

YouTube Birth and the Primal Scene

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Introduction

In 2011, the performance artist Marni Kotak gave birth to her son Ajax in the Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, creating a work entitled The Birth of Baby X. Although it is not completely clear who attended the birth, it seems that Kotak opened her performance to visitors to the gallery with whom she had spoken in the weeks prior to the birth itself -- conversations that seem to have circulated around bodies, pregnancy, visibility, taboo, silence, birth, motherhood and art (Rochman 2011). It is a small gallery ('microsized', as its own publicity describes it, hence its name), and she certainly expected no more than fifteen people to be able to attend. In a highly controlled interior, specially heated, and dimly lit, in which she had inserted many of the props of birth -- a birthing pool, her grandmother's bed, blue wallpaper, a carpet, a rocking chair, a freezer for the placenta, a shower, a hotplate, and so on -- her birth performance recreated, and continued, the ritual performance of normative birthing practices in the United States. Although the performance was intended for the 'public', there was barely space for her partner, midwife and doula, her birth installation, and a handful of visitors (Anderson 2011). So, despite considerable international press coverage about the first live birth to be performed in a gallery, The Birth of Baby X seems to have been rather sequestered. Although Kotak describes birth as an 'amazing live performance', one that she claims remains routinely hidden from public view, her gesture towards its publication seems to have been an oddly intimate and private affair.

Bodies, pregnancy, visibility, taboo, silence, birth, motherhood, art. The constellation of affects that the relations between these terms produce threads its way through many endeavours by artists, academics, practitioners and activists, over the last four decades, who have exerted sustained pressure within public discourses and institutions to open up the hidden labour of social reproduction, and the political, ethical and subjective dimensions of birthing and caring for the particular others we come to name as 'children'. Motherhood has (re-)emerged in the last decade as 'material' for artistic and performance practice, and a viable subject of academic research. This work both recognizes and extends

feminist perspectives that situate motherhood as a key site for the anxious psychosocial negotiations of identity, subjectivity, equality, ethics and politics. A wealth of texts, artworks, forums, networks and organizations have been seeded to support new discussions of maternal aesthetics, and new configurations of the ambiguous and yet ambivalent place of motherhood in contemporary life.^[note]¹ Yet the pressing need to develop a political aesthetics of motherhood, or to find a space of encounter for self-reflexive modes of auto-ethnography that can reveal the daily struggles to maintain one's sense of self while supporting the life of another, might not fully explain this renewed desire to perform, record, represent and spectate birth and motherhood. While these are vital elements in the ongoing work of countering the double bind of motherhood's simultaneous ubiquity and dereliction in the public sphere, in this article I attempt to think through an ambivalent curiosity that underpins our desires for what I'm calling 'maternal performance' that I think is on the move in contemporary culture. To do this I shift the focus from the 'liveness' of the performance space, to the burgeoning culture of routinely recording and sharing live birth films on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. Birth, once confined to highly regulated spaces and publics such as the home, the hospital and the medical textbook, has now emerged much more 'dramatically' into a shared digital domain, with hundreds of thousands of short films of live birth accessible to anyone with an internet connection, some with followings of many millions of viewers (Tyler and Baraitser 2013). This phenomenon raises questions about what it might mean to film ourselves giving birth, to watch others being birthed and to spectate our own birth mothers giving birth to ourselves, in public, with millions of other viewers. It asks us to theorize the meanings of watching and performing live birth.

I want to explore these questions through revisiting an old psychoanalytic notion -- that of the 'primal scene'. The primal scene (the fantasy of adult sexuality), and the related concept of primal fantasies (fantasies of castration and seduction), refer to the Freudian articulation of the role of infantile unconscious sexual and violent wishes in the structuring of psychosocial life. It is linked in particular to the psychic meaning of the loss of, or denial of, the material/maternal body as 'source' or 'origin'. Although within both psychoanalytic theory, and feminist and queer theories of the maternal, the primal scene as a theoretical concept is radically out of date, a small number of scholars have begun to think again about the primal scene and primal fantasies, particularly in relation to the digital visual culture,

and what it does to the question of origin.^{[note]2} The effects of the digital revolution on psychic and social life are now well documented, with the key themes being the ways that images are taken, viewed, stored, shared; the dissolution of the boundary between producer and consumer of images; the dematerialization of the observer, and the evisceration of the notion of the referent and index in audio-visual digital technologies (Jacobs 2015). As Amber Jacobs has argued, these changes characterize a specific ontology of the digital image, and prompt us to develop new theories of spectatorship and subjectivity. Where analogue technology such as photography relied on a belief in an unmediated event that fuels the fantasy that we can access a tangible source and origin of that event (that is, a primal scene), the digital image is a matrix of numbers that can be transmitted electronically and then interpreted into an image by a display device. Within the paradigm of the digital, Jacobs maintains, we no longer 'see' the image but experience, instead, the interpretation of data. This creates an indexical rather than representational relationship with the object (Jacobs 2015). Moreover, if, alongside the ontology of the digital image, we also think about the body in terms of 'somatechnics' -- Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray's term for the body as both culturally produced, and as 'techne', in the sense of an intermingling of dispositifs and 'hard technologies' (Sullivan and Murray 2009) -- then the digitization and dissemination of the particular somatechnic event we call 'birth' might call on us to reconfigure our notions of place, scene, birth, origin and loss; our relations, that is, to the maternal.

In arguing for the continued place of psychoanalysis in helping us understand issues to do with origin, reproduction and temporality, I want to ask both what psychoanalysis might have to offer to our understanding of performing and watching birth, and how a psychoanalytic configuration of the primal scene may itself need to change in relation to what Jacobs has called 'digital primal fantasies', produced by technologies that function through fungibility and loss-less-ness (Jacobs 2015). When we ask what is it that we desire to see when we perform, record and spectate birth, we open up a question about the birth of curiosity, and the need to know something about our origins. But if the very notion of 'origin' shifts in relation to technologies of image capture, circulation and consumption, then we may also need to rethink the relation between the maternal and the drive to look and know.

The Trouble with Birth

Let's face it -- it's difficult to speak about birth. Birth is an aberration in many disciplinary spaces; it appears as an embarrassment in the academy, and oddly in psychoanalysis too, where Otto Rank's theory of birth trauma was rejected by Freud early in the history of psychoanalysis, never to fully recover its place in the formation or functioning of psychosocial life (Rank 1924). Anxieties abound, in part, as Della Pollock has argued, because death always finds its way into the place of birth -- maternal death, stillbirth, miscarriage -- rendering silences in birth stories that nevertheless make their way into the narrative (Pollock 1999). Theoretical anxieties also haunt birth talk -- will birth embarrass us by tripping us into making pro-natalist statements celebrating the joys of parenting? Will it reveal a hidden unreconstructed liberalism, an implicit humanism or an old essentialism lurking within our theories, dragging us back to the link between women and bodies, nature and 'dumb' materiality? Or might it return us to the affects of horror, revulsion, hate, abjection and ultimately matricide, which cling to the maternal-feminine? ³ In Telling Bodies, Performing Birth, Pollock describes talking of birth as itself 'performance', 'the artful, inventive, changing, interstitial, corporeal process' (Pollock 1999: 8) in which birth's meanings and values are negotiated. Performing birth through practices of narration 'authorizes new selves, alliances, and norms of relation, even as she reveals the deep impress of norms and expectations on herself' (8). Here the risks of speaking of birth, including what Pollock calls the 'commodification of disclosure', are balanced against the potentialities for the emergence of maternal subjectivity, birth made meaningful, that is, through the performance of telling stories. The need to harness what is 'not said' within the 'said' about birth expands what we can know and think, especially about some of feminism's central questions. Birth reopens, in other words, questions of sexual difference, and the possibilities of conceiving of positive or generative difference, rather than difference marked as lack, loss and castration; it reopens questions of embodiment, materiality and matters of the flesh; and of intimacy, dependency, vulnerability and the ethics of care. It asks us to think again about kinship, in old and new forms; and the relation between social reproduction, class, 'race' and labour. The 'performance' of birth that renders birth meaningful, in other words, remains a feminist question, and performs the labour of reopening feminist questions.

Of course, the meanings of birth are always on the move, and perhaps now more than ever, in the context of a 'new visual culture' of birth that has emerged in the last three decades. (Tyler and Baraitser 2013).⁴ There has been a dramatic increase, for instance, in media representations of childbirth across a range of platforms, from cinema, reality television and television drama, through to online video-sharing platforms, pornographic film and fine art practice. And yet, as myself and Imogen Tyler noted in 2013, there is still very little feminist and no psychoanalytic scholarship on the implications of this new visual culture and its relationship to earlier feminist debates about the cultural taboo against the representation of birth (Tyler and Baraitser 2013). In attempting to make sense of the trouble with visualizing birth, we have drawn out a natal politics derived from Hannah Arendt's work that emphasizes our condition as natals rather than mortals, as beings who are all born, rather than an ontology based on being-towards-death, the dominant phenomenological tradition in Western philosophy. In The Human Condition, Arendt stated that 'natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political thought' (Arendt 1958: 9). Politics, for Arendt, is the capacity to speak and act in the public sphere -- it occurs when people who are equals come together to discuss and debate their differences, without aim, and without knowing what the outcome of such debate will be. In this sense, politics is, by definition, always a new beginning, and is therefore linked with an originary beginning -- that of birth itself. Following Augustine (1998), Arendt argues that beginning is unique to human beings, and the beginning that birth inaugurates is the foundational fact of all thought, politics and action. Without the potentially transformational category of natality for Arendt, there can be no freedom, no social change and no human future. 'Birth' is a category, in other words, that brings 'beginning' into being. Although Arendt retains a problematic separation of the concept of birth (natality), from subjects who birth (mothers), and is always in danger of producing another account of 'birth without women', nevertheless, we have maintained that the new visual culture of birth also calls for a new natal politics. Without harnessing birth as a symbolic category that gives rise to freedom, social discourse, action and social change, contemporary visualizations of birth are in danger of becoming simply banal (Tyler and Baraitser 2013). Natality functions as a metaphor for a mode of sharing words and deeds in public space that allows for the appearance of transformational beginnings. This positions birth, and those who birth, at the centre of public life.

YouTube Birth

Imagine two scenes, two women, encountering their birth.

Scene one: A woman is in an attic full of junk. There are some videos in a box, and one is labelled 'Birth'. She loads it into an old VCR player, and recognizes her own mother. She is birthing a baby whom she realizes must be her.

Scene two: A woman is doing some research on YouTube birth, and clicks through to a home birth movie. She recognizes her own mother. She is birthing a baby whom she realizes must be her.

If you enter 'live birth' into the search engine of the video-sharing platform YouTube you can access approximately 230,000 videos of women giving birth. Many are extremely graphic -- there is no censorship of the moment of crowning or the erotic enjoyment of childbirth on this site -- showing a much fuller spectrum of birth than on reality television. One of the most visited videos has had just under 50 million views. It shows a white Australian woman giving birth unassisted, in the open air, in a creek. Her partner appears to be videoing the birth, and their other three young daughters wander around and play in the water nearby. Although the video has some idealized, even idyllic aspects, it is also rather 'real'; mum is in considerable pain and discomfort in the last part of the labour; during the moment of birth she is rather frightened, and we are invited to witness the huge risk and precarity of birth for both mother and infant; and she is refreshingly open in her disappointment when she realizes it is 'another girl'. Importantly, what becomes apparent, when you explore the site more fully, is that she is a trained 'doula' or birthworker, and she advertises her services in a related website.

One early study of childbirth videos on YouTube by the feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst concluded that births she looked at were largely highly medicalized, white, middle-class and American (Longhurst 2009).⁵ Rarely did one see the diversity of birthing practices across the world, or see anything go wrong, including the violence that childbirth can enact on the birthing body that leads to almost half a million women dying in

childbirth worldwide every year (Alkema et al. 2016). However, by 2017 we can certainly track a number of 'genres' of birth on YouTube, each with a complex visual politics. There are births that are recorded explicitly for educational purposes, sponsored by private healthcare providers, state-led health campaigns and non-profit organizations; there are those made by partners of birthing women at home and distributed to closed audiences of family and friends, and there are other home movies that people have chosen to share with a general anonymous public; there are videos made by individuals in order to promote specific personal and political agendas such as the natural childbirth movement, unassisted birth, or hypnobirth, or by midwives to promote 'safe birth' in hospital settings; there are births recorded by companies whose purpose is to help 'capture' and sell back to you this 'momentous life event' for you to keep alongside your wedding video, and your child's first steps. This latter genre of birth video inserts birth into a heterochrononormative timeline -- birth, development, maturation, coupling, marriage, reproduction, the accumulation of wealth, its passing on, death. Although the majority of videos do appear to depict white women birthing in the global North, there are also many thousands of videos of African and Asian birthing women. What is involved, then, is the production and shoring up of national and cultural identities through birthing practices; the construction of discourses of classed and raced, able and disabled bodies; a complex politics of youth and aging, of power and gendered and sexual relations, and the relation between medicalization and notions of 'nature'. We need to remember that YouTube is owned by Google, and that despite the democratization of birth information and sharing of birth experiences between women, YouTube involves a highly mediated distribution of visual information.

But to return to our question, how might we understand the particular desire to perform, record, distribute and spectate birth? Is it simply, along with 'live death', the last taboo, toppled by the weight of mass global communication brought about by the ubiquity of digital technologies? We watch because we can? If so, what is it that we see when we watch birth performed in this way?

I began this section with two scenes. In the first scene in the attic, although anyone might have found the video, I would argue that the protagonist may still encounter the video as a communication with her, and her alone, an enigmatic communication, we would have to say, but a communication nevertheless, even if she may know that others have seen it and might see it in the future that does not include her. In the second scene, however,

this fantasy is, we could say, 'interrupted'. Here, the protagonist of this scene, along with potentially 50 million others, witness this birth. They witness it simultaneously, constituting a public. How does the publication of birth in this way change its meaning?

In Relating Narratives (Cavarero 2000) Adriana Cavarero develops a philosophical account centred on 'who', rather than 'what' we are. She theorizes that each individual leaves behind a pattern, the residue of events and actions that can only be told in retrospect as 'nothing but their life story' (2). 'The meaning', she writes, 'that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events ... consists ... in leaving behind a figure, or something from which the unity of a design can be discerned in the telling of the story' (2). It is a story that begins with the uniqueness of our birth: 'This and not another; a mother who, by giving birth to him, has generated the "seasons" of his entire existence, this existence and not another' (11). However, we are not fully present at our birth. Being birthed to this and not another mother can only be told by someone else -- by the birth mother, or a father, a partner, friend, an institution perhaps, a midwife, a stranger who was passing. Cavarero argues that its telling corresponds to a primary desire on the part of the one whose story it is, which is the desire to hear the story of our birth that we cannot recall, working at the level of what Freud calls historical truth (Freud 1939), an event that occurs beyond the capacity for memory or recall, which we cannot narrate for ourselves.

Birth points us, then, towards the fact that we are fundamentally dependent on others for our identity, our 'who'. 'Inside, we are all alike' states Hannah Arendt (1978: 32). It is the co-occurrence of being and appearing that allows us an ontology of the 'who' that constitutes each unique existent. Identity expresses itself -- it is the product of action, including the action that is a birth that is then narrativizable. We 'are' through appearing to others and therefore through the narrative of others. Hence our intense desire for the gathering up of 'nothing but our life story'. The performance of birth stories is always displaced, for Cavarero, showing up a primary dependency on others.

This may account for some of the curiosity that we have around watching birth; that the chance to 'really see' our birth appeals to this intense desire for the gathering up of 'nothing but our story'. And we could think about a mother who records herself birthing as she who makes a narrative, a visual representation, in anticipation of her child's desire. When someone makes a video of our birth, perhaps this is the beginning of that narrative

that comes to us from the outside, that generates the seasons of our entire existence, a reminder of our identity's fundamental dependency.

But when the narrative is shared with an amorphous public, when we shift from the woman in the attic, to the woman who witnesses her birth alongside 50 million others, then I think we are no longer watching our own birth. We are participating in the generation of a digital public around what was once understood as what Jacques Rancière calls an 'intolerable image' (Rancière 2009). Rancière disputes the fact that our current condition is one of drowning in a torrent of images of horror, massacres and massive population transfers. Mass Media, he argues, carefully selects and orders images, eliminating from them anything that might exceed the simple superfluous illustration of their meaning:

We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. (96)

One of the outcomes of birth as a form of mass spectacle is that, as well breaking the taboo on its representation, as well as offering a space for a mother to begin a narrative that is the child's 'who', as well as reminding us of our fundamental dependency on others for our identity, it also generates nameless bodies that in this forum cannot be knitted into the narrative of an individual life. When we witness our own birth on YouTube I would suggest that we do not necessarily get any closer to what we really desire to see or know.

The Sexual Theories of Children

To come back to the question, what is it, then, we are looking for when we look at birth? James Strachey introduces Freud's paper, On The Sexual Theories of Children (Freud 1908) in the following way:

Here, then, the first readers of the present work were confronted, almost without previous warning, with the notions of fertilization through the mouth and of birth

through the anus, of parental intercourse as something sadistic, and of the possession of a penis by members of both sexes. (Strachey 1908: 207)

Freud proposes that birth -- the birth of a sibling (or the birth of another child's sibling) -- prompts a child, who until this point is unconcerned about what comes to be understood as sexual difference, into a series of questions and investigations about where children come from, which give rise to a set of theories or fantasies about the sexes (figured in the specular field as what bodies have and don't have), intercourse (how bodies get together and get inside one another), gestation (the visible swelling of a body) and birth (how a baby gets into a body, and from where it emerges). These theories do not remotely match what adults tell small children about their origins -- in Freud's day it was that babies came from storks, and today parents in cultures in the global North are more likely to use ideas about a seed inside mummy's tummy, that seed needing to meet another seed from a daddy or from a donor, mummy and daddy doing pleasurable things to make the seeds meet and grow, or mummies and mummies, daddies and daddies doing pleasurable things but the seeds meeting to grow elsewhere, of babies coming out of mummy's vagina rather than her 'tummy' and so on. Picture books on the facts of life for very small children attempt to get closer and closer to 'reality'.

However, Freud's contribution was not that children will understand better if they know more of 'reality', but that whatever you tell them in early childhood they won't believe, or at least they will attempt to make sense of it in their own way, through their own libidinal psychic struggles. Children develop their own theories, Freud postulated, through a mix of fact and fantasy, which are then suppressed in relation to the 'reality' they are told in order precisely to manage the disjunction between the two. It is not the problem of who does or doesn't have a penis or breasts that is the issue for the child, but the disjunct relation between adult knowledge and infantile knowledge around the question of birth. Freud was particularly attuned to the fantasies of boy children -- their insistence, in his view, that girls and mothers have penises, their hope that they too can eventually birth babies based on their belief that if everyone has an anus then faeces and babies can come out of it, as well as their theories linking reproduction with the imagined sadistic violence of the primal scene itself. Despite the many difficulties with Freud's position, what we might retain is simply the idea that something we call adult reality, proffered in our discussion here as

the birth scene, mismatches a child's theory of where babies come from -- one set of imaginings displaced in relation to another, and that this disjunction (whatever its content) is the instigator of the desire to know, what Freud calls 'burning curiosity', sublimated in thinking, creating and looking in later life. Scopophilia, from a Freudian perspective, is linked to the tantalizing unseen of the internal space of the maternal body for both men and women, and to the unanswered question of how a baby gets in there, and how it gets out.

For the French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche, this relation between adult and child - the intergenerational encounter -- is crucial in instigating both infantile sexuality, and the binding of the drive that has to do with the production of unconscious life. Laplanche shifts the Freudian frame so that instead of assuming a human subject with an interiority governed by an aspect of the mind that remains unconscious (Freud's notion of the other in me), for Laplanche the unconscious (the other in me) is precipitated through an encounter with another person's other-in-them. The most important discovery of psychoanalysis for Laplanche is therefore the presence of the 'other thing in me, and of the link between the other thing and the other person' (Laplanche 1995: 663). In focusing on the link, Laplanche provides an account of psychic reality that resists being co-opted as either a version of internality (the child's theory) or externality (the adult's reality), but stages their relation as the condition for the very emergence of psychic reality. The link, Laplanche tells us, takes the form of a message that passes between adult and child. The message comes too early for the child to decode. It is sexual in its intent, a 'real' form of seduction, and not simply a seduction fantasy on the part of the child:

'Psychic reality' is not created by me; it is invasive. In this domain of the sexual, there is too much reality at the beginning. (680)

This third domain of reality, that is neither the child's theory of sexuality nor the adult's reality, is simply the reality of a message that passes from adult to child. Because the message is enigmatic and cannot deliver its content in a straightforward manner, it both fails and succeeds at one and the same time (665). For example, Freud, Laplanche tells us, makes an enormous effort to manufacture the primal scene from just two ingredients -- perceptual reality on the one hand, and the child's fantasy on the other. But the reality that is not material, but also not purely subjective, has to do with the adult proffering of the

scene, a kind of unconscious intent on the part of the adults, an offering, a performance we could say, indeed a seduction, through an invitation to look, to witness, to receive a message, regardless of what actually takes place. From this reading, the primal scene is not predicated on its content (we do not need to see or fantasize adult sexuality as such, from this perspective), but on the fact of something enigmatic, undecodable, being proffered for the child to witness. Laplanche, in other words, triangulates the primal scene not simply in the child's mind, but in the reality of the adult's enigmatic message to the child, at the same time as the adult is also caught up in the dyadic sexual relation with a third. The message says something like 'I am showing you -- or letting you see -- something which, by definition, you cannot understand, and in which you cannot take part' (666). The child, in the presence of the adult, must then translate the enigmatic messages, and this sets in motion the process of psychic binding. Importantly, for Laplanche, this encounter 'remains'. It is not subject to developmental time. It is what is reactivated in the transference in an analytic scene, but also remains active as an element of adult sexuality, in which the too-much-ness of the present-tense encounter between the generations, a kind of sexual seduction and sexual trauma, is always at play.

So, one reading of the desire to perform and spectate birth is that we are in a scene of address -- an address, described above, that is focused towards other adults -- that the child may witness or fantasize about, but crucially is also aimed also at the child. In other words, perhaps at some level we can say that a mother who chooses to film herself giving birth does so as an unconscious invitation to the future child, to look and to witness, as well as simultaneously trying to see something of her own original birth, to recreate a scene, that is, of unconscious proffering of adult sexuality that she has been invited to witness, and that sets psychic binding in train. And from the perspective of the spectator, when we end up watching birth, including our own birth, we are confronted, not so much with the mystery of origin, with the violence of the primal scene in the Freudian sense, but simply with the disjunction between adult and infantile knowledge. This is a temporal asymmetry between the generations that is experienced by the infant as an alarming present-tense encounter, one that instigates binding, narrative, discourse. To offer a narrative of the 'who' is underpinned, in other words, by an element of psychic life that does not develop, and perhaps never gets worked through -- the psychic reality that Laplanche triangulates, but in

the Freudian sense is understood simply as curiosity. What we witness when we witness birth is the birth, not of ourselves, but of the origin of our curiosity.

Furthermore, the psychoanalyst and painter Bracha Ettinger describes this temporal asymmetry between the generations as not only instigating curiosity, but also compassion (Ettinger 2010). Ettinger unpicks two major strands of psychoanalytic theorizing that she seeks to supplement, and that roughly give primacy to the paternal or maternal metaphor. On the one hand we have a Freudian/Lacanian trajectory that posits the subject as emerging out of a series of separations, retroactively gathered up as having been precipitated by birth and culminating with the crisis of Oedipus, in which the drive-directed subject is alienated in language and culture, constantly chasing its lost objects. On the other is an object-relational tradition that emerges out of the work of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, which understands the emergence of subjectivity through the intricate play of emotional life in the actual and fantasmatic early infant--carer relation. Ettinger seeks to move beyond this paternal/maternal binary altogether, in order to overcome the signification of the feminine in negative terms. Her project is part of the theoretical field that seeks to think sexual difference differently. To do so, Ettinger attends to the final stage of intrauterine life that she draws on for the figure she names the 'matrixial', a neologism that brings together the notion of the matrix with that of the maternal. She writes:

The Matrix is modelled upon certain dimensions of the prenatal state which are culturally foreclosed, occluded or repressed. It corresponds to a feminine dimension of the symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural, and fragmented subjects, composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown, and to unconscious processes of change and transgression in borderlines, limits, and thresholds of the 'I' and the 'non-I' emerging in co-existence. (1992: 176--7)

By referring to intrauterine life Ettinger is not positing that we think through the literal pre-birth experience of an individual and its effects on psychic life. Instead she is drawing out the potential of a model that has at least two subjective elements in play: a not-yet infant and a not-yet mother. Ettinger calls the space of encounter between the two the 'matrixial borderspace', where the emerging I of the infant in relation to what is not quite yet its non-I, the mother, 'co-emerge and co-fade' in a process she calls 'borderlinking' (Ettinger 2006).

The matrixial is primarily a principle of severality (at least two) that supplements the phallic processes of separation, and is the basis for ethical encounter -- an encounter that does not destroy or paralyze the other, but allows the other to be, without intrusion, or knowing. Ettinger calls this principle 'sexual difference', in that it is a form of difference that is inscribed in the feminine (it is specific to gestation within a maternal body), that is not about establishing ways we are different from the other, but constitutes difference as a state of 'wit(h)-ness' (another neologism referring to both witnessing and being with). Subjectivity that is established in a state of 'wit(h)-ness' rather than castration is the feminine; the aspect of being with others that all birthed human subjects carry with them, and yet remains distinct from 'merger' or 'symbiosis'. This locates the matrixial as the condition for sexual difference that refuses, or exceeds, binary logic.

For Ettinger the infant meets the maternal subject through its own primary affective compassion, the figuration for which is the co-affective encounter between not-yet I and not-yet mother in the late stage of intrauterine life. Compassion allows what she calls 'primal psychic access to the other' (Ettinger 2010: n.p). Like Laplanche, the encounter with the other is not so much a reaction but more like an arousal, akin to anxiety, an affective signal. Along with primary affective awe, these states mitigate early experiences of fear, guilt and shame. What this means is that alongside the primal fantasies of the primal scene, castration and seduction, that help us to understand intergenerational difference, loss and desire, Ettinger adds three new primal fantasies relating to the mother: the devouring mother, the not-enough mother and the abandoning mother. These are existential fears -- part of the condition of being human is to be anxious about being abandoned, invaded and withheld from. What is crucial, in her view, is to recognize that these are primal fantasies, distinct from narcissistic fantasies, and from actual abuses that some parents enact on their children. Primal fantasies have an important beneficial regulatory sense-giving function, and they allow the continuation of access to compassion and awe in adult life. We must be able to play with them, in order to come to terms with reality.

If we draw on Ettinger to supplement the Freudian and Laplanchean account of the birth of curiosity above, then the desire to perform and spectate birth would include both elements -- it replays an originary encounter between adult and child that instigates a desire to know or decode the enigma of the primal scene, and it activates a primary capacity for

compassion and awe that mitigates existential fears of being abandoned, invaded and withheld from.

Digital Birth

Let's go back to the difference between the two scenes. One was an analogue film or video tape, and the other was the circulation of birth through digital means, both in terms of production and consumption, creating a public that witnesses the performance of birth. As I noted above, digital images do not allude to the lost mother, as analogue images once did, but are, if you like, motherless, bodiless, with no referent. Amber Jacobs writes: 'Nothing is lost in this lossless duplication' (2015: 138). If nothing is lost, then with the digital comes the 'radical demoting of the concept of origin' (138), and the psychic experience of loss in psychosocial individuation. This would appear to cut across the account of the primal scene as 'birthing' curiosity. The question becomes not where do I come from, as Cavarero suggested, and how do I get back there, but, as Jacobs puts it, 'what am I and what can I be' (138). If primal fantasies can now be thought about in their digital form then it suggests that what emerges from this is a new form of curiosity, and perhaps a new form of compassion. The digital infant, if you like, asks not just where do I come from, who am I, and what is my relation to the lost maternal body, but also what am I, and what can I do, as Jacobs explains. Watching one's own birth then raises the question of 'fungible subjectivity'-- what I can be through experiencing my non-uniqueness, my substitutability.

If we loop back to The Intolerable Image, Rancière offers us the idea of the image that incites curiosity without foreclosure, without giving any answers. Reflecting on the history of images that have been used for political purposes by artists wishing to prompt the viewer into action, he notes how images that may be deemed socially intolerable (especially images of death, torture, horror or suffering, and here we can add birth) have been used by artists to raise awareness of the reality the image is supposed to be representing, with the hope of inciting a desire to act to change that reality. However, this representation--knowledge--action sequence is based on a presupposition, as the image derives its power in the first place from a scenario that is always already political, a sensible regime in which some things are visible, thinkable, sayable, and others are not. Many artists have understood this, growing suspicious in the end of overt political intent in art making,

instigating a critique of the spectacle and the notion that we may have direct access to 'reality' through the image. Rancière, in 'The Paradoxes of Political Art', for instance, discusses the shift in Martha Rosler's work, from the photomontage series Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful (1967--72) to her more recent series Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, new series (2004), which juxtaposes war images with advertisements for petty-bourgeois furniture and household goods, intended to reveal the realities of imperialist war that underlie the mass circulation of homogenous images of individual happiness (Rancière 2010). The effect is not, as in the earlier work, produced by a calculable sequence -- artistic shock, intellectual awareness, political mobilization -- but through what Rancière calls 'a process of dissociation', a rupture between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt, that cannot be anticipated or counted on in advance (Rancière 2010: 143). When we watch birth now, the scene, and its psychic representation, are already constellated in a host of ways. In returning now to what might be political about an image, especially an 'intolerable image', we need, Rancière maintains, to embrace the critique of representation—knowledge--action that we can see in Rosler's later work, but without a politics of suspicion. Instead of repelling us, or inciting action or passivity, a political image, Rancière argues, is simply one that incites us to look again. Curiosity and attention are created through images that do not deliver their 'message' but instead ask us to ask the question 'What is this?', and by extension 'What am I?' We could say, then, that digital birth, as one of the last taboo performances of intolerable images to emerge into the public sphere, through its staging of the birth of curiosity with compassion (that is, without suspicion), enacts Rancière's suggestion; through this practice of watching our desire to watch, or attempting to witness our own birth, the banality of the image is interrupted.

It might be, then, that we can supplement our reading of the performance of birth by attending to what Bracha Ettinger has called 'fascinace' (Ettinger 2004) -- a kind of transformational and creative looking that is neither intrusive, nor transgressive, nor filled with horror and desire. Through a process that simply multiplies the questions that arise when we watch birth being performed, a form of generative looking -- fascinace -- is 'birthed' by birth.

Notes

- 1 See Studies in the Maternal (www.mamsie.org) volumes 1--8, for many examples.
- 2 See papers in Lemma and Caparrotta (2014), and Ettinger (2010), Lemma (2017).
- 3 See Kristeva (1983), Irigaray (1985), Jacobs (2007) and Tyler (2009b) for examples of the long feminist debate about maternity and abjection.
- 4 See extensive work by Imogen Tyler, for instance Tyler (2009a, 2011 and Tyler and Clements 2009).
- 5 Birth on YouTube has attracted very little scholarship. The volume The YouTube Reader (Snikars 2009), for instance, makes no mention of birth.

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