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Before Reproduction: The Distortion of Generation

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Abstract Jean Baudrillard has posited a theory of 'the precession of simulacra', arguing that it is no longer possible to tell the difference between an image and the meaning it purports to represent because technology allows the image to precede its meaning. Christa Wolf, while researching *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (1984), traveled to Greece and discovered the ways in which language in the rational, Western model of civilization has been distorted. Both Baudrillard and Wolf are disturbed by the ways in which sign systems can be manipulated and generated, and both demonstrate the effect this has in the political and cultural arenas. This analysis intends to show how Baudrillard's theories play out in Wolf's narrative, and how Wolf resolves the problems thus posed through the shock of the aesthetic experience, which forces communication while it defies representation.

Keywords Baudrillard · Jean · *Simulacra and Simulacrum* · Wolf · Christa · *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* · Generation · Reproduction · Manipulation · Distortion · Ethics – of representation · Ethics – of artistic generation · Ethics – of linguistic generation · Aesthetics · Cassandra · Polyxena · Symbol – relation to language

In a series of essays first published in the mid-1980s, now collected in a book entitled *Simulacra and Simulacrum*,[1] Jean Baudrillard introduced his impression of modern technological reproduction as 'the precession of simulacra'; that is, in a culture with technology capable of exact reproduction possibility arises of a breakdown between real experience and manufactured representations of it. According to Baudrillard, it is no longer possible to determine the difference

[1]Sheila Faria Glaser (Tr.) (1994). (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press)

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between an image and the meaning it purports to represent because the technology of replication allows the image to precede its meaning. In the words of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure,[2] the sign has displaced its own signifier.

Just a few years earlier, German author Christa Wolf, weighed down by the 'balance of terror' theory of nuclear proliferation being debated in Berlin, journeyed to Greece and discovered there – at the root of Western civilization replete with all of its beauty, oppression, and violence – the ways in which language has been manipulated and generated. As part of the process of discovery that ultimately led to the delivery and publication of *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*,[3] Wolf was forced to confront the ways in which artistic generation can be compared to political manipulation.

Both Baudrillard and Wolf are disturbed by the ways in which sign systems can be manipulated and generated, and both demonstrate the effect this has in the political and cultural arenas. Baudrillard, as cultural critic, defines a wide array of signs, but Wolf is most concerned with language, specifically poetics and politics. This analysis intends to show how Baudrillard's theories play out in Wolf's narrative, and how Wolf resolves the problems thus posed through the shock of the aesthetic experience, which forces communication while it defies representation. Baudrillard restricts his discussion to intellectual sign systems but neglects the one image that touches humanity at physical, emotional, and possibly spiritual levels – the beautiful. Wolf posits the aesthetic as a potential solution to her concerns and those of Baudrillard, believing that beauty may possess the power to shock humanity out of a purely intellectual and thus abstract understanding of personality and culture that could permit a more ethical response to the intersection of society and personal identity.

Baudrillard

Simulacra and Simulacrum opens with the claim that "[t]oday […] [s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation of modes of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Baudrillard states that neither the real nor its imitation exists; only the process between them, what he calls "simulation" (3–4), which "can never again be unmasked, since it is not false" (4). The images thus produced are "murderers of the real" and of "every symbolic form" (5, 8). In his analysis, simulacra do not imitate any underlying, incommunicable reality. Instead, they actually destroy the only evidence of that reality, which is our perception of it. Such imperceptibility robs humanity of an ethical base from which to ascertain the consequences of individual choices upon others.

Finally, Baudrillard identifies four "phases" through which the image moves:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

it masks and denatures a profound reality;

[2] Wade Baskin (Tr.) (1959). *Course in General Linguistics.* (NY: Philosophical Library)

[3] Jan van Heurck (Tr.) (1984). (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux)

it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure

simulacrum. (6, emph in orig)

The cultural theorist assumes the final phase as the dominant trope of the late twentieth century and describes its consequences in detail. Christa Wolf is more concerned with the processes that guide the first three phases, detailing how manipulation, generation, and reproduction relate to experience communicated through language.

Each of the processes is dangerous because they all start with imitation. While the impulse toward *mimesis* was suspected as early as the time of Plato and was denounced both by him and the early church fathers, for the very good reasons described by Rene Girard[4] – the desire to imitate leads inevitably to violence – these philosophers have neglected the root causes of imitation so basic to the formation of the human psyche that they cannot be denied and which to repress would only lead to neurosis. The most primitive of these is a fear of death. Wolf, in the first travel report accompanying *Cassandra*, reminds her audience that "not the despised, the forgotten man is miserable" (174). The impulse to make literature and the impulse to procreate are derived from the same source, with many of the same attendant consequences, a fact that has not been fully realized until the twentieth century. Children and stories, representations of their makers, alleviate some of the anxiety attendant upon the concept of dying.[5]

But the simulacrum of Baudrillard's treatise suggests that an image can be exactly reproduced, in which case no original can be distinguished and identity can no longer be ascertained. Imposters become free to dissemble and obtain the honor, the glory, and the blame of another's deeds. The epideictic function of praise and blame thus becomes meaningless, and society is left with no means by which to judge the worth of its citizens. Or, originals vested with deeply held personal beliefs may not meet the overdetermined expectations of their viewers, causing disillusionment, which would likewise rupture the most basic value system of a culture. This disjunction has forced a psychic reevaluation of catastrophic proportion for the twentieth century intellectual and in many ways provides the impetus for poststructuralism and postmodernism.

For the purposes of this discussion, let us suppose that the symbol combines image, a tangible embodiment, with meaning, the abstract thought or experience to which the image refers. As Wolf's text illustrates, in the early phases of the image, when distinction, the mark of difference, still adheres to the reproduction, positive and negative results balance one another, but as the image progresses through the later phases, dangers begin to multiply, arising from an uneven weight on either the

[4] (1965) *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press)

[5] Although the ancients did not possess our own elaborate theories of identity-formation, they were well aware of the dangers of not abiding by the charge of the Delphic oracle's, "Know thyself." Witness Oedipus. Had he known himself, he perhaps would have recognized his originals, those parents of whom he was but a representation, and thus could the tragedy have been avoided.

image of the symbol or its meaning. Wolf finally confronts her fear that language might become so divorced from meaning as to become purely abstract.

Baudrillard does not argue that the symbol has lost its referential function. Instead, he claims simply that it no longer reaches toward an external reality. In his formulation, the symbol points only to itself and other symbols within its own sign system. Poststructuralists have argued that the *image* (when formed under the conditions described by Baudrillard, the *simulacra*; more generally, the *sign* – the physical embodiment of meaning) refers only to other images within its representational system; that the concept of a transcendental signifier – a meaning outside of the system – is a myth. In a purely internal sign system, it becomes impossible to judge the consequences of shifts within the system to tangential modes, making it appear as though personal decisions, such as Cassandra's choice to become a priestess, affect only the person and not the culture in which he or she lives.

The self-referential symbol makes its first appearance in Western literature in the Judgment of Paris, a myth that reveals the disturbingly self-centered nature of beauty. Paris, a prince of Troy, abandoned as an infant on Mount Ida, proves himself while still a teenager to be a spectacular judge of cows. Zeus, embittered by the decade-long strife between his consort and daughters, thus chooses him to decide which of three goddesses is the most fair. Knowing that all three deserve the title, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite rely not on their merits but on their gifts. Hera offers the young farmer sovereignty over all Asia; Athena would give him the wisdom to rule the world; and Aphrodite promises the most beautiful woman in it. Paris' decision to accept the gift proffered by the goddess of love demonstrates that beauty is the only standard by which to judge beauty.

In other words, the aesthetic is a closed system for which there is no external referent, stable or otherwise. The astute reader will here note the similarity between this conception of beauty and the postmodern, Derridean conception of language, in which the transcendental signifier is a myth and language's meaning is only constructed through the endless slippage of deferral. But language is only one sign system that has been so affected. Any symbolic system, including language, the aesthetic, politics, or culture, is subject to the slippage. Baudrillard focuses primarily on the cultural while philosophers including Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller have identified and described the linguistic and political phenomena. Wolf combines the concerns of all three – culture, politics, and language – but adds the aesthetic as a unique experience that shocks the witness and engages multiple faculties as he or she attempts to understand it. The result is an enhancement of personal identity and a greater awareness of the individual's impact upon a culture.

Wolf

In 1982, German author, Christa Wolf, was commissioned to produce a series of "Lectures on Poetics" by the University of Frankfurt. "Cassandra" was the fifth in the series, preceded by two travel reports, a work diary, and a letter, all of which recorded the circumstances of the novel's creation, including Wolf's trip to Greece, the awkward intersections between ancient and modern she there witnessed, the cultural and political context of her inner circle as she wrote the novel, and her own

conflicting attitudes toward this conglomeration of influences. Cassandra's narrative was thus clearly situated within time and place establishing a contiguous relationship between the artistry of the novel and the real experiences that generated it.

In 1983, the lectures were printed in Wolf's East German state in the order in which they were delivered. Unfortunately, the Federal Republic (West Germany) published the novel without the 'lectures', and van Heurck's English translation presents the novel first, followed by Wolf's other writings, suggesting that the narrative supersedes or transcends the record of its production. This argument will demonstrate the untenability of that position.

Standing before the Lion Gate of Agamemnon's palace in Mycenae, Cassandra remembers, in no particular order, the events leading to Troy's demise and her own capture, including the escalating tensions between Greek and Trojan states over the trade route to Asia through the Hellespont, the rise of the petty officer Eumelos to palace official responsible for recording the gradual shift from economic to personal causes so that the dispute becomes centered first on the abduction of Priam's sister Hesione and then on Helen, and her own growing disillusionment with the palace's manipulation of the temple priests. In her final hours, Cassandra reflects on the inevitable chain of events that led her to this place and time, and without refuting the necessity imposed by destiny she recognizes the small differences her voice could have made, perhaps not to the whole political process, but at least to individuals who were instrumental in it and influenced by it, and most of all, the changes she could have wrought upon herself.

"Cassandra" pushes to the logical extremity of 'the precession of simulacra' by exposing the absence of a cause to the Trojan War in her novel, which is "a recognition of the powers and horrors of representation, in the widest possible sense of the term" (Porter 379).[6] In the first lecture of the series, Wolf explains the concern of her project: "There is and can be no poetics which prevents the living experience of countless perceiving subjects from being killed and buried in art objects" (142). Artistic creation thus becomes an act of violence akin to the war itself.

In an effort to prevent this necessity, Wolf exposes the generation of her subject in the very 'lectures' themselves. Margit Resch[7] describes how both Cassandra's narrative and Wolf's combination of 'lectures' and novel mix autobiography and literary criticism with a more traditional mode of storytelling.[8] This procedure

[6] Porter, James I. (1989). Resisting Aesthetics: The Cassandra Motif in Christa Wolf and Aeschylus. (In Marilyn Sibley Fries (Ed.) *Responses to Christa Wolf: Critical Essays*. (pp. 378–394). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.)

[7] (1997) *Understanding Christa Wolf*. (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press)

[8] Resch is certainly not the only critic to compare Wolf with her protagonist. Most analyses of Wolf's work begin with an apology for their extensive recounting of her life in particular and twentieth century German history in general, most notably those performed by Anna Kuhn (1988) *Christa Wolf's Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and Marilyn Fries. Although an effort is here made to separate author and character, Wolf herself acknowledges the difficulty of the task in a diary entry dated ten years after the lecture series that spawned *Cassandra*, "Berlin, Monday, September 27, 1993," (excerpted in *Parting from Phantoms. Selected Writings, 1990–1994*. (1997) Tr. Jan van Heurck. Chicago: University of Chicago Press):

> I've brought a book home from the bookstore, one that people are talking about now, I've leafed through it, a completely invented story, I envy the woman who wrote it. When will I – or will I ever again – be able to write a book about a distant, invented character? I myself am the protagonist, there is no other way, I am exposed, have exposed myself. (244)

"derives from Wolf's belief that reality is not an entity outside of ourselves but, instead, a fluctuating process to which we are subjected and which we create at the same time" (Resch 3).

Marilyn Fries claims that Wolf's artistry emanates from and returns to a conscious subject, and is thus comparable to Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra,' self-enclosed reproduction. Fries states that for Wolf, "the real (the truth) must emerge from and return to the innermost depths of individual consciousness," not be "measure[d]" "against an infallible and unalterable external 'reality'" (26). Myra Love[9] stresses Wolf's concern with the *means* we use to access signifiers (7). Wolf herself, in the conversations cited by Love, terms this method 'subjective authenticity', the individual's search for a reality that corresponds to lived experience and personal identity, not in opposition to one another, but in harmony. Karin McPherson[10] defines Wolf's term in more detail as,

> the result of an unconditional demand for truth in dealing with one's own experiences. That requires a new relationship to reality: instead of trying to create an objective reproduction of facts in which the subjective element is submerged and which, at its most negative, becomes a mere reflection of reality, Wolf includes the subjective element, which involves the thinking, judgment, and experience of the individual in the writing process. (149–50)

Wolf accomplishes this goal "[b]y regarding communication as a process embedded in a specific context and therefore inevitably bound to specific speakers and hearers, readers and writers" (Love 32).

Wolf and Language

Language is Christa Wolf's principal concern; her characters, those who control it: prophet, author, and politician. Margit Resch asserts that the two themes of *Cassandra* are "the dynamics of a society [Wolf] calls 'prewar,' including the motivation and preparation for war and its impact on the individual, and achievement of individual autonomy in spite of oppression" (121). Both themes are developed through Cassandra's anxiety about the relationship between language and experience, a dichotomy she struggles to reconcile. Laurrie Voglesang[11] describes the novel's shift from "the expressive aspect of language (how to speak truthfully)" to "the *influence* of language on and within society" (367, emph in orig). In regards to the first, Wolf demonstrates Baudrillard's theory of the progressive disintegration of the assumed relationship between an image and its simulacra. She employs the aesthetic to halt the progression and return to an awareness of identity and personal ethics.

The movement is circular rather than linear. Cassandra is cognizant from an early age of the effect language can have on an audience, spawning the desire for her

[9] (1991). *Christa Wolf: Literature and the Conscience of History.* Vol. 6. East German Studies. Richard Zipser (Ed.) (New York: Peter Lang)

[10] Female Subjectivity as an Impulse for Renewal in Literature. (In Fries. pp. 149–161)

[11] Killa's Tertium: Christa Wolf and Cassandra. (In Fries. pp. 367–377)

vocation. But when Cassandra realizes that even an ordinary citizen such as Eumelos can change the way a people think, she schools herself at the feet of other plebeians to learn how to communicate her experience. She only returns to influential language as a last resort in the few minutes before her execution.

Language defines culture.[12] Wolf reflects in the first of two travel reports accompanying the novel, "[t]he faith in prophets (I think then) is, to a large extent, faith in the power of the word" (162). This faith allows words to create an "orderly structure" around which culture and identity form "like iron filings around a magnet" (162). So vital is it to humanity that most never question the veracity of language, but to those who dole out words, like priests granting absolution for one's sins, the root of such a faith must be closely studied. The devotee may close his lids when receiving the host, but the hierophant should diligently guard the repository of his craft. Cassandra's eyes must be opened by her fellow priest Panthous, who speaks only the oracles he knows will be received favorably and by the petty officer Eumelos, who soon rises above his fellows because of his ability to control the daily speech of the average citizen.

Not until she sees the destructive influence of language so wielded does Cassandra become aware of the oftentimes radical disjunction between experience and expression and the attendant ethical consequences. She returns then to "the expressive aspect of language," only to learn that her nature compels her to exert some influence through it. At the gates of Mycenae, it is narrative rather than prophecy to which she turns, a turn to the past rather than the future, but by which she hopes to alter both, however minutely. "Send me a scribe," Cassandra implores of Clytemnestra, even at the hour of her death:

> Or better yet a young slave woman with a keen memory and a powerful voice. Ordain that she may repeat to her daughter what she hears from me. That the daughter in turn may pass it on to her daughter, and so on. So that alongside the river of heroic songs this tiny rivulet, too, may reach those faraway, perhaps happier people who will live in times to come (81).

Those who manipulate language do so for ends that are violent and destructive, in Cassandra's experience, and Wolf's. Both women strive to develop new modes of narrative expression that transform language from a meaningless system of signs to one pattern within a kaleidoscope of experience. The effort is an ethical one that seeks to reconcile the twin realities of self-referential sign systems and the personal and cultural dependence upon the interplay between several different modes.

The first official manipulation of language is instituted by Cassandra's own family, what she calls "the palace," in a metonymy designed to reinforce distance,

[12] A point brought out by T. S. Eliot in Chapter 3 of his essay, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture" in which he claims "that for the transmission of a culture – a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving – and for its maintenance, there is no safeguard more reliable than language." When language is lost, and particularly its literary uses, the people "will tend to lose their racial character" and "their individual genius" will cease to have any effect upon the world at large. (130. Rptd. in *Christianity and Culture*. (1976) (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, pp. 79–202) Whether such hegemony is or is not desirable for today's global culture is another matter altogether.

since Cassandra was then living in the temple and is now at the gates of Mycenae (31). This nebulous entity designated Lampos' mission to Delphi "the FIRST SHIP" only after two other ships had embarked on similar voyages to the Greek mainland for radically different purposes (31). To disguise the differences, the state "decided at last to withdraw the common folk's term 'ship to Delphi,' from circulation and substitute neutral designations" for the embassies (31). The words first, second, and third seem more "neutral" than descriptions of the traveler's goals or destinations. Wolf, keenly aware of the material conditions of her work, employs significantly different visual markers to distinguish the speech of those in power from the people's tongue. The language of the people is surrounded by quotes, a mark of ownership and respect, while the palace-speak is presented in all caps, a sign of violence or anger.

But while speech can be abused, it can also generate sympathy and promote healing. Cassandra is committed to the task. She admits as much when she says, "my belief that a successful phrase – words, that is – can capture or even produce every phenomenon and every event, will outlive me" (95). Myra Love describes the hope Wolf cherishes for literature, her belief that language can communicate without "manipulation and domination" (4). Such purity is only possible when an author achieves "the assertion of one's identity through one's work" (Love 84). Wolf believes that earlier generations of authors were willing to engage their readers with this kind of honesty but were unable to do so because of the distance created by the conventions of narrative. The author needs to master the material in order to structure it and the resulting tendency is to dominate rather than communicate (Love 84). Wolf hopes that by "includ[ing] the author in the text, that is [by] mak[ing] the identity asserted through writing itself part of the objective reality being transformed from reified substance to relational pattern" she will return narrative from orchestration to expression (Love 84–85).

Wolf's primary narrative strategy is thus to insert herself into the text, which she accomplishes through the 'lectures' accompanying the narrative. This record of Wolf's experience is intended both to frame Cassandra's story and to serve as the canvas on which she will ink her tale. The task is much easier for Cassandra who refuses to serve as Aeschylus' objective correlative for the city of Troy or as a stand-in for Iphigenia and instead insists on her own primacy. She is not part of the story of the Trojan War; she *is* the story. Her own process of discovery she attempts to recreate for her reader, and so she reveals the other strategies that she hopes will render an authentic narrative: distrust and exposure of those who manipulate language to gain power, avoidance of generalization, and the distinguishing between fine shades of meaning.

Cassandra's distrust is at first limited to Eumelos, a petty "officer" who thinks he has the power to "decide the use of words" (55) and therefore her concern looks suspiciously like class snobbery. Soon, though, she learns to be on her guard with anyone who wields words, and this precept she mandates for future generations in her call for the scribal slave girl. The only solution to deceit is exposure. When confronted with the deception of a phantom Helen, her impulse is to repeat the name (67). She would become Helen's servant if she could, but is not allowed (67). As the palace tacitly complies with Paris' guile, Cassandra feels compelled, almost unconsciously, to expose it.

With brutal honesty, the seer at Mycenae employs every strategy she can to face the truth of her experience in Troy. Perhaps the most difficult realization for her is the fact that very little separates Trojan from Greek; the two enemies are alike in many ways. Even so, it is not until long after her "shocking discovery: They are like us!?" (13), that she is able to unite enemy and patriot in her own use of the personal pronoun. Other milestones along the route include learning to avoid generalization and to maintain absolute precision. Rejected by her father, objectified by Panthous, and abused by Agamemnon, the Trojan princess has many reasons to say, "[a]ll men are self-centered children" (9). It is only with some effort that she rejects, parenthetically, her own cynicism, asking, "What about Aeneas? Nonsense. Aeneas is an adult" (9). It is up to the reader to decide whether the "nonsense" is the applicability of a general description to this one unique man or if it refers to any such abstraction of language.

She becomes more precise throughout the text, refusing to say 'we' regarding Anchises' peace-loving clan beneath the fig tree (94). Instead, she says 'them' and 'they' while she tries to ascertain the group to which she belongs. Her final achievement is the ability to say the 'we' when the description is accurate and not simply desired, that is, to group herself with the Achilles she reviles rather than the Anchises she admires. Even so, she acknowledges the pain of the admission: "I say 'we,' and of all the 'we's' I eventually said, this is still the one that challenges me the most. It is so much easier to say 'Achilles the brute' than to say this 'we'" (119). Thus the shift described by Laurrie Voglesang and the themes identified by Margit Resch are both completed in her final acknowledgment of her kinship with Achilles. Language is still being generated, but at least the experience on which it rests has been firmly established, an ethical base from which expressive choices can be soundly made.

Wolf and Beauty

Despite all the efforts made by Wolf and Cassandra to ensure a contiguous relationship between language and experience, both remain aware that true unity can never exist between the two realms. Their intersection will always depend up on the strenuous efforts of an individual committed to the task. It is this separation with which Baudrillard, Wolf, and everyone living in the postmodern age must contend, but still, one realm remains wherein image and meaning can be fully united – the aesthetic. This is the lesson of fire through which Cassandra and her author must both pass before finding the means to render experience through narrative: in language, but not limited to language.

The beauty of Polyxena for the mythical prophetess and that of Mycenae and its artefacts for the modern author force a reevaluation of the functions of prophecy and narrative, especially their susceptibility to manipulation. Beauty becomes a stumbling block to both separating and uniting an image with its meaning because an object of beauty has no history. It bears its own experience with it and allows no other. Since, as Wolf claims, "to interpret means: to know the history of a phenomenon" (193), beauty cannot be interpreted. As neither an image nor its

meaning but indissolubly both, the experience of beauty will not allow interpretation; therefore, it cannot be manipulated. Beauty has no agent. It insists both on its own meaning and on its own image, resisting the separation that is the prerequisite to analysis. Again, Wolf says, "[s]torytelling is the assignment of meaning" (174), but since a beautiful object asserts its own meaning, it precludes the telling of any stories about it.

Like many a wise author, Wolf does not describe Helen directly. Indeed, the message of her novel resides in the fact that Helen, the very reason for the war, is a mere phantom, a metaphor for the ethical consequences of permitting an image to separate from its reality. But just as Homer had his Briseis, so Wolf has her Polyxena. Cassandra's sister is exotic, "with [her] curly dark-blond hair – the only one of Hecuba's daughters whose hair was not black" (25).[13] Her beauty resides in part in this strangeness of hers, a difference that alienates her from her father, who suspects her appearance. Her unique status leads Polyxena at first to desire the office of priestess Cassandra eventually attains. The station could have given her a purpose and thus an identity, but Cassandra naïvely thinks that because her beautiful sister is surrounded by admirers, she somehow belongs to the community in ways that Cassandra cannot. Only much later does the prophetess realize that belonging begins with identity, not vice versa. Before the gate to Mycenae, Cassandra acknowledges that Polyxena did not want "dignity, distance, and a substitute for pleasures that were denied, but rather, protection from [her]self, from the multitude of [her] lovers, from the fate already prepared for [her]" (25).

Polyxena's apparent popularity, lacking real human connection, next sparks in her the desire for humiliation, the very human need to experience difference. She brings her frustration to Cassandra, holder of her thwarted destiny, manifest in strange dreams of sexual degradation. Faced with her sister's beauty, Cassandra cannot interpret Polyxena's dreams as she should; "[w]ords failed [her]" (96), always the first reaction to the aesthetic object. Rather than acknowledge Polyxena's need to lower herself, Cassandra confronts the contradiction first with laughter and then in anger (96, 98). Contradiction was once the most natural thing in the world to a Trojan, and the ability to laugh in its face was once the people's hallmark. "Public events in Troy" used to be characterized, Cassandra remembers, by "abrupt reversals" (45). The changes wrought by Eumelos, however, have strained language to the breaking point with only the merest thread of internal consistency, and so such blithe acceptance of rival positions is no longer possible, thereby denying the recognition of difference that is the prerequisite to self-knowledge. Polyxena, refused the understanding that Cassandra could have given her by interpreting her dreams and thus her self, chooses to experience the degradation she dreamt of by offering herself to Achilles. But after "show[ing] herself to her future owner on the wall beside the Scaean Gate," instead of facing revilement as she had feared and desired, she becomes "the most admired woman in Troy" (109). The Trojan people thus unite with Cassandra in their fear of difference and their refusal to accept contradictory states.

[13] But not the only one of her children so adorned. Paris, too, has blond curls (52), and like Polyxena, his strangeness makes him long for acceptance in ways detrimental to himself and his countrymen.

These are Polyxena's difficulties, and likely Helen's too, but beauty poses a different set of problems for the narrator. Cassandra recalls herself as a "girl" but stops herself, saying, "here I am caught by the very word 'girl,' and caught all the more by her form. By the beautiful image" (21). "The beautiful image" silences the priestess, and forces her to examine the medium of her craft, to question whether language is suitable to her task of conveying reality. The hard work that Cassandra learns to perform to test her own linguistic pronouncements is necessitated by a confrontation with the aesthetic. A less honest narrator could never have been brought to admit that she has "always been caught by images more than words. Probably that is strange, and incompatible with [her] vocation" (21), but a less honest author would not have offered the very archaeological record she seeks in the past as a *Condition* of her own *Narrative*.[14] Beauty teaches both Wolf and Cassandra that words alone are inadequate to convey experience, but knowing that neither of them can faithfully convey their own experiences in any other medium, they both attempt to construct a different kind of narrative that will not be bound by a linear and therefore artificial conveyance of plot and character. Instead, author and narrator are encouraged by beauty to seek other means to replicate experience: Wolf through content, Cassandra through structure.

The material of Cassandra's narrative is fairly traditional. Like many modern versions of the Trojan War legend, this one assigns different motives and a revised timeframe to the characters and their actions, but otherwise it remains true to the ancient material, even in its exclusion of Helen, abandoned in Egypt per Herodotus. The story is unusual in its lack of traditional marks of punctuation and attributive tags noting the differences between speech, thought, emotion, action, and reflection, and in the way it moves back and forth between Cassandra's present reality in Mycenae, where she awaits certain execution, and her past in Troy, where she was confronted with the task of developing her own identity in the midst of a degenerating culture.

Wolf is faced with a similar quandary, but in her case, the tale of the Trojan War has been so thoroughly documented that her own version will probably not change its received status. Perhaps the narrative will allow a new perspective on the cold war negotiations, but it is more likely that critics will focus on the dissimilarities rather than the connections. And so, to force her reader into the experience of the narrative, she recreates the writing of it through her 'lectures', which constitute a faithful record of her creative process that exposes its difficulties.

Both the author and the narrator are given pause by the raw aesthetic experience. The first travel report describes Wolf's reaction to the Greek landmarks. When confronted with the "fragrant shrubbery" at the foot of the Acropolis, the ancient monument "floating in the deep-blue sky," Wolf allows frustration to seep into her tone at the limits of language to describe what she sees: "Why not say what people expect to hear? Beautiful! Who would want to be the monster left indifferent by the Acropolis of Athens?" (156). The experience prepares her to recognize the beauty that is missing from the ancient legends when she sees it in the light of the sunset at

[14] See Work Diary, About the Stuff Life and Dreams are Made Of. (In *Cassandra*. pp. 225–271)

the harbor of Pireaus (181). Wolf assumes that this same light must have held poignant meaning for the women of Troy forced to depart these shores with their Achaean conquerors, but is only too well aware of the absence of this aesthetic experience in the plethora of legends, ancient and modern, one of a multitude of absences that she mourns both in her travel reports and in her search to uncover Cassandra's experience. When her companions discover precious images of goddesses, although Wolf objects to the limits of the feminist project that spurs her companions in their cultural discoveries, she, too, is "deeply moved by these little terra-cotta figurines which are not the image of ideals like the art of classical antiquity but bear all the traces of everyday life, the prints of the fingers which formed them" (197). These experiences stamp her narrative with the prints of its formation and thus bring it to life, through the beauty Wolf longs to recapture.

Cassandra, too, is stymied by beauty. Even as she remembers her sister, she reverts to old, stultifying patterns:

> Evasion, digression, those are always my tactics when her name comes up for discussion: Polyxena. She was the other woman. She was the woman I could not be. She had everything I lacked. Of course I know they called me "beautiful," even "the most beautiful," but their faces remained solemn when they said it. When she passed by they all smiled, the highest-ranking priest as well as the humblest slave, the most dimwitted kitchen maid. I search for a word to describe her; […]. But where she is concerned I fail. She was composed of many elements, of charm and meltingness; and of firmness, even hardness. There was a contradiction in her nature that was both maddening and attractive. You wanted to seize it, protect it, or rip it out of her even if you had to destroy her in order to do it. (95)

Cassandra is forced to use nonlinear strategies to describe her sister, because beauty resists its rendering into another symbolic system. In Polyxena's presence, every human being is forced to respond physically, not linguistically as they do for Cassandra. For some, such as the "dimwitted kitchen maid," this comes as a relief. For others, such "the highest-ranking priest," it must be as frustrating as it is to Cassandra, who feels that in the presence of beauty her own nature as a wordsmith is ripped from her.

If Cassandra will learn to be truthful to herself, she cannot evade the fact that she loves language and believes in its power. The experience that takes language from her must be abhorrent to her, and so she responds initially with violence, later with indirection. She is not alone. Both the Trojan under Eumelos' command and the twentieth century poststructuralist witnessing the disappearance of the signified experience her frustration. The endless attempts to bridge the gap between the signifier and the signified are confronted in beauty with the futility of the task. In Polyxena, every element coheres, regardless of its natural contradictory state, and the difference between her certain reality and our own tenuous one renders us silent.

Conclusion

Wolf is concerned not simply with exposing the problems inherent in the phases of Baudrillard's image, but also with finding a means to do so that is both healthy and

instructive.[15] As her first lecture instructs, humanity must affirm the power of life and must reject any course of action or way of thinking – whether political, philosophical, or literary – that would allow "the living experience of countless perceiving subjects" to be "killed and buried" (142). Wolf's "overall concern is the sinister effects of alienation, in aesthetics, in art, as well as elsewhere," and thus her greatest fear is of "indifference" (142, 157). In Wolf's novel, Arisbe reminds the Amazon Queen Penthesilea that "[b]etween killing and dying there is a third alternative: living" (118), "which for Christa Wolf can only be attained through the self-awareness of a mature individual" (Kuhn 207–08). Wolf understands a "mature individual" as one who can reconcile all facets of her experience. As a poet, her own concern is obviously a literary one, and is thus formulated as such in the opening lecture of the Cassandra series, but as those very 'lectures' are intended to illustrate, Wolf is firmly convinced both of the interconnectedness of all spheres of life and of that fact as a solution to her poetological (and cultural) problem.

Wolf's premise, therefore, leads her to reject reason as an appropriate means of mediation. As far as she can see, the classical philosophical method has justified such 'rational' solutions as the Western world's long history of oppression and the 'balance of terror' theory of nuclear proliferation. The quandary presents itself to Cassandra on numerous occasions, but nowhere more clearly than in her dream of Apollo and Selene (87). In it, she is asked to judge which light shines more brightly, that of the moon or the sun. Although she feels trepidation at her response, she cannot identify its source and so she responds with the obvious answer, to the great sorrow of the moon goddess and detriment to her own sense of honor. It takes a slave girl to explain her atrocity: "[t]he most important thing about your dream, Cassandra, was that faced with a completely perverted question, you nevertheless tried to find an answer. You should remember that when the time comes" (87).

Wolf acknowledges reason's capabilities, refusing to comply with a system that "critique[s] rationalism" yet "itself ends in reckless irrationalism," as she states in her work diary (260). But Wolf also recognizes reason's limitations, rejecting a narrow reliance on logic and the linear structure of narrative it generates. She would balance a record of the life of the mind with one of the body, allowing physical sensations and emotional reactions an equal place alongside rational thought as contributors to personal identity and dictators of ethical behavior. Wolf would therefore have her narrator confront beauty in all of its terror and power in the person of her sister Polyxena. The pure physicality of Cassandra's reaction strikes her dumb, but precisely that fact must be acknowledged. Polyxena's behavior and Cassandra's reaction to it make little logical sense and are detrimental to Polyxena's sense of self, leading to a personal and senseless sacrifice. Cassandra inscribes the

[15] The mandates under which Wolf's artistry was formed rested on the principle that art's purpose remains to better the lot of humanity. Although sometimes criticized as didactic, Wolf's mature literary output cannot be understood or appreciated outside of the context of its creation. Anna Kuhn argues that Wolf's social concerns are universal, and so her work is not subject to the historical and cultural constraints common to allegorical literature, but it tends to be co-opted by narrow interest groups concerned only with furthering their own ends, such as those feminists who would claim Wolf as one of their own and thus restrict her message (Introduction 1–19). Kuhn insists that Christa Wolf can only be understood as "an *East German woman writer* and consideration must be given to each facet of her identity if one is to do justice to her work" (3, emph in orig).

experience as a record of her own failure as priestess, counselor, and sister in order to demonstrate how the physical and the emotional remain elements of the human experience that shape us and that propel our actions.

Wolf's argument is radical in its simplicity: if we are to progress beyond poststructuralism and resolve the ethical and existential quandaries that its theories have posited, we must turn to aesthetics. Wolf codifies the physical nature of the aesthetic experience as her principle of 'touching', a principle she achieves narratively by establishing contact with a subject and thus allowing the reader to experience an empathy roughly equivalent to physical contact (Kuhn 13). She remains firmly committed to "the patterns which art makes available to us", but prefers "not the image of ideals like the art of classical antiquity but" those which carry "all the traces of everyday life, the prints of the fingers which formed them" (first travel report 191, 197). To deny the sheer physicality of the aesthetic experience is to deny an essential part of the human psyche its natural role in shaping identity.