

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

Madwomen Out of the Attic: The Rise of Catastrofemales in Contemporary North American Literature

Affiliation of the reviewer

University of Cagliari

Report

Carlotta Ferrando's dissertation develops the concept of the "catastrofemale" as a remarkably powerful and comprehensive critical tool through which a wide range of cultural and historical processes are examined alongside a carefully selected corpus of American literary texts published between 2015 and 2021. The central intuition of the dissertation is both original and theoretically compelling. Defined as a "dynamic interpretive category whose analytical force depends upon its capacity to register the uneven distribution of precarity across different social positions" (8), the catastrofemale operates less as a category *stricto sensu*, comparable, for instance, to that of the anti-heroine, than as a critical mechanism capable of tracking and indexing the social, cultural, and political transformations undergone by the protagonists of the novels Ferrando analyzes. At times, in fact, these characters also reshape, however imperceptibly, the worlds they inhabit, not necessarily through forms of visible resistance, but through their capacity to alter the perception of supposedly stable categories such as "woman" and "the female," and thus repositioning the very epistemic perspective from which such categories have traditionally been constructed.

Ferrando's readings of Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed* (2021), and Emily Austin's *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead* (2021) consequently emerge as provocative and thought-provoking critical experiments. Rather than simply opening up these texts to further hermeneutic possibilities, Ferrando tests their capacity to register, refract, and make intelligible the social contexts they represent through the figures and embodied experiences of their protagonists. The experiment is, in my view, entirely convincing and exceptionally successful. Indeed, one of the major strengths of the dissertation lies precisely in the fact that the catastrofemale is not merely a character type, comparable to such conventional categories as the hero, the antiheroine, the victim, or the villain. Rather, it functions as a dynamic tool capable of radically reframing the social contexts examined in the dissertation from the perspective of women who choose or are forced to occupy minoritarian, invisible, or imperceptible positions. The materialist approach adopted throughout the dissertation is

particularly effective and perfectly suited to its overall critical purpose.

The comments that follow should therefore not be understood as corrections, nor do they point to shortcomings that need to be addressed for the dissertation to achieve its aims. The dissertation is fully accomplished in its present form. I offer them instead as possible directions for further theoretical development, which Ferrando may wish to consider either at this stage or, perhaps even more productively, in the context of a future publication of this excellent work.

If I were to suggest one such direction, it would be to push the dissertation's materialist orientation even further, perhaps allowing it at times to take precedence over an identitarian framework. This is the only aspect of the argument that, to my mind, might need further theoretical elaboration. On some occasions, Ferrando appears to rely on relatively stable conceptual oppositions (body versus mind/psyche, white versus non-white, and so forth), whereas the conceptual potential of the catastrofemale might be brought out even more forcefully by emphasizing the material, corporeal, biopolitical, and economic conditions through which these subjects are constituted.

This possibility seems particularly consistent with Ferrando's own methodological premises. As she writes, "I propose that a posthuman feminist approach (as theorized by Braidotti 2022) is best suited to examine catastrofemales, as it critically challenges anthropocentric, humanistic and universalistic assumptions" (77). Ferrando reconstructs with remarkable precision the historical and intellectual genealogy from which her argument emerges, moving from Freud and Foucault to the decisive interventions of feminist criticism, particularly Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar. This genealogy is both necessary and perfectly presented. Yet it is precisely at this point that the dissertation might make a further theoretical leap by engaging more extensively with Braidotti and, perhaps even more importantly, with the Deleuzian philosophical matrix that underlies much of her work.

Deleuze, surprisingly never explicitly invoked in the dissertation, could provide Ferrando with a conceptual vocabulary particularly suited to the originality of the catastrofemale itself. Concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, beginning with the body without organs and becoming-woman, but also their broader understanding of becoming, affect, assemblage, and processes of deterritorialization, might prove especially productive for a category that is defined not by a stable identity but by processes of transformation, withdrawal, imperceptibility, and the material forces traversing and constituting the subject. Such a theoretical framework would also reinforce the dissertation's materialist orientation, allowing Ferrando to move beyond conceptual oppositions that risk remaining identitarian or binary and to conceptualize the body instead as a shifting configuration of forces, intensities, affects, and relations.

Precisely because posthuman feminism plays such an important role in the dissertation's theoretical architecture, the notion of the "posthuman" might therefore benefit from some further elucidation along these lines. The term can potentially be misleading if it is understood as indicating a movement "beyond" the human. What appears particularly productive in Ferrando's readings, instead, is the extent to which these women are traversed, constituted, and continually reshaped by the very forces they seek to resist. As subjects, they are to some extent produced as effects, or even side effects, of capitalist, biopolitical, and normative regimes, while their bodies become the material sites in which dissatisfaction, exhaustion, refusal, and resistance are inscribed and negotiated. Read through Braidotti's Deleuzian genealogy, the posthuman could thus become less a designation of what comes "after" or "beyond" the human than a means of questioning the presumed unity, autonomy, and self-sufficiency of the human subject in the first place.

A still stronger emphasis on this materialist dimension could therefore further enhance an already exceptionally compelling argument. At certain points (for instance, around p. 133) the body risks being treated primarily as a metaphor for the protagonists' social or psychological conditions. The dissertation's own premises, however, seem to allow for an even more radical claim: the body is not simply a metaphorical representation of those conditions, but a material instrument, surface, and index that is shaped by the world while simultaneously participating in the reshaping of the world that perceives, classifies,

disciplines, and evaluates it. This reciprocal relation between bodies and their material environments could make the notion of the catastrofemal even more theoretically distinctive.

Finally, one more point to address concerns the specifically American dimension of the phenomena discussed in the dissertation, particularly around p. 161. It might be productive to foreground more explicitly the extent to which the conditions experienced by the catastrofemales interact with foundational myths of U.S. culture, such as the self-made individual and the pursuit of happiness. The protagonists' exhaustion, withdrawal, failure, invisibility, or refusal might then be read not only in relation to contemporary neoliberal capitalism in general, but also as particularly revealing disruptions of an American ideological (or mythological) tradition predicated upon self-fashioning, individual achievement, upward mobility, and happiness as both aspiration and obligation. This would add a further historically and culturally specific dimension to an argument that is already extremely rich and persuasive.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

As I have pointed out in my report, I consider the dissertation excellent in its present form. It does not, in my view, need any substantive revision and is ready to be defended. The observations and suggestions included in the report should thus not be understood as requests for revision, but simply as possible directions for further theoretical development, which the candidate may wish to explore in the future, particularly if, as I very much hope, she and her supervisors are considering the possibility of publishing the work.

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☒ Good ☐ Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☒ Good ☐ Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

☒ Yes ☐ No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

1) adequate as is

2) require minor revision

3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

☒ Accept as is ☐ Minor revision ☐ Major revision

Date: 8/10/2026

Reviewer: Iuliano Fiorenzo