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The Matrixial Feminine or A Case of a Metempsychosis

Chrysanthi Nigianni

In her work, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Bracha Ettinger presents us with a founding image: founding in both senses of *grounding* and *revealing*. This means grounding difference differently, on a non-phallic prenatal level, and revealing a difference that has passed unnoticed: the matrixial difference as *the* sexual difference that derives from the feminine, with the Ettingerian feminine being antithetical to the phallic concept of the masculine-feminine binary. Contrary to phallic sexual difference, the matrixial feminine sexual difference puts difference at the heart of same-sex relationality; a move that radically deconstructs the binary of sameness-difference in which subsist reactive and negative definitions of difference, as mainly a 'difference from'. Quoting Ettinger:

[T]here is a feminine sexual difference which concerns the difference of the female child from another woman/m/Other and not from men, boys or the father. In other words, the enigma of feminine difference is posed from the start between female subjects, and between the woman-beneath-the-mother and the woman-beneath-the girl.¹

Such a theorization of a matrixial feminine sexual difference manages to do away with a binary articulation of sexual difference that always implies a heterosexual framework. It thus provides the conceptual tools to rethink the constitutive binary of sameness-difference and to revalue an ethics of sameness (and of homo-relating) outside an identitarian logic; while it positions itself in a critical distance from theories of regression (e.g. Luce Irigaray, 1993).²

As Brian Massumi argues, the matrixial feminine provides us with 'a newly (and already) degenerated image'³; an archaic image of a new perception about female specificity, not as biology but as an originary event: rather than coinciding with the phallic concept of the maternal or with the unsignifying Lacanian absence, Ettinger's feminine gets redefined by Pollock as 'the psychic tracing of a physicality that holds a libidinal and signifying potential via the signifier Matrix'⁴. The Matrixial feminine is a non-unifiable space of a primary psychic relation between part-subjects (subjects-to-be), where phallic binary connections make no sense since the individuated entities are not yet formed. A pre-historic image, then, of sub-symbolic connections.

Thus, Ettinger constructs a different psychoanalysis, an inherently relational psychoanalysis, with the relational eschewing the causal. Key terms like subjectivity-as-

encounter, encounter-event, co-poiesis, transmissibility, co-emergence-in-differentiating, create a new thinking-image that conceives of the subject-formation outside notions of splitness, castration, or separation. Yet not anti-oedipal enough, she moves into a 'before' and a 'beyond' the oedipal scenario, drawing new routes between the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic, exposing and testing the unconscious of psychoanalytic thinking. The feminine is reconceptualised as a pre-symbolic corpo-Real ('the womb and the prenatal phase are the referents to the Real'⁵), yet with humanizing-subjectivizing effects; a feminine not included in the phallic logic of the Symbolic yet running parallel to it, expanding the Symbolic.

Hence Ettinger's thinking-image departs from the question of *what is earliest*, transforming time and temporality into a key question related to the (im)possibility of thinking and visualising. Matrixial time is a border-time, meaning the instantiation of thresholds, where borderlines of metamorphosis and transmissibility are at work. Matrixial time as border-time is both elusive and disturbing; a past insisting in the present as a trace, a trace that cannot be represented without fading out. Imaging becomes a temporal process of dis/appearing that produces the image as the unstable in terms of signification space. As Pollock quotes Ettinger: 'Matrix is an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the I and the unknown non-I which is neither fused nor rejected.'⁶

Thus, Ettinger provides us with a different time-image that breaks away from linearity and causality reminding us more of the Nietzschean image of eternal return that brings into play 'repetition' as another way to think of subject-formation. As in Nietzschean time, Ettinger's repetition is not conceived as imitation nor as reproduction but as a constant dis/appearing. As a result, matrixial subjectivity can no longer be perceived as the product of a linear development with retrospective references and becomes instead an in-built temporality, a nomadic subject constituted as the folding and unfolding, the appearing and disappearing in a durational matrix, where she *is* only for a moment and *as* a moment, as Judith Butler observes: '... she is there, there for the instant in which she is there'.⁷ Matrixial subjectivity then is a case of a Deleuzian metempsychosis⁸: the playing and replaying of an originary a-subjective past, which crosses over the notion of a stratified time and an organized life, by putting into the game all the different levels of existence: the actual and the virtual, the possible and the impossible.

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Ettinger's reluctance to go all the way down the anti-oedipal path (as in the case of the DeleuzoGuattarian schizoanalysis), and her insistence in drawing the matrixial as the condition that does not oppose to the phallic order, raises unavoidably the question of whether the matrix is not a retrospective construction that works as a confirming mechanism rather than one that challenges the Symbolic (thus partaking in the analytic machine of psychoanalysis premised on a prior *savoir*, a machine which works as a cyclotron process of producing/confirming its own truths). Moreover, whereas much attention is given to the conceptualisation of a matrixial psychoanalysis that is different from Freudian/Lacanian theorisations of key psychoanalytic concepts, it still remains unclear how matrixial conditions broaden the Symbolic order without affecting and changing the latter. Hence the question of what a matrixial Symbolic looks like; a rather badly formulated question since the reply that emerges instantly in my mind is that of in/visibility and loss: the moment the image gets fixed, it vanishes. Hence, the Matrixial Symbolic is conceived as a simultaneous emergence and self-annihilation, a failure to be 'seen' which constitutes another perception, as Butler writes:

To lose the trace is to lose the connection with the matrixial space itself, and to articulate the trace through history or a conceptual representation that is too masterful is to lose the trace again, this time through seeking it to know it too fully and too well.⁹

Following Deleuzian lines, far from asking how to explain difference (a question that assumes a prior sameness e.g. common human nature, ungendered bodies), Ettinger departs from difference as ontology, seeking ways to affirm difference as positive and connecting and not separating and negative. However, this makes an urgent demand on re-thinking how such a sub-Symbolic event affects and radicalizes the Symbolic order in other ways than those of loss and negation; or else, a *normalization* of the matrixial feminine is assumed in order for the latter to fit into the necessary later Symbolic expressions of a humanizing nature (expressions that always require loss and absence).

The originary feminine as the corpo-Real, as it is conceptualized by Ettinger, is an ethics of the Real, not in the sense of being oriented towards the Real but as an attempt to rethink ethics by recognizing and acknowledging the dimension of the Real; an acknowledgment that challenges and radicalizes the self-other binary distinction and the notion of relating as being necessarily oppositional, negative and transcendent.

As I have argued elsewhere (2008) a pure and exclusive conceptualization of the

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feminine in temporal terms as a durational multiplicity (or what Bergson (1908/1998) calls confused multiplicity) at the expense of space manages to avoid the phallic disciplining of the notion, what Massumi calls an identity-concept.¹⁰ An essentialised notion of the feminine as a primarily temporal force can be summarized as the becoming force of a ‘could have been otherwise’; not an originary force in the sense of ‘origin’ but a force of a complex ‘here and now’ that coexists along with and gets enriched by past and future durations; hence, an essence of sexual difference that has nothing to do with a binary logic of static and oppositional genders produced by structural impossibilities and transcendent signifiers.

However, I believe that Ettinger’s decision to stretch the matrixial feminine into the Real through spatialised concepts¹¹ such as the womb and the fetus risks stratification and molarisation. I wonder if the replacement of the matrixial motto ‘here I am’¹² with a ‘now I am’ would not provide matrixial subjectivity with the flexibility and severality it assumes, protecting it at the same time from any fixity. Moreover, the claim that the feminine is a ‘stratum of subjectivation, a psychic sphere that spans the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic’¹³ raises the question of whether the Real does not become a structured absence, an absent cause that does not however exist somewhere beyond the symbolic. In this case, the Real becomes a structural impossibility of the Symbolic order, tied to the latter as a signifying absence, rather than addressing the limit of signification *per se*. The question that emerges then is the following: how can such a framework promote an ethics of fusion, symbiosis and co-poiesis? That is, an ethics of immanence and not of transcendence? Or in other words, an ethical relating-to-the-other in horizontal, immanent and non-hierarchical terms against the vertical/archaeological model psychoanalysis assumes.

A matrixial link is a touching gaze - a *perceiving* as affecting and being affected and not as grasping. The image, her image is nothing but the topos of our affectuations: I am looking back at her, at she-the-other. Anonymity and intimacy is what brings us together in silence, beyond words and cognition: a-being-with-the-self/other as an ephemeral Whole, ‘for that particular moment’¹⁴. Her image insists, persists and returns, not so much out of the desire to ‘become what it would have been’ as Massumi argues but from a desire for an ‘all it could have been’ that effectuates all prior past possibilities as an

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ethics of open futurity that addresses directly the present¹⁵. Hence, an image that mobilises the minoritarian desire *not* for permanence (within eternal forms of existence) but for living actively the eternity of the moment and the peopling of the border-time.

Chrysanthi Nigianni is a Visiting Lecturer in the Psychosocial Studies at the University of East London. Educated in the social sciences, she then took the turn to philosophy and feminism with the focus being on theories of sexuality, psychoanalysis and continental philosophy. She is the co-editor of *Deleuze and Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press 2009), and of 'Deleuze and Politics', a special issue of the journal, *new formations* (2009).

¹ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. by Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp.182-3.

² See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

³ Brian Massumi, 'Painting: The Voice of the Grain', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, pp.200-213 (p.200).

⁴ Griselda Pollock, 'Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, pp. 1-38 (p. 37)

⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger, 'Woman-Other-Thing', quoted in Griselda Pollock, 'Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p.17.

⁶ Griselda Pollock, 'Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, pp.18-19.

⁷ Judith Butler, 'Bracha's Euridyce', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, pp.vii-xii (pp.vii-viii).

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p.105

⁹ Judith Butler, 'Bracha's Euridyce', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p.xii.

¹⁰ Brian Massumi, 'Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy', in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus—Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2003), p.xi.

¹¹ In any case the matrixial constitutes primarily a space, a borderspace.

¹² Quoting Ettinger's words during a two-day seminar at University College, Dublin: "Reading Bracha Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace*", 18-19 April 2009.

¹³ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p.178.

¹⁴ Bracha L. Ettinger, *Matrixial Borderline* (Musée Saint Pétersbourg: Les Cahiers de Regards, 1993), p.27.

¹⁵ Brian Massumi, 'Painting: The Voice of the Grain', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p.203. This implies a conditional thinking of possible hidden causalities.

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