Looking back in fascinance and wonder: Reading and thinking with Ettingerian concepts

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Abstract This paper opens with an account of my journey to, and my theoretical journeys with, Bracha L. Ettinger’s theory of the Matrix. Over the last three decades I have been fortunate enough to witness the evolution of her conceptual vocabulary and the extended range of her theoretical innovation. In the second part of the paper, I focus on two of her most significant concepts, fascinance and transubjectivity, both elaborated after 2000. I then examine three domains in which Matrixial theory offers radical new directions – transmission, trauma and intergenerationality – where Ettinger contributes new theorizations to current explorations of historical and personal trauma by elaborating the Matrix, whose linguistic meanings I shall explicate before presenting Ettinger’s thesis of a proto-subjectivizing time-space for the inception of psychic life beyond the classical psychoanalytical limit of birth. Grasping also the postnatal legacy of the asymmetrical but shared borderspacing, which characterizes the matrixial pairing of late prenatality and prematernality, radically expands our concepts of subjectivity, aesthetics and ethics.

Keywords Matrix · Fascinance · Transubjectivity · Feminist theory · Psychoanalysis

I am honoured to have been invited to contribute to this journal with a ‘foreword’ about my long engagement with Bracha L. Ettinger’s conceptual revolution in psychoanalysis and philosophy with her theory of the Matrixial. During the pandemic summer of 2020, I garnered repetitive strain injury from the month-long work of creating, electronically in html format, an index of the first volume of the collected writings of Bracha L. Ettinger from 1990–2000 that I was editing. It has since been published but will be republished in a new edition shortly.
It was to have been followed by a second volume that has since been deferred along with the new edition of the first volume. The index, covering 42 printed pages, will ultimately enable scholars to follow the evolution of key concepts and the linguistic innovations necessitated by matrixial thinking because the Matrixial defies the phallic logic embedded in language itself. Indexing ten years of writings was not a job I could assign to a professional indexer. The process of preparing two volumes of her writings, the second covering 2002–2014, required a sustained period of reacquaintance with texts I had read and taught for many years. Only someone immersed in the conceptual universe of Ettinger’s sustained creativity could plot out a theoretical history of the Matrixial so that the research tool of an index would open these texts to general study, to wandering and wondering.

As editor of her collected writings, I was tasked to write short introductions to each text, giving the reader a sense of what to expect and how each chapter contributed to the building, elaboration, expansion and innovation of the theory first proposed in ‘Matrix and Metramorphosis’ (Ettinger 1992). I also wrote two introductions, one for each volume. Both publications are being revised for future editions but I wanted to draw on this experience here and place some elements of those, now unpublished, texts in the context of my sustained engagement with matrixial theory over three decades.

**Encounter 1992**

In 1992, I encountered an artwork by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger before I encountered the artist or the theorist. It was in a museum exhibition titled *Routes of Wandering* where her single, multi-part work arrested my attention. Sometime later, I was introduced to the artist by a British colleague who lived part-time in Paris where he had met her. He suggested that a meeting between an artist who was also ‘into feminism and psychoanalysis’ and an art historian deeply engaged with feminist engagements with psychoanalysis in film, contemporary art and literary theory might be of interest to each other. Bracha came to see me in the UK. She introduced me to her theoretical work and specifically her concept of the Matrix with its associated meaning-generating process, metramorphosis. Both had just elaborated in a paper she had presented in 1991 at the fifth conference of women artists and art historians held annually in Germany.

I was immediately enthralled. I recognized her theory’s enormous and transformative significance for the still-tortured positions of post-1968 Western feminist engagements with Freudian, Lacanian, Irigarayan and other psychoanalyses (sic) as critical and theoretical rather than as clinical or even analytical resources. As an active participant in British feminism as well as an emerging feminist art writer since the 1970s, film studies had been my route into psychoanalysis as a feminist theoretical resource. Yet, so many feminists remained sceptical of psychoanalysis, notably among US-American feminists who had identified ‘Freud’ only with North American adaptive therapies, rather than with the theoretical continental communities around psychoanalysis, considered as theoretical tool that, of course, needed not only critical engagement but feminist transformation. Yet, it is
clear that however brilliantly we try to work with psychoanalysis in all its current forms, twisting and turning to accommodate to the structuring mechanisms by which a phallocentric order is constructed and installed as the single condition of sexuation and subjectivity, classic psychoanalytical theory nonetheless dooms any ‘feminine subject’ it produces to the anguished, envious (Freud) or ‘Othered’ (Lacan) negotiation of a negative position within its Symbolic system. While brilliant feminist philosophers and theorists exposed and condemned the ‘sexual indifference’ (Irigaray) of the phallocentrism (there being in its purview only one sex and thus no sexual difference from the feminine) or sought to mobilize the ‘negativity of the feminine’ dialectically (Kristeva) or to propose ‘two-ness’ as a transformation of the phallic one sex (Irigaray), no one before Bracha L. Ettinger dived deep to discover the potential of late Lacanian theories of subjectivity to be able to pose, at the same level of first-order theory, a shifting of – thus neither a replacement of nor an alternative to – the phallocentric such that a radically different dimension of subjectivity – the Matrixial – would come into view as a stratum operating in all subjectivities. The concept of a sexual difference ‘from the matrixial feminine’ as a universal, subjective encounter – the legacy of the protopsychic, somatic and aesthetic condition of the severality of human becoming of mutually unknown partners in a shared event – radically springs us from traps and dead-ends in feminism’s faithful yet tortured use of phallocentric psychoanalysis as a tool for deciphering and differencing subjectivity.

My immediate response to reading Ettinger’s foundational text in 1992 was to solicit her paper for a collection I was then editing for the US-American feminist journal of feminist cultural studies: differences. I had been invited by Naomi Schor, a founding editor, who was deeply involved with contesting US-American resistance to psychoanalytically informed directions in literary and cultural theory, often directly challenging misreadings of the texts of philosopher Luce Irigaray, so often wrongly accused of the ‘crime’ of essentialism even as her work is systemically philosophical and psychoanalytical, focusing on language and the complex formation of the psyche between body, language and society. I felt it would be important to publish Ettinger’s contribution in this specific journal known for its courageous intellectual commitments. Thus ‘Matrix and Metramorphosis’ appeared in my special issue of differences titled ‘Trouble in the Archives’ (see Ettinger, 1992).

I was confident that there would be a response as immediate and excited as my own to Ettinger’s deeply engaged, but also revelatory critique of both the potentialities and limitations of Lacan’s rethinking of Freud’s work and her equally insightful analysis of the limits of what Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray were offering as feminist critiques and elaborations. These would surely lay the ground for an engagement with Ettinger’s thesis of the Matrix – understood as a symbol supplementing, while shifting the primacy of the Phallus as the sole signifier/legislator of subjectivity and sexual difference – and its meaning-generating mechanism metramorphosis – also supplementing, while shifting, phallic mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. Many readers have shared the excitement of

1 Real, Imaginary and Symbolic indicate the Lacanian definitions of three registers of subjectivity. The Symbolic is the register of language.
Ettinger’s daring hypothesis about the significance and long-term legacies of the proto-subjectivizing time-space of the later stages of prenatal/prematernal encounter-eventing. Ettinger theorizes the prematernal as one of the partners-in-difference, allowing another dimension of the maternal to be thought beyond being a position in the Oedipal triangle (the Mother in Freud, Lacan) or an element in a postnatal dyad (object relations) that the Oedipus complex will shatter in the name of Father. It is itself a psychoanalytical project to analyse the persistent attachment to these mainstream psychoanalytical positions and to dare to acknowledge additional strata of subjectivity that can run in parallel, opening vistas that localize as phallocentric the still-dominant narratives of the subject and the psyche’s formation, while elaborating supplementary tracks.

I have written a great deal about and with matrixial theory as artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger has continued to elaborate her concepts, paper by paper, chapter by chapter over thirty years (see Pollock, 1996b, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2009a, 2013a, 2013b; de Zegher & Pollock 2011). I have equally engaged with matrixial aesthetics and Ettinger’s artworking as she, also an artist, moved through different phases of her painting, notebooks and latterly video, constantly faithful to the traumatically charged historic images that form her ‘archive’ (Pollock, 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 2000, 2001, 2011, 2013d). In 2009, I curated an exhibition of the artworks of Bracha L. Ettinger at the Freud Museum (Pollock, 2009b) and wrote the catalogue as a book length study (Pollock 2013c), prefacing the book with this response by Bracha L. Ettinger to artist Craigie Horsfield about the relations between being an artist and being a psychoanalyst.

In the beginning I painted, then I thought I should not make a profession from that which is most hidden, the most non-social, and the most non-institutional. I had to hide it, not make art my professional work, and study something else. So I studied and worked as a clinical psychologist. But what I pushed underground and left behind continually haunted me. When I came to Paris, I left everything of my life in Tel Aviv and my work in a psychiatric hospital, in order to paint. I painted and I stopped being a psychologist. But then again, slowly, what I left behind haunted me. I was first painting, and then not painting. Then I started painting again, until I slowly began to integrate the notes and the thinking, painting and life, this work and that profession, psychoanalytical theory and practice, writing and painting. It took me years to understand that this was all part of an artistic oeuvre which is mine. When I transferred my artistic experience with pigment, dust, colour, ash, lines and grains to my theoretical knowledge and practice, I wrote in a psychoanalytical language, because it was the only language I had, the only theoretical world at my disposition. At the same time, I discovered with anguish its poverty in the domains of art and of the feminine [emphasis added]. What came from my art allowed me to understand what goes on with my patients, but something also began to work the other way around. (Ettinger, 2001, p. 43)

Perhaps here lies the paradox that was not at all paradoxical for me at the moment of first encounter. I had been grappling with both feminism and psychoanalysis since the early 1970s when, joining the Women’s Liberation Movement, I also discovered
the concurrent theoretical investigation pursued by women artists, writers, academics, filmmakers. I am not a trained psychoanalyst but a cultural theorist who had to learn the languages of several psychoanalyses to be part of the post-1968 moment of theoretical and aesthetic experimentation. I was formed in that now-ageing generation who engaged with staggeringly complex theories of everything that we embraced as ‘political instruments’ for the analysis and transformation of the multiple oppressive ordering of sexualities, subjectivities in the classed, racist and sexist societies that sustained that ordering. My route into this was through both deep engagement with aesthetic processes and their theoretical, cultural analysis.

While many of the major feminist theorists interested in psychoanalysis became analysts, or went through analysis as an extension of their theoretical engagements, the specific doubling of first-order theoretical invention and first-order aesthetic creation such as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, now Bracha L. Ettinger, practised, enacted and en-minded is unique. She inhabits both the conversations about psychoanalysis at its cutting theoretical edge (a PhD from Paris VII examined by Professor of Psychoanalysis and major theorist Pierre Fédida and a massive body of texts elaborating her theoretical intervention) and the most advanced spaces of contemporary art, notably in its confrontation with the transgenerational transmission of historical legacies in their most traumatic, encrypted and haunting modalities. At the junction of her matrixial theorization of subjectivity and her enactment of matrixial aesthetics, she adds a critical engagement with ethical philosophies, self, other, relationality and difference.

I have found myself negotiating the rigidity of the dividing walls that carve up the spaces of subjectivity and confine their partialized study under disciplinary and professional labelling. My writing about matrixial theory and curation of Bracha L. Ettinger’s artworking has been perceived as too theoretical for the aesthetic community and my theoretical writing too psychoanalytical for the feminist communities no longer thrilled by what psychoanalytical theory makes it possible to challenge and also to invent and rethink. But what puzzles me beyond these complexities I can easily understand is the difference between my own instant ‘recognition’ of the huge and radical significance of Ettinger’s paper ‘Matrix and Metamorphosis’ (1992) – and my 30-year study of its unfolding elaboration across countless papers – and the hesitancy, if not resistance, I have encountered amongst a few psychoanalytically minded, progressive intellectuals already fluent in Freudian, Lacanian, object relations and many other psychoanalytical schools. I am not alone in deep engagement with matrixial theory, of course, and this issue is evidence of the way in which a group of scholars and thinkers are now confidently working with matrixial theory in the context of many radical developments in our expanding analysis of subjectivity, sexuality and difference.

My story is perhaps a footnote to what will be the future history of its wider recognition. I want to tell it here because it is about fidelity to the discovery and the work that has been involved in deepening an understanding of what is already there in ‘Matrix and Metamorphosis’. The insights that the Matrixial delivers in psychoanalytical language are already to be found in Ettinger’s writings recorded in her artist’s notebooks. Indeed, that is the point. I have found consistently that, while intellectuals wedded to their selected theoretical god resist the challenge matrixial
theory poses to the deeply rooted phallocentrism that underlies so many of the thought systems of these gods of the Academy, artists ‘get it’ – they ‘get’ matrixiality and metramorphosis (see, for example, Rowley, 2007) and run with it, and those who think with aesthetic practices in literature, film or visual art also grasp and feel emancipated by the shift matrixiality enables within and beside the phallic universe, the opening to other regions and to the rhythms, waves, modalities and sounds of subjectivity that phallocentrism forecloses, and worse, polices as both nonsense or non-sense.

My journey since 1992 has been alongside Bracha L. Ettinger as she has written and expanded her thinking, paper by paper, and artwork by artwork. I invited her to be Visiting Professor of Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics at my university for many years so that each new instalment of her evolving theory was wit(h)nessed by students, colleagues and myself. Wit(h)nessing is one of her key concepts combining the testimonial associations of witness (self/other) with the ethical, positional compassion of matrixial compassion: with-ness. On each of her visits to Leeds, she would read her latest paper, elaborating and teaching the theory and at the same time brilliantly explaining the late theories of Lacan as she went, enabling our accumulating understanding of the major lineaments of matrixial theory and the cumulative effect of each new concept in her expanding vocabulary. I want to focus here on two key concepts that have special resonance for current debates.

**Fascinance**

Fascinance is a concept formulated by Bracha L. Ettinger at the turn of the second decade of her sustained theoretical production of texts on her theory of a supplementary matrixial stratum within subjectivity. A preliminary version of her paper appeared as ‘Plaiting a Being-in-Severality and the Primal Scene’ – a short version of a written lecture presented at Jacques-Alain Miller’s seminar on the 7 June 2000 – was printed partly in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis 3* (Ettinger 2003) and partly in Jacques-Alain Miller’s, *Los usos del lapso, Los cursos psicoanalíticos de Jacques-Alain Miller* (Ettinger, 2004). A subsequent version was published in a collection I edited, *Psychoanalysis and the Image* (Ettinger, 2006a). What follows here is a reworked draft of the introduction to and overview of Ettinger’s 2006 elaboration of her text, ‘Fascinance and the Girl to m/Other Matrixial’ that I prepared for the now out of print first volume of Ettinger’s theoretical papers.

Illuminating the difference between the triangles of the primal scene and the Oedipal complex, Ettinger’s text performs a matrixial intervention in theorization of the formation of a subject ‘in the feminine’ who is designated ‘Girl’. The text also deconstructs ‘hysteria’, additionally offering a perspective on fascination and desire, the maternal, daughter-mother hidden links, the difference between female (body), girl (position) and ‘Woman’ (subject and concept). Finally, the text forges a connection between matrixial feminine subjectivity and the function of painting. Bracha L. Ettinger identifies several dimensions of matrixial feminine intra- and trans-subjectivities. (Spellings of
this concept have evolved and Ettinger now uses transsubjectivities. I hyphenated it as an indication of its own emergence.) She identifies a number positions in this complex of becoming of feminine subjectivities within the matrixial field that is always more than one: Woman-beneath-the-Girl, the Girl-beneath-the-Woman, the m/Other-beneath-the-Woman and the Woman-beneath-the-Mother all instances of encounter-eventing and transformation. They multiply feminine differences beyond those limited to Oedipal sexual parameters. They operate in the psychic process of ‘fascinance’ to reveal the desires embedded in the asymmetrical reciprocity of wondering (rather than identification). Ettinger’s text theorizes subjective becoming through fascinance as a durational, non-specular approaching-gazing in wonder, awe and ‘com-passion’ that arises in the encounter with a feminine other, who appears primordially as ‘m/Other’ and post-natally as a sexually mature feminine other (motherhood not being a destiny but a choice that marks active sexuality and desire). This affective process is also incited in our relation to aesthetic experience as a joint process: ‘Fascinance is an aesthetic affect that operates in the prolongation and delaying of the time of encounter-event and allows a working-through of matrixial differentiating-in-jointness and copoiesis’ (Ettinger, 2005).

Fascinance performs a matrixial shift from Lacan’s concept of fascinum – the mortifying fascination with the gaze (of the Other). Fascinance both engenders a scene for, and elaborates temporality of a durational, asymmetrical, creative transformation of partners in an encounter and of a subject in front of the m/Other and the Thing.

Fascinance originates in prenatality in the archaic encounter with the prenatal m/Other, while, in postnatal ‘subjectivity as encounter’, it happens in an encounter with what Ettinger names the femme-fatale-Other-woman: ‘ffAm’ – for the French femme-fatale-Autre-mère – which, when sounded, echoes and matrixially redefines ‘femme’ (figures of Woman as subject, woman-mother figure of desire, and more). Fascinance initiates new directions for analysis and for feminist debates on feminine subjectivities by extending matrixial analysis to becomings and formations of subjectivities and sexualities postnatally as well as to the maternal and to daughter-mother relations and differences.

This text, therefore, initiated an important new direction in the work of Bracha L. Ettinger after 2000. The ‘prenatal with the archaic-prematernal’ foundations of matrixiality that had been analyzed and given conceptual articulation in her writings over the 1990s, newly generated a range of new concepts with which Ettinger worked across visual art, literature, film and philosophy. Fascinance also becomes a key element in her reformulation of the maternal, the paternal and of countertransference in the psychoanalytical theory starting from Freud and up to the very late Lacan.

In her paper on Fascinance, Ettinger offered a reading of the mid-twentieth century novel The Ravishing of Lol Stein (1964/1966 by Marguérite Duras, showing how what she defines as matrixial processes and affects are already discernable in the novel’s scenarios and tragic plot. Ettinger recognizes in Duras the matrixial dimension precisely at the point in the plot where its potential for transformative work on behalf of Lol is catastrophically...
suppressed by a brutal Oedipal misreading of the ‘moment’. Unacknowledged but evidently at work, the non-recognition of fascinance as what the young woman, Lol, in this novel desired and needed to sustain becomes the source of her devastating descent into psychosis.

*The Ravishing of Lol Stein* portrays the fate of a young woman, Lola Valérie Stein, who becomes engaged, but then is unexpectedly abandoned during her engagement party by her fiancé, Michael Richardson, when another woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, who is significantly also a mother, hence an adult sexual woman, arrives to enrapture both Lol and Michael. For Lol, Ettinger identifies in this scene a moment of fascinance, wondering-gazing at the adult femininity she might become. She does not desire Anne-Marie, but needs time near/with her to emerge into her own desiring adult sexuality. This moment is, however, brutally interrupted by Lol’s mother who misinterprets the event Oedipally as her daughter being jilted.

Lol develops an obsession, compulsively watching a close friend, Tatiana, and her lover, Jack Hold, during their sexual rendez-vous in a motel, recreating another scene of heterosexual desire for her secretly to witness. Lol, eventually married with children, returns, however, after ten years to the scene of the eventful night (the dance) as she set out again to stage her voyeuristic vigils (the motel). There she meets her friend’s former lover, Jack Hold. He tries to save Lol from the madness of her compulsive voyeurism by performing what she desires to see. The novel is, in fact, told through Jack Hold’s eyes and is generally read as if he is the central subject. Ettinger’s reading of Duras’s novel as a story for the matrixially psychic disaster that befalls a young woman places Lol’s failed attempts to situate herself as a feminine adult, in this case, in heterosexuality, in conversation with one of Sigmund Freud’s most famous case studies and indeed admitted analytical failures, ‘Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’ (Freud, 1905/1953), often referred to by the disguised name ‘Dora’, the name Freud used for the suicidal hysterical analysand who has been identified as Ida Bauer. Between 14 and 18, Dora was psychically trapped in a double web of triangular relations between herself and her estranged parents and herself and her father’s friends Herr K. and Frau K. With Frau K., both the father and the daughter were very close, raising questions for Freud of jealousy and seduction. In the preface to this case, Freud even fretted that his case study came perilously close to a racy, literary short story of sexual intrigue and seduction. After the 1970s, the case of Dora has become a major topic in feminist literary, cinematic and psychoanalytical explorations (Bernheimer & Kahane, 1985). Ettinger’s study of Duras in the light of Dora was originally written for her participation in a series of lectures on Duras’s novel by Lacan’s leading follower Jacques-Alain Miller where Ettinger elaborated her development of aspects of the matrixial gaze from 1993 (Ettinger, 1995, 2006b, Chapter 1) into fascinance by means of a further concept – the matrixial trans-individual plait/braid. She was extending Lacan’s late thesis on the *sinthome* and what he had proposed as the fragile mechanism for ‘plaiting’ the three registers of psychic life – the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic (RSI) that he had explored in...
his seminar on the writings of James Joyce as the precarious means of preventing his collapse into psychosis. Ettinger here provides a theoretical exegesis of Lacan’s late theory in which he sought to overcome his initially linguistic and structuralist propositions by drawing on both avant-garde experimental and classical literature to elaborate a formula by means of which a subject might be in contact with the Real (trauma, that which cannot be imagined or signified) without losing contact with language; psychosis. Lacan proposed the image of the plairting/braiding of three strands: Real (trauma), Imaginary (fantasy, images) and Symbolic (thought, words) [RSI] and recognised how these strands could multiply within the same subject.

Through her deep reading of this opening in Lacan’s later thought, Ettinger proposes an even more extended matrixial plairting in so far as the multiplying strands that form the subjective knot Lacan proposed may be drawn not only from within one same subject but might also plairt strands from several subjects, including a subject’s archaic maternal Other and beyond, to the m/Other’s [matrixially imprinted] others, thus creating a cross-knotted, or rather cross-woven ‘subjectivizing’ fabric. She proposes, then, that the RSI knotted with a sinthome might not belong to the individual alone but join different threads from several different subjects:

If we imagine a plairting-braiding of RSI elements coming from three individuals in such a matrixial, almost-impossible linking, the strands of the Real-Symbolic-Imaginary are interlaced in the plait/braid not only in an intra-subjective fabric or cloth but also in a cross-subjective fabric … If, then, a ‘woman’ in the sense of the Matrixial is whoever exhibits the intersections of knots or a multiplied plaitt/braid – that is, a trans-individual fabric – then such a ‘woman’ is not a radical Other, but rather a limit-Other, a liminal-Other, a border-Other, a transgression, a more-than-one and less-then-whole (pas-toute) who cannot be approached by a universal, but who can, still, be encountered by following her threads in the weft and the warp of the fabric and along the plaît/braided strands.

We see here how carefully Ettinger works with Lacan’s radical intervention. He allowed a feminine jouissance but could not conceive a feminine subjective dimension beyond the Phallus. Ettinger overcomes this limit so that Woman ceases to be the radically Other to the Subject of Lacan. She lifts feminine jouissance from its insignifiance (a neologism to convey in French both the lack of meaning-generating capacity and its acknowledgement). Instead, a figure emerges here as Woman, whose meaning is ‘borderlinking-borderspacing’ and transformation at the edges of the subject in its ‘transjectivity’ (‘trans-subjective’/‘cross-subjective’ moments).

My long engagement with matrixial theory and the sustained labour of editing two volumes of the writings of Bracha L. Ettinger is a kind of theoretical fascinance

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2 For an excellent anthology of writings on Lacan’s late concepts of sinthome, knots, extimacy, on which Ettinger draws, see Luke Thurston (2002). The volume includes ‘Weaving a Trans-subjective Tress [Plait] or the Matrixial sinthôme’ (Ettinger, 2002b). See also ‘Some-Thing, Some-Event and Some-Encounter’ between Sinthome and Symptom’ (Ettinger, 2020, pp. 401–420).
– a durational encounter with a series of writings that have enthralled, convinced and changed me from my first encounter in 1992. So when we read that ‘Fascinance is an aesthetic affect that operates in the prolongation and delaying of the time of encounter-event and allows a working-through of matrixial differentiating-in-jointness and co-poiesis’, I borrow this to elaborate the process of encountering, reading, working with, being transformed psychically and intellectually by a process that is the very opposite of the normal academic procedures: namely, idealization of and projective identification with a thinker or artist (typically male genius), identifying with the victim (excluded subject positions), cannibalism (absorbing others’ ideas in art or literature, for instance, for one’s own professional advancement in the Academy) and finally, instrumental application of theory to art, literature or film as if these artistic practices were not themselves already theoretical and generative. How to work matrixially becomes both an intellectual adventure and an ethical process.

My recent fascinance – the labour of an editor of a substantial corpus of theoretical papers – was undertaken in the year before and during the global pandemic caused by Covid-19 that for a period suspended our social existences and isolated many in solitary or limited community confinement, a time during which a global trauma engulfed us all in a kind of negative fascinum as death stalked the planet. Yet, unfortunately a result of new platforms and legal practices within the global publishing industry, the published version of the first volume had to be suspended because of the radically incorrect directive for the correct citation of each of her own chapters on the electronic platform, a citation that ‘erased’ Bracha Ettinger’s authorship of her own writings. The two volumes will appear in due course in another form.

As a concept, fascinance has specific resonance for me as a feminist scholar and art historian in so far as the concept of ‘the feminine’ has been both ‘desired’ by those whom phallocentrism produces as its Other-Thing and has been equally dreaded, or even quarantined, along with the concept of ‘sexual difference’, by the evolution of gender theory. My continuing purpose in dedicating time and energy to the publication of two volumes of Ettinger’s collected writings is to ensure that the foundations and elaboration of the complex and evolving architecture of Ettinger’s transformative thesis of the Matrixial could be followed, with its radical propositions with implications for all subjectivities and sexualities, even as it articulated a primordial encounter with the matrixial feminine [I write it as feminine$^m$ (matrixial) to distinguish it from feminine$^p$ (phallic)] and the radical – and indeed vital – implications of this revelation of supplementary, shifting, non-phallic dimension in subjectivity might be shared more widely, and not in bits and pieces so as to resonate across ethical, aesthetic, political and psychoanalytical fields.

**Transubjectivity**

Let me place two statements before you:

To the field of the subject and to inter-subjective space I have added the transsubjective sphere of psychic and mental resonance that I have named
Matrixial…[whose] imprints and inscriptions that elude intersubjective communication form its aesthetic and ethical heart. (Ettinger, 2007, pp. 107–108)

Here Ettinger introduces her critical concept of transubjectivity. This spelling is the product of Ettinger’s own careful reflections on both the analytical concept and on the history of the word ‘trans’ that has entered both political and theoretical vocabularies. Other spellings may be found in her earlier writings, including transsubjective and transsubjective. Her definition of the Matrix as a symbol makes possible our understanding of this supplementary and transformative dimension of subjectivity:

The Matrix supplies the symbol by which we can identify and recognize the moves of the transgressive co-implicated entities behind the moves of the differentiated subject of the mature psychic constitution, and by which we draw out the activity of the specific Eros whose source is in the feminine-matrixial differentiation and differenciation. I have named metramorphosis and copoiesis the ensemble of encounters and joint-eventing that co-emerge, co-change and co-fade within the unconscious web of borderlinking between I and non-I patterned upon late pregnancy. There, copoiesis stands for the creative potentiality of metramorphosis. I and non-I in metramorphosis are not emerging in symmetry. At one pole, the fruition of the subject from its pre-subjective ‘aesthetic’ and proto-ethical position is enabled; at the other pole, the borders of the aesthetic and ethical fields of the pre-maternal/feminine Other are enlarged and transgressed at the price of its fragilization. (Ettinger, 2007, p. 109)

The passage ends with a key concept associated with the legacies of the primordial matrixial eventing of our proto-subjective becoming – fragilization – that in mature, and individuated subjective agency we need to mobilize to sustain the matrixial potentiality and enable its inherent ethics. (Ettinger, 2009)

Over thirty years, Ettinger developed her analysis of a primordial joint-but-differencing psychic dimension within subjectivity we can grasp through the symbol, the Matrix. Just as the phallocentric Symbolic order is organized by its symbol, the Phallus that defines a universe of meaning as I and not-I, so the Matrix is to be understood as a symbol organizing meaning for a transsubjective co-emerging I and non-I across the three registers Jacques Lacan proposed: the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic – corporeality, phantasy and images, thought and words. The key concepts of Ettinger’s theoretical complex include the following: Matrix, matrixial borderspace, metramorphosis, borderlinking, copoiesis, differentiating-in-co-emergence and co-fading, wit(h)nessing, relations-without-relating, distance-in-proximity, partners-in-difference, encounter-event, metamorphic transformational potentiality, besidedness, severality, potential shareability, the-impossibility-of-not-sharing, com-passion, compassionate hospitality, transcryptum, trans-inscription and cross-inscription, and transsubjectivity.

In the decade after 2000, Ettinger elaborated several new concepts: fascinance (Ettinger, 2006a), resonance, pregnancy, carriance (Ettinger, 2014b),
communicaring (Ettinger & Gardiner, 2010), as well as key pairings such as fragilization and resistance (Ettinger, 2009), compassion and hospitality (Ettinger, 2011), while proposing a matrixial Eros and theorising two complexes: Laius (Ettinger, 2015, 2016) and Demeter and Persephone (Ettinger, 2014a). These emerged with readings of novels, films, and myths – always touched by the anxieties of our current world that have incited a turn to ethics, aesthetics and subjectivity even in social and political thought and practice. I want to elaborate further on one concept that has I feel especially resonance in this context.

Ettinger’s transformative formulation of a matrixial dimension of subjectivity-as-encounter supplements, and therefore shifts, the classic psychoanalytical model of a solely postnatal and Oedipal constitution that can be defined as subjectivity-as-separation. If phallocentric model works with I and not-I, the Matrixial is articulated as the elemental encounter of I and non-I. The phallic divides Subject and Object, Self and Other, by the thetic rupturing of the infantile confusion with the maternal body as breast, voice, space, chora (Kristeva, 1974/1984). Later Oedipalized, subjectivity-as-separation is initiated with birth marking the inception of psychological life through the primary severance from the maternal body. This body is defined as only a generative, non-subjective environment. As a result, prenatal human becoming has no meaning, prenatality being imagined only as fusion or symbiosis within a maternal body or even body part.

As an effect of the displacing this monadic Oedipal formation as the sole mode of psychological being, matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter has the effect of exposing the phallic model as partial and limited thus revealing the meaning of the phallocentric. Matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter recognizes an asymmetrical co-emergence and co-affection – affection being understood as affecting in the Spinozan or psychoanalytical and not the sentimental sense – of the becoming-maternal psyche with the proto-subjectivity of the becoming-infant that her intimated otherness and co-existence incites. At the heart of Ettinger’s double project of exposing the phallocentric as not the only theory of subjective formation and bringing into recognition a supplementary subjectivising stratum is the concept of transsubjectivity.4

The Matrixial thus articulates the founding transsubjective quality of late prenatally incited proto-subjectivity that survives, transformed, into postnatal subjectivity, even when the latter is then being configured in the thetic separation of a Self from its others – a position not possible under the Matrix. Oedipalized subjectivity masks or blocks out incompletely the matrixial, proto-ethical condition

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3 The reference is to the Kristevan hypothesis of a thetic rupture as the condition of postnatal separation of infant and maternal chora (sound and holding space). The thetic is thought to be the initiating gesture that establishes, for subsequent language use by a speaking subject, the core positions of subject and object. It does so by creating separation between the subject and its objects symbolically, via signifiers and signification.

4 This neologism, transsubjectivity without the second ‘s’ we might expect in a compound noun as transsubjectivity purposely combines trans and subjectivity. At present, however, the prefix trans has come to be used as a noun and an adjective in the politics of gender identity and gender transition. Transsubjectivity specifies the matrixial addition to psychoanalytical concepts of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. Hence Ettinger will also write of transject as an addition to object and subject, and transjective.
of the *impossibility-of-not-sharing* and its related *fragilization* register as the proto-ethical ‘gifts’ of the matrixial feminine to all born human subjectivity.

The psychic primordial matrixial sphere is transsubjective even if and when it is experienced, without conscious reflection or cognitive attention, in the field of the separate self, and even if and when its processes evolve inside intersubjective relations, and even if, and first of all, we must include it in the paradoxical dimension of pre-subjectivity. We must distinguish between transsubjectivity and intersubjectivity. During life, the matrixial sphere pulsates in the subsoil of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity. (Ettinger, 2007, p. 10, original spelling)

The Matrixial is to be understood, therefore, as supplementing and shifting the current theories of a solely postnatal, discrete, Oedipal, phallocentric subject as well as the post-Freudian or non-Freudian theories of intersubjectivity and relationality, all of which accept as the condition of subjectivity (including intersubjectivity or relationality) the separateness of an I, Ego, from its other, Not-I, be that parental figures, objects, others, or the world.

The psychic primordial matrixial sphere of the transsubjective is expressed as the *severality of I and non-I*, which is an effect of asymmetrical co-becoming and copoiesis in what Ettinger defines, and makes us able to think, as the shared space of co-emergence in the sphere of later ‘prematernity and prenatality’. This sphere or psychic condition psychologically defines the tracing into all who are born an aesthetic, non-cognitive encounter-event resonating across a shared matrixial borderspace that may be mobilized, postnatally, as the threshold for shared, but differentiated, proto-psycho-aesthetic events and imprints. This shared borderspace registers such events differently at each vibrating end of ‘the shared strings’ because there is difference between the *partners-in-difference*: the becoming-maternal – an already formed subject temporarily being *transformed* by the becoming-infant in what is, for the becoming-maternal partner, a potential reanimation of her own primordial matrixial encounter-event – and the becoming-infant, constantly bathed and moved in an aesthetic intimation of a proximate yet distant, unknown otherness that is sensorially – i.e. aesthetically and transformatively – registered as sound, movement, resonance, breathing, pressure, vibration, etc.

Imprints and traces of uncognized, shareable psychic instances of the matrixial *Encounter-Event* of becoming (and, to begin with, in a non-cognized dimension) between several (two or few) participants – that are becoming-together and by this process becoming partial-subjects of the same matrixial web that operates on a sub-symbolic level – precede or arise alongside the unconscious traces of each one subject in self-identity (‘before’ at the level of prenatal pre-subject for example, and ‘alongside’ at the sub-subjective level in the maternal psyche for example, she being already formed as well in subjectivity and intersubjectivity). (Ettinger, 2007, p. 108)
Matrixial transubjectivity is new and specific and must not be confused with already existing psychoanalytical theories even as it engages with, but modifies, them and their insights.

Although matrixial inscriptions are shared by two or several individuals, they are not inscriptions of ‘collective’ unconsciousness in a Jungian manner. Neither are they traces of sexual-libidinal energetic or aggressive occurrences in a Freudian manner nor are they remains of the repression of signifiers à la Jacques Lacan. The ongoing ‘pregnant’ Encounter-Event imprints sensuous and affective traces and leans on the Matrixial Eros within the maternal Eros, a matrixial Eros that evades death-anxiety yet joins it in a specific way to a larger measure than the maternal Eros can join sexuality and aggression. This kind of jointness is revealed by vulnerability and particular kind of passivity. (Ettinger, 2007, p. 108)

Ettinger radically theorists the encounter between the becoming-mother and the becoming-infant as an encounter of the several (severality is distinct from multiplicity). The space of this uneven encounter of an ensemble of co-arising, co-activated and co-activating, subjective instances is what she will define as a ‘psychic resonance camera obscura within different individuals at different, and non-symmetrical, moments of subjectivity who are participating in particular experiences of transmission across matrixial borderspaces’ (Ettinger, 2007, p. 109). The pairing of I and non-I in a matrixial transmissible immersion registers a minimal but significant intimation of difference (with what is mutually unknowable yet co-affecting). This is distinct from the postnatal necessity of thetically distinguishing I from not-I, eventually installing in us the binary structuring of linguistic meaning. Matrixially, in the realm not of subject and object, but of asymmetrical transjects, both are being transformed and are transforming one another while traces of this transformation are inscribed differently both directly and in a cross-inscription into one another. ‘Thus, the matrixial psychic traces concern neither the one separate subject nor a society based on a general common denominator. Severality is a specific configuration, neither a celibate psyche of “one” subject nor “two” subjects in symbiosis of either separateness or an inter-subjective relationship’ (Ettinger, 2007, p. 109). The Matrixial thus takes the late-prenatal conditions of human becoming as a psychological, not a solely biological, starting point, even as corporality is its medium and, of necessity, rich in aesthetic imprints and affects. The Matrixial is corporeal, sexual and material as is all psychic life.

This statement is the basis for Ettinger’s affirmation that matrixial theory does not in any way challenge, in fact it strengthens, the arguments for women’s rights to choose and to determine the events in their own bodies. By subjectivizing the processes of human-becoming specifically in the later terms of pregnancy, and by insisting that this is a severality in which one partner has the conditions of all partners within her ethical and compassionate remit, only the woman has the right to choose concerning her joint ‘corpo-reality’. Her bodily events cannot be considered separately from her; her womb is not just an organ to be regulated or policed by external authorities be they religious or political. For a pertinent statement of this
see Ettinger’s keynote address at the Kochi Bienniale 2018 (Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2019) and her talk at Oxytocin Mothering the World (Procreate Project, 2020).

Any reference to prematernity and prenatality, however, may engender anxieties in queer, feminist and trans theoretical worlds made acutely suspicious of pregnancy and maternity because of the ways in which women’s reproductive capacities have been – and are being – socially regulated and appropriated by what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak named a patriarchal ‘uterine social organization’ (the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is appropriated socially and economically as the chief means and agent of production) (1987, p. 152). In revising Simone de Beauvoir’s famous phrase, ‘One is not born woman’, (the correct translation of the French), lesbian Marxist theorist Monique Wittig named ‘woman’ as what the lesbian is not. Wittig redefines woman as a ‘class’ position – akin to that of the proletarian under capitalism or an enslaved person in chattel slavery – in systems of oppression and servitude that created ‘a relation that implies personal and physical obligation (forced residence, domestic corvee, conjugal duties and unlimited production of children), a relation that lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual’ (1983, p. 108). Such theoretical linking of pregnancy, reproduction, organs and obligatory heterosexuality have driven a wedge into feminist and queer theory so deep that any consideration of maternal subjectivity and the conditions of prenatal human becoming have become deeply problematic for some but not all queer, trans and feminist thinkers. Ettinger is fully aware of these debates and deeply sensitive to these concerns. Her work shows precisely how the Matrixial both escapes ‘the linking of pregnancy, reproduction, organs and obligatory heterosexuality’ and provides radically queered viewpoints on human becoming that has erotic and psychic implications unbounded by Oedipally defined ‘gender’ or ‘sexuality’.

Ettinger already addresses this misunderstanding from the novel psychoanalytical position she has developed using the specific formulation of the m/Other to designate the unknown and unknowable prenatal partner-in-difference universally encountered in the conditions of human becoming that she defines under proximity-in-distance and co-emergence. The m/Other is distinct from the Mother of postnatal phantasy and the Oedipal family scenario and also from the Kleinian pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad. The paradox that theoretically results from this is twofold.

The Matrix must be grasped as ‘Real’, occurring before yet psychically persisting alongside and beyond any postnatal, socializing formation of gender, masculinity and femininity, or other gender positionings, and of heterosexuality and homosexuality, allowing a better understanding of transgender and transition. It operates outside the parameters of the Oedipal (and pre-Oedipal) formation of sexuality and sexual (non-)alignment. Yet – now the paradox – it does, and logically cannot but, introduce a sexual difference into the conditions of human becoming. Matrixial difference logically is defined as ‘feminine’. This matrixial feminine is not, however, a phallically defined difference from the masculine, and is not defined biologically, but by the psycho-corporeal specificity of the conditions of human becoming. It arises outside and before any gendered opposition or hetero-pairing. We have to think ‘a feminine to the power of the Matrix’ (feminine™) distinct from,
and not to be confused with or by, ‘a feminine under the rule of the Phallus and the Oedipal’ (feminine<sup>ph</sup>).

Thus, the matrixial transsubjective dimension, and the desire that arises within it, applies to both women and men [and those who align with neither term or both] even though they are based upon the archaic bonding and linking of each human pre-subject with his/her/their m/Other. In that sense the Matrixial dimension and Matrixial Eros are feminine and (pre)maternal. The matrixial transsubjectivity does not postulate subjects in interrelationships or intersubjectivity. It is the emergence of the I and the non-I (in the partial dimension), without rejection and without fusion, without assimilation or devouring and without abandonment, in the borderlinking of a premature body-psyche to a female/feminine mature body-psyche. It is forever bound to the psychically imprinted mystery of the invisible inside of a female body bathed within a specific auditory and otherwise sense-able and transitive-sense-able environment. Prenatality and pregnancy as Real, as process, as Image and as Symbol, inform unconscious borderspace of co-transformation-in-difference. (Ettinger, 2007, p. 109)

This last phrase makes clear that the theoretical project of Ettinger is not deriving a cause of social or sexual identity in the non-social beginnings of life as we find in right-wing and extremist or essentialist patriarchal thought that also deny women the rights to determine the events of their own bodies. She is projecting the potentiality for radically new ethical and ultimately political as well as therapeutic thought as the donation to us all of our shared primordial mode of co-becoming proto-subjectivity in transsubjectivity. Ettinger names this matrixial gift a seduction into life, that is archaically several but not symbiotic, co-emerging and differentiating, co-affecting but in dis-synchronous psychic time.  

This occurs at the point at which the threads that intertwine subjectivity, ethics and aesthetics are revisioned through the acknowledgement of the supplementary matrixial prism. Working and thinking with a matrixial shifting of the currently dominant and exclusive Oedipal-phallic model, ripples its effects across the major questions of all three fields. Admittedly, it alters the ways in which we currently think and phantasize about, analytically shame and blame, the postnatal Mother, exacting a devastating price that is paid by both those who become mothers, those who are loved as parent figures through legal or elective caring, those who do not align as mothers or fathers but are parents, and those, all of us, who have been carried into life by a subject whom our becoming maternalized just as her already psychologically-charged carrying subjectivized us. Thus, having been carried, we carry

5 In choosing this term seduction, Ettinger may be compared with Jean Laplanche who vindicated Freud’s early but later rejected thesis on seduction. Laplanche retheorized seduction not as the seduction by adults of children, but as the phantasy engendered in the infant as it has to encounter the already and unconsciously sexually-inflected world of adults upon whom the infant depends for its postnatal life. This is the enigmatic signifier that initiates the psychic apparatus to process it. The enigmas of sexuality the infant confronts are ‘where do I come from?’, ‘what is sexuality?’ and ‘what is sexual difference?’ (Laplanche, 1987/1989). Ettinger, however, does not focus on retroactive realization of Oedipal and pre-Oedipal sexual seduction but on the life-giving loving energy – the matrixial Eros – invested by the m/Other, the m/otherly Eros necessary for the seduction into psychic life of a becoming other.
permanent if fragile imprints and traces of a primordial matrixial legacy composed of wit(h)ness, severality, hospitality and carriance, one of whose effects, Ettinger proposes, is our compassion – and specifically for the unknown other. Where and when is this unknown other or others already a component of any subjectivity?

Transmission, Trauma and Intergenerationality

In art today we are moving from phantasm to trauma. Contemporary aesthetics is moving from phallic structure to matrixial sphere. We are carrying into the [the twenty-first century] enormous traumatic weight, and aesthetic wit(h)-nessing in art brings its awareness to culture’s surface. Certain contemporary art practices bring into light matrixial alliances in confronting the limits of shareability in the trauma and jouissance of the Other. The beautiful accessed via artworks in our era – and I emphasize again our era since we are living through massive effects of transitive trauma, and it is captivated and illuminated by different art works – carries new possibilities for affective apprehending and produces new artistic effects, where aesthetics approach ethics beyond the artist’s conscious control. The aesthetic is trauma’s transformed affectability in wit(h)nessing in/by art, beyond time and in different sites and spaces, yet it has ethical and even therapeutic consequences. (Ettinger, 2006b, pp. 147–148)

Matrixial theory arose from Ettinger’s own reflections during the 1980s on what she was encountering in both her artworking and her psychoanalytical and personal analysis of what is now more widely acknowledged as transgenerational transmission of trauma. She was one of the first artists to register in her work and then elaborate the affects and effects of transmitted trauma, individual and collective-historical, in both the form and process of her aesthetic practice. In her notebooks she writes:

My parents are proud of their silence. It was their way of sparing others and their children from suffering. But in this silence all was transmitted except the narrative. In silence nothing can be changed in the narrative which hides itself. If being haunted is the direct testimony of repression, the ceremony is a testimony of testimony. (Ettinger, 1993, p. 85)

In her theoretical work on trauma and memory, and notably in her much later article ‘Transcryptum’ (2002a), Ettinger draws on, but matrixially reconfigures, what has now become a widely cited reference point for clinical and theoretical studies of intergenerational transmission, namely the thesis of the crypt advanced by Hungarian analysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török (1987, 1994). They defined a phantom unconsciously haunting the subject in which the crimes, secrets and traumas of parents and grandparents and beyond are both encrypted (made enigmatic at the level inscription) and entombed (at the level of inaccessible inclusion) in the psyche of a child. The theme of the troubled past installed as a

6 For a brilliant reading of the word-concept wit(h)nessing see Anna Johnson’s ‘Nomad Words’ (2010).
riddling phantom – Hamlet’s father’s ghost is one of Abraham’s key literary example – has been taken up by many contemporary analysts (see, for example, Frosh, 2013). Haunting is also a subtitle title of the influential cultural sociological study by Avery Gordon (1997) whose focus was social violence and oppression within ‘racial capitalism and monopolistic and militaristic and state violence’ that caused the unhomeliness of ‘dispossession, exploitation, repression and their concrete effects’ (p. xv).

There are now many studies providing theorized case studies of transgenerational trauma (see, for example, Wardi, 1992). As therapists and analysts, the writers of these studies encounter those whose psychological experiences may seem inexplicable in terms of classic Freudian or Kleinian attention to the immediate family personae and histories. There is now no doubt that a child may absorb others’ traumas in the manner Ettinger proposes, above all at the affective level, but without a narrative giving cognitive access to working it through. But what is this transmission if not only the register of secrets, crimes and unspeakable trauma endured by parents (perpetrators) or even successions of generations of victims such as the descendants of the enslaved African Americans, or the children of those who endured the Stalinist rule of terror, war service, class violence, Apartheid regime, child loss under a dictatorship, dispossession, and of course the Shoah? What if the matrixial ‘unconscious’ of which Ettinger has been speaking all along is not only about the subject’s vulnerability to intergenerational transmission, but also reveals a fragilization in a compassion that is not optional but an affect generated in the asymmetrical co-emergence that at once makes not-sharing impossible while inspiring an ‘arousal’ in compassion for the m/Others?

Rather than seeking to find the stories or events that might be the keys to decrypting specific anxieties and alienating, dispossessing ‘inhabitations’ of the child’s present by a parent’s or grandparent’s past, perhaps there are ways to recognize another capacity and the relation of the one carrying the trauma of the other to its processing and transformation. Ettinger writes, using the Lacanian term Thing (foreclosed from language, hence unknowable but exerting its force like the invisible atoms that shape the void of a vase) that predates the formation of the object in the psyche:

Like a phantom, the object of the ancestor’s desire and loss is buried alive in its crypt together with the trauma that its loss has caused her, and now I carry in my internal crypt the crypt of the crypt of my m/Other, like a crypt within a crypt. Thus, we are conceiving of a Thing [foreclosed] that, although it is treated by my own originary repression [the unconscious] it was never ‘mine’ in any direct experience. The phantom that is coming alive through me is already the object of desire of its own object, and the Thing that is now incarnated by me was originarily already included and foreclosed by/for someone else who is linked to me – by my non-I. Here, when it is the object who ‘wears the subject like a mask’ while the crypt constructs the internal boundaries of the subject like a castle – is the subject’s psychotic-like position not in strange proximity to that of the contemporary artist who, according to Lyotard (1997), is inhabited by the Thing as if the Thing still dwells outside,
and who is ‘de-habitated’ from her own habitat, from her own body and history, by the Thing? In their relations to emerging possible significance of/for such a Thing, certain contemporary artworks are what I am naming transcryptum. Transcryptum is the art object, operation, or procedure that incarnates trans-cription of trauma and cross-inscriptions of its traces, where the artwork’s working through of traumatic amnesia is a trans-cryptomnesia: the lifting of the world’s cryptomnesia (‘hidden memory’ in Latin) from an outside with-in. (Ettinger, 2002a, p. 255)

Metamorphosis, the aesthetic agency of the Matrixial may enable some processing by mobilizing of what Ettinger terms ‘the erotic antennae of the psyche’ engendering ‘a poietic process of affective swerve and borderlinking … between/with-in several matrixial entities [that] dissolves borderlines to become thresholds for a trans-subjective passage to a surplus of fragility. … A matrixial impossibility of not-sharing with the other is profoundly fragilizing; it demands its price and originates its beauty’ (Ettinger, 2002a, p. 262).

**Words, Concepts, Interventions**

Let me begin with the word ‘matrix’ that comes from Latin and is widely found in mathematics, biology, chemistry, geology, anatomy and other disciplines in different ways. A matrix is a cultural, social, biological or mathematical grid or structure. In her psychoanalytical usage, however, Ettinger has theoretically transformed the literal meaning of the Latin that shares a root with the word mater (mother). In the dictionary, matrix is defined as a ‘generative environment’ rather than a structure. It is a space in which something else develops. Environment or space can lead us away from organ-based thinking to focus on an event: the ‘emergence of the new’ in an ‘ hospitable environment’ for such emergence. Ettinger’s Matrix is a space, but rather a time-space of co-genesis of which the new is the becoming whose becoming transforms the subjective of space of the partner-in-difference in proximity-in-distance. What makes her thesis distinct, therefore, is the Matrix as co-emergence, a shared proto-psychic space of encounter and a primordial being-with something other, so that, for both the ‘partners-in-difference’ that form the Matrix, the latter signifies for the emergent infans a proto-subjective becoming-with, while the other partner is already a subject being equally transformed in this new severality that the matrixial moment of pregnancy (Ettinger’s term to distinguish the joint psychic condition from the medical definition notion of pregnancy) beings into existence. In this specific framing, matrixiality is, therefore, about becoming, transformation and futurity but never in solitary individuality. Ettinger has created a cluster of psychoanalytical image-concepts for joint processes of transformation-in-shareability that is not about a specific bodily organ but is not afraid of the fact that there is an event of bodies.

Matrixial becoming of any subject occurs in this matrixial non-relation to the already formed psyche of the feminine other also becoming through the encounter with the becoming-infant. Ettinger thus equally theorizes matrixial hospitality that
shifts the connotations of the feminine towards affective states of fragility and vulnerability, wit(h)nessing and co-affection utterly distinct from patriarchal ideologies of destiny, role, nature, anatomy. These conditions of becoming through encounter-event are then available as psychic resources that can later become ethical foundations for non-lethal, non-phallic subjectivity and relationality and, later, for consciously decided political agency in relation to others.

Because of both the legacy of hysteria, attributing women’s dissidence to womb troubles, and of political application of notions of sexual anatomy as destiny that were used to deny women education and the vote, and because of fixed notions of gender difference based on body parts, I too recognize the anxiety that led to a feminist focus on and preference for theories of sociopolitical and linguistic construction of designated or assumed gender. It had seemed impossible to imagine a non-patriarchal exploration of embodied, materially-based, corpo-Real subjectivity. There is no reason to become anxious about a theory of psychosomatic sexual difference which addresses, as does the Matrixial, not the destiny of all women but is the condition of all of us who have been matrixially carried into life. We seem negatively trapped in the legacy of historical (and political) hystericalization of femininity and thus cannot allow ourselves to think with the matrix (i.e. the space of the emergence of the new) or the Matrix (a psychoanalytically theorized supplement to existing theories of subjectivity and difference).

Ettinger’s complex, and indeed challenging process of not only deconstructing the patriarchal/phallocentric entwining of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Lacan’s three registers of psychic life) but also of proposing one more register, the corpo-Real (its phenomenological account as well as the encounter with it), and another kind of entwining of all these registers, requires us to think differently with our embodiedness and about psychologically-imbued embodied subjectivities – both consciously and non-consciously. This means acknowledging the affective and sensuous, psychic corpo-Real.

Phenomenology has taught us to recognize the relay between flesh and concept, between living sensate experience and imagination, between matter and memory (Bergson 1896/1990). The matrixial embrace of both the corpo-Real and corpo-reality in the formations of subjectivity must now be extended into the critical

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7 To avoid confusion we need to note the distinction Ettinger makes between 1) the corpo-Real, her term for materializing the corporeal in the psychic register, the Real, one of Lacan’s three orders where the Real is unthinkable and unspeakable, 2) corpo-reality (a sense of human reality mediated through the body and considering the body a level of reality we live, sense, suffer, act, create etc.), and 3) corporeality (the condition of having a body). Ettinger uses ‘female corporeality’ to argue for the acknowledgement of the effects of the archaic bodily encounter by the proto-infant with a female body, and of the psychical and affective effects of the events of a female body which, since both structuralism and even the affective-sensationalist turn against structuralism, has not been acknowledged as founding any dimension within our understanding of what constitutes subjectivity. The exiling of the corporeal (the body in this enlarged sense of material being) and the corpo-Real as the site of psychic proceedings and histories) has been paradoxically intense in the defensive forms of feminist theory. Ettinger seeks to relieve this anxiety by opening the three fields (1–3 above) to genuine enquiry. This might result in their rejection again, but not before we have allowed ourselves to understand what may be being masked or censored by the ‘correctness’ of a rigid anti-corporeal stance that justifiably rejects reductively deterministic uses of non-psychoanalytical concepts of bodies, but at a price. Ettinger asks us to dare to rethink feminist anxiety and thus avoid the splitting of intellectual structuralism from dismissed reductive essentialism.
question of sexual difference and where it arises *primordially* and its affects on all who are born.

Ettinger’s use of the Latin word *matrix* suspends the legacy of the hystericization of the feminine as much as it defies anatomical reductionism so as to approach *female corpo-reality* and explore the psychic register of the corp-Real that the Matrix keeps in semantic play as *concepts* and *figures* of co-genesis. It radically contests the anatomical and sociopsychological reductionism we find in the long association of hysteria with femininity. In effect, hysteria defines woman as a non-subject, as asocially predetermined by the operations of an organ associated specifically with sexual *reproduction* – even though the womb is not a *sexual* organ per se.  

8 If the focus on the function of an organ has historically served as the means to deny women’s political subjecheid while prescribing/proscribing women’s sexualities and denying gender fluidity and multiple sexualities, as a subjectivizing time-space, the womb can nonetheless be reclaimed as the basis for shifting the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic registers as the site of the proto-humanizing of our earliest co-becomings. All of us carry its legacy and could animate its resonances in aesthetics, ethics, and, indeed ultimately, politics.

Matrix is not at all about who has, or does not have, this or that organ. It addresses a common proto-subjectivizing encounter – whose aesthetic traces persist into postnatal life – experienced by every living person by virtue of being alive. This makes us question what we fail to recognize in human subjectivity when we deny, as *psychologically* significant, the universal human condition of being generated, becoming, in a shared environment *with-in* an unknown subjectivizing other and in a radical *corporeal* and *corpo-Real* proximity to an unknown otherness. This encounter is differentiating. I stress the durational and the constant by the gerund(-ing). This is sensuously experienced *in the later stages* of our becoming when we have become sensate, and are aesthetically affected by sound, rhythm, pressure, movement, light and intimations of difference. These aesthetic sensations leave their enigmatic imprints of *co-affection* and *crossed mental inscription* of what Ettinger terms *carriance: being carried with-in.*

The legacy of matrixial *severality* matters in sociopolitical terms precisely because matrixial theory does not allow, as currently occurs in many cultures and laws, a privileging of the product or object of sexual reproduction over the woman-as-subject and as the sole responsible subject in a shared event. It refutes the intervention of the phallic law in the primordial *encounter-event* by giving us an alternative way of approaching any Symbolic and Real matrixial co-emergence, offering each matrixial event *a language of her own* that resists phallic control over bodies that have long been colonized by the instrumentalizing reproductive reason that characterizes patriarchal social organization, theology and law. The generative psychological potentialities are reduced to products— the child— that are claimed

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8 For an important discussion of the confusion between sexual differentiation via organs of sexuality – penis and clitoris – and the womb as site of a phallocentric reproductive or ‘uterine’ economy that, at its most extreme, literally excises a prime organ of exclusive sexual pleasure (and not associated with reproduction), the clitoris, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987, Chapter 9).
by the father (and thus by society).\textsuperscript{9} Ettingerian matrixiality \textit{psychoanalytically} defies and disowns any patriarchal abuse of the ‘uterine’.

As a theory of severality and encounter, the theory of the Matrix provides a language with which to think women as subjects of, and in, their own bodies, and introduces differentiating processes, \textit{metr}amorphoses, that temper, shift, even deflect as well as supplement, our analysis of the subject, of any sex, and of its agency. Moreover, the primordial alliance implied in \textit{subjectivity-as-encounter} grants to the prematernal \textit{m/Other} a subjectivizing and humanizing role to those born who will be then further shaped through the postnatal process of the formation of subjectivity. Being attentive to the different resonances of matrixial \textit{subjectivity-as-encounter} for partners at different stages of their respective subjective formation, we also have to acknowledge, more profoundly and ethically, the psychological impact of ‘maternal shock and trauma’, and of phenomenological embodiment, pain and loss (Ettinger, 2006c; Pollock 2013a).

The lowercase \textit{m} in \textit{m/Other} indicates the subject who is being \textit{maternalized} within the matrixial encounter-event of jointness with a becoming infant. To begin with, the term distinguishes the archaic \textit{m/Other} (otherness sensed aesthetically by the late prenatal infant that is nonetheless intimate and transconnected) from the \textit{Mother figure}, of postnatality, who figures in the later, Oedipal mother/father/child triangle. The neologism also distinguishes Lacan’s Other (Language and Culture) from matrixial \textit{alterity-in-encounter}, the intimate even if uncognized alterity of the \textit{non-I}. For the becoming-infant, the \textit{m/Other} is an intuited Otherness, unknown, yet sensed, not as someone, but as an intimated non-I. It is one point of a \textit{shared string} whose vibrations incite, for the concurrently emerging \textit{proto-I}, the very first, non-cognitive intimation of a \textit{non-I}. The \textit{m/Other} is also radically different from the casting of the pregnant maternal body/subject as a bodily container (science), a holy vessel (religion), a biological incubator (phantasy) or a lost home \textit{and} tomb (Freud), all of which are, in phallic phantasy, associated with psychic death of the subject – which can be desired as a kind of release from life into no-longer-life (this is Ettinger’s phrase) or feared as the horrors of submergence into non-being.\textsuperscript{10} In British psychoanalysis after Freud, ‘psychic container’ signifies maternal enveloping rather than non-being. Ettinger, however, escapes these phantasies and connotations with her concept of \textit{carriance} (caring-carrying in a matrixial borderspace, Ettinger 2014a) radically distinct from Winnicott’s notion of postnatal maternal ‘holding’ and from Bion’s pairing of ‘container/contained’ (Ettinger, 2006b, Chapter 1).

\textsuperscript{9} For a Hegelian reading of patriarchal claims that privilege paternity in law precisely because of a lack of prolonged bodily and psychological intimacy with the process of the formation of the infant beyond insemination, see Mary O’Brien’s \textit{The Politics of Reproduction} (1981).

\textsuperscript{10} Ettinger is not alone in thinking about prenatal life and subjectivity but it is rare and never developed to this level of theoretical elaboration. See Sandór Ferenczi, Wilfred Bion, Françoise Dolto and R.D. Laing cited in Ettinger, (1999).
Thinking beyond the Limit: Positing a Time-Space

Bracha L. Ettinger thinks beyond the traditional limit of psychoanalytical thought about the origination of subjectivity – birth – that a few have, however, dared to breach. Those courageous psychoanalysts who also done so, have not, however, discovered a unique psychic process that might later contribute to subjectivity in the manner that Ettinger’s matrixiality has done. As a result, the maternal remains in their thinking only as either a non-subjectivity physical environment or an object of postnatal phantasy of a lost space.

Through matrixial recognition of the potential significance in postnatal human subjectivity of prenatal proto-subjectivizing experience of becoming-a human-being-with and the phenomenological meaning and ontological significance of our becoming, the carrying maternal individual also re-enters psychoanalytic thought and practice. In Ettingerian psychoanalysis, the m/Other, and later on the mother, and in general the other, are no longer conceived only on an axis of present or absent or as the lost objects of desire. They are to be understood as a subjects participating within singular severalties. Secondly, since the becoming-maternal subject is also embedded in the matrixial encounter as an archaic element, one end of the string of the matrixial link a, this kind of liminal and limited connectivity can then be thought in and for every current encounter-event. Thirdly, although traced into our proto-psyches so archaically, the matrixial link a haunts us with a yearning that is not, like Lacan’s objet a, for (phantasised) lost wholeness (the phallic phantasy of an abolition of difference). We yearn for borderlinking. Thus, in theorizing and stressing jointness-with-in differenc/tiation, the Ettingerian thesis powerfully counters the sociocultural abuse of women’s bodies and minds. 11

Furthermore, matrixial reframing has considerable implications for the way psychoanalysis has imagined and theorized the subject itself as well as the psychic object, the mother figure, so often disfigured as too much or too little, as suffocating or abandoning, as over-present or absent, as object of blame for all the existential ills of postnatal life (Ettinger, 2006a, 2006c, 2010). Ettinger offers new ways to understand actual transference and countertransference relations and the ethical mode they require. She shows how the mother has been blamed and made the cause of what is in effect, as I have argued, the existential discontent of having been born and thus expelled from matrixiality (Pollock, 2009a). As cause of such distress, the Mother may be thus expelled by the analytical process itself from its potentially matrixially-attuned, transferential web that Ettinger brings into recognition. Ettinger addresses the profound damage caused by the analytical use, the production even, in many cases, of what she identifies as a cause of psychic pain, the readymade mother-monster:

In our Western Post-Freudian psychotherapeutic theory and clinical atmosphere starting with Ferenczi and followed by Winnicott (shared beyond different psychoanalytical schools, with exceptions like Klein, Balint, Bion, the Lacanian

11 Ettinger uses differenciation, which typographically installs the idea of differencing as a process and to distinguish her meaning from the usual form, differentiation, which signifies separation. Ettinger uses the -ance ending which has resonance with Derrida’s thesis on difféance as a process of differing and deferring that refuses completion or limit.
theory, Deleuze-Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* and Jessica Benjamin’s inter-subjective attitude that considers the mother as subject), a semi-automatic mother-blaming and mother-hating is produced. Unless an obvious trauma is found in a real-life history, a mother-monster readymade is offered to the patient qua the major ‘cause’ for almost any anxiety and psychic pain. The prefabricated mother-monster readymade is always in stand-by readiness as the cause for any infantile suffering arising to consciousness. The prevalence of the imaginary mother-monster readymade figure testifies in my view to a major lacuna in the psychoanalytical theory and to the major narcissistic trap of the transferential relationships, due to a systematic disrecognition that particular kinds of recurring phantasmatic and imaginary complaints, arising in almost each and every reported case of regressive therapy, represent in fact primal phantasies, and have no other ‘cause’. (Ettinger, 2006c, pp. 105–106)

According to Ettinger, the maternal needs to be grasped as a pole on the axis of severalities etched in each subject. The archaic matrixial web, proto-psychically garnered by a becoming, prenatal subject-to-be, forms a dimension that continues working all through life in further relational webs. This archaic time-space may be, differently, re-encountered when, as an adult, one such subject now finds herself initiating the process of becoming-maternal with her own now prenatal becoming-infant non-I whose emerging-with-her transforms her into its archaic m/Other. The non-conscious memory of the primordial condition of her own becoming and its long-term, postnatal subjectivizing legacies are reactivated from a shifted position in a multidimensional, transsubjective matrixial encounter producing multi-layered timescapes, a shared transsubjectivizing environment with its specific temporality and imagined spatiality. According to the Ettingerian thesis, kernel-to-kernel transsubjectivity subtends and re-affects and continues to affect us even when we are already mainly reshaped as separate individuals in inter-relations and by the series of phallic separations (birth, weaning, loss of the breast, and ‘castration’).

The matrixial sphere concerns all of us, aligned or non-aligned with gendering positions, since to be living, we all have been engendered in another body, carried within the matrixial partnership-in-difference and then born into a world so far dominated by the binary logic of the phallocentric. We carry, therefore, a non-gendered heritage of having been seduced into life by the matrixial m/Other. Born is the past participle of the verb to bear in the passive voice. Hence, it conveys the idea of having been carried and thus transconnecting to an unquestionably sexual-feminine body-psyché that itself, in this matrixial sphere, escapes the phallic definitions of Oedipal sexes. The multiple, diachronous as well as synchronous, transitivity within a matrixial sexual difference whose character must be understood in its specificity as asymmetrical, remembering and, at the same time, futurizing – being anticipatory and projecting onto living futures to come – is what Bracha L. Ettinger brings into psychoanalytical and indeed cultural debate as part of a broader meta-feminist (her term for the extended metaphysical reach of specifically feminist philosophical thought to encompass many dimensions of ethical relations to other others, human and non-human, such as the earth itself) research into what might now, already, be sensed, intuited, imagined to be occurring beside, beneath, beyond
the phallocentric structures – without knocking them out or replacing them, but significantly shifting their sovereignty. Ettinger warns us against the rejection of whatever carries us, as well as against the abandonment of others that are knowingly or unknowingly our non-I(s), that, being carried, are also webbed into subjectivity as our unknown others.

This theory has many implications for psychoanalytical theory and practice. But for what Laplanche defined as extracurricular psychoanalysis, where we, now post-psychoanalytical subjects, live, think and create, matrixial theory is a sensitizing resource for reading ourselves, our cultures and artworks for more than phallic thought has narrowly legitimized.

Thus, my thirty years of reading, studying, being constantly surprised at each new conceptual development in Ettinger’s thought and writing has been an experience of sustained fascinance that has radically transformed my deepest sense of the potential of the Matrixial to shift and even to deflect the trauma of an unchallenged phallocentric order. The Matrixial touches and recasts our understanding of subjectivity, aesthetics and ethics – that is obvious. It also provides a language with which to oppose fascist, totalitarian, authoritarian, racist, sexist and transphobic, and consumerist earth-destroying abuses that grow daily in our world so in thrall to the phallic (I and not-I) and thus unable to accept the life-oriented gift of the matrixial feminine. Without displacing or undermining necessary structurations of subjectivity that do require acknowledgement of I/not-I difference, the Matrixial imagines and evidences a supplementary dimension of I/non-I, such as moments of, and selected spaces, for transubjectivity, fragilization, responsibility, awe, wonder and, finally, respect.

Declarations  No third party material has been included in the text.

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