

# Cinema and the *Matrixial* Gaze

Stella Carneiro

Universidade Lusófona, Portugal

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## **Stella Carneiro**

Graduated in Social Communication and Cinema at Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (FAAP) in São Paulo (2016), Master in Arts with specialisation in Screenwriting from Universidade Lusófona in Lisbon, Napier University in Edinburgh and Baltic Film and Media School in Tallinn, as part of the Erasmus+ Masters Program Kino Eyes – The European Movie Masters (2021).

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## Abstract

Using Freudian psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey (1975) carefully explores the *male gaze* in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, criticizing its implications and linking the representation of women on-screen as an object-of-desire to the *male gaze*, largely criticised by bell hooks in the 90s. Considering Bracha L. Ettinger's theory of the Matrix, which translates to *frame, grid and womb* and encompasses psychoanalytic concepts beyond Freudian perspective on femininity, is it possible to investigate another type of gaze in Laura Mulvey's article? In times such as our own, can Bracha L. Ettinger's definition of the *matrixial gaze* provide an alternative foundation to the cinematic apparatus itself?

**Keywords:** Cinema, Feminist Film Theory, Psychoanalysis, *Matrixial Gaze*, Matrixial Screen.

## Introduction

I initially began my studies in film theory with the aim of defining the *female gaze*. I first realised how unlikely it was to arrive at such conclusion without annihilating the way we perceive the foundations of psychoanalytical theory of film. Since Freudian and Lacanian concepts are so deeply rooted in this field, I found it impossible to escape the *castration complex* rhetoric which the feminine had been condemned to. By researching feminist film theory, taking, as a starting point, Laura Mulvey's approach in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* published in 1975, she was unsuccessful on providing a precise answer on what would a *female gaze* consists of. Looking through different authors who have criticised Mulvey's observations, such as bell hooks<sup>1</sup> and her *oppositional gaze*, very few offered an objective notion under psychoanalysis of what we could define as a *female gaze* in such a widely explained manner as the *male gaze* had been explored. That is, until I began studying contemporary psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger.

By the time Mulvey wrote her famous article, Freud's theories had been largely discussed among the common public. Sigmund Freud passed away thirty years before Mulvey was able to publish her article. Bracha L. Ettinger, on the other hand, is alive and still in constant supervision of her work. Her latest book to which my article bases itself upon – *Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics and Ethics* – is a compilation of work up to the 90s released in the past year of 2020. Her contemporary theories discuss matters such as subjectivity, art theory, ethics, and femininity – the latter to which Freud failed to do so<sup>2</sup>.

Bracha L. Ettinger was born in Israel and spent her latest years in Paris, where she studied Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis. Her theoretical work has been extensively discussed among her area of education<sup>3</sup>, while her art-work has been featured in museums and galleries around the world<sup>4</sup>. She had an inspiring conversation with Emmanuel Levinas on femininity, a topic he previously resigned from speaking of, from which they concluded that the feminine (and the *Other*) is a matter of *futurity*.

Bracha L. Ettinger's theoretical work is mostly influenced by Lacan's psychoanalytic theories (regarding gaze and *Otherness*) and is in conversation with

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1. bell hooks requires her name to be written in lowercase letters following the Chicago Manual of Style (2009).

2. In his question to his French colleague, Marie Bonaparte, Freud (1937) acknowledges the possibility of feminine desire that might not be directed to the masculine phantasy: "The great question, the great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul is, "What does a Woman want?" (Freud 1937, 474)

3. Griselda Pollock, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Brian Massumi, N. Katherine Hayles, Julian Albilla and Sheila L. Cavanagh are a few contemporary and relevant theorists which discuss matrixial theory. Bracha Ettinger currently teaches in Switzerland alongside some of the most well-known intellectuals in the world, such as Slavov Zizek and Judith Butler, the latter who also wrote on Bracha L. Ettinger's *Eurydice* painting series and theory.

4. Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in Oxford, Pompidou Centre in Paris, The Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Biennale of Istanbul, the Biennale of Kochi, The Castelo di Rivoli are among of the many contemporary museums in which Bracha L. Ettinger's art-work has been exhibited.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology through her concept of *copoiesis*. She centres her work on a theory she defines as the Matrix, translated from Latin, the word can mean *frame*, *grid* and *womb*. These three definitions are the core aspects of her theoretical work: *frame*, in matters of art theory and screen; *grid*, as the link between subjects in a shared *borderspace*; and the most complex, *womb*, on how the prenatal phase, influenced by the pregnant body-psyche with which the presubject is "borderlinking", reflects into subjectivity and gaze. Her work does not dismiss Freud and Lacan's insights, but rather complements and enlarges concepts of Phallus and castration. Ettinger has found a definition for what she determines as the *matrixial gaze* which functions wit(h)in<sup>5</sup> the *male gaze* (referred as the *phallic gaze*<sup>6</sup>).

### Cinema and the Matrixial Gaze

Laura Mulvey ends her famous article in a melancholic tone:

"Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret." (Mulvey 1975, 18)

In her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975, Laura Mulvey analyses classic Hollywood cinema and concludes that 'woman' is "subjected to her image as a bearer of the bleeding wound" (Mulvey 1975, 7). Inside the Freudian *castration complex* through which she bases her article upon, other theorists consider that the 'woman', not only occupies a place of "wound", but also of a "lack" (Pollock 2004, 51) and an "absence" (hooks 1999, 118). Under this *castration complex* notion, the desire of the 'woman' to possess a penis is the imaginary condition of entry to the Phallus symbolic. Modern psychoanalysis, as it is schooled by Freudian and Lacanian influences, focuses subjectivity inside the prism of the Phallus or its *castration*.

Griselda Pollock (2004), art historian and cultural analyst in the field of visual arts, agrees with the statement above. According to her, Freudian psychoanalysis is an accumulation of "separations, splits, cuts and cleavages" (Pollock 2004, 6) captured into the traumatizing complex named after Oedipus. This phallic model which refers to the 'woman' as "the bleeding wound" configures the feminine with the "archaic Other, Thing and cause of desire" (Pollock 2004, 51). To Bracha L. Ettinger (2020a), the issue with Freudian and Lacanian subjectivity is that it bases itself on a concept of *Otherness* which is a negation of the subject. This is the origin, Pollock argues, of all the extremities which the phallic symbolic carries (Pollock, 6). The subject I engages with a subject which is a *not-I*. This differentiation in language places the Other to a place of negativity of the subject itself.

This problem – of encountering *an-Other* subjectivity outside the phallic model in modern psychoanalysis – translates into film theory, which Mulvey finds it a challenge to escape (Mulvey 1975, 7). Mulvey's propositions rely on what alternative cinema can offer in terms of breaking the convention of Hollywood cinema. Is traditional narrative cinema, then, condemned to the limitations of the *phallic gaze*? Bracha L. Ettinger provides answers and a better alternative.

To engage with Ettinger's theories we must, at first, dislocate the term 'feminine' from the Freudian-Lacanian paradigm. The 'feminine' should not be considered as competition of the female organ over a male organ. In her theories of the Matrix, the *womb* symbolically refers to a "structure, a logic, a process of subjectivization and meaning-making" (Pollock 2004, 58). The *womb* is a signifier such as the Phallus between "thought, phantasy and its corpo-Real which is never anatomy or nature" (Pollock 2004, 58). Bracha L. Ettinger, is, however, very careful explaining in her theories that despite having the *womb* to justify a symbol, the subjects do not need to possess one to enter the Matrix symbolic. If that were

5. The bending, change and spelling of words to enlarge their meaning is commonly found throughout Ettinger's work. In this case, "with" and "in", as well as "with-in", signify the larger concept to which Matrixial theory relies itself so much upon.

6. It is important to note in this article that bell hooks refers to the latter as the phallogocentric gaze.

the case, the *womb* would be phallic, as it can be lacking or possessed by the subject. Neither it is to say that having a *womb* is at the core of 'femininity', since all subjects are born from a *womb*, it cannot be gender exclusive. Subjects within the Matrix are *I(s)* and *non-I(s)*, the (s) carefully placed here signify subjectivity as a matter of 'severality', since at the centre of Matrixial theory the subject is several. Bracha L. Ettinger considers subjectivity "as an encounter with the other" (Ettinger 2020, 142).

The Matrix, according to Bracha L. Ettinger, is not an opposition of the Phallus and neither is it its denial. It coexists and encompasses the Phallus in itself, since the Matrix refers to the prenatal and pregnancy phase as a symbolic nature to subjectivity. In the Matrix, on/off, possession/lostness, absence/presence are concepts which are not opposites, but rather coexist in a world-grid-system (Matrix) which none have hierarchy over the other. In 1993, Bracha Ettinger explains:

"(...) the *womb* and the pre-natal phase are referents to the Real to which the imaginary Matrix corresponds. But as a concept, the Matrix is no more – but no less – related to the *womb* than the Phallus is related to the penis. That is, Matrix is a symbolic concept." (Ettinger 1993b, 12)

An issue I found upon reading feminist film theory is not only that the *male gaze's* definitions and implications are so deeply analysed, but also that feminist film theory lacks intersectional thought on '*an-Other*' subjectivity. Despite the recognition of the damage the *male gaze* can provoke is found among the criticism, a solution for the *female gaze* is mostly regarded as a counterpoint or adversary to the *male gaze* in a system which is limited to the Phallus symbolic.

"The concept of the gaze [le regard] has played a major role in feminist theories of cinema, art and the image. In its popularization as 'the *male gaze*', the gaze is attributed to a subject who looks and an object that is looked at and objectified." (Pollock in [Ettinger 2020a, 241])

In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks (1999), a film theorist known for her contributions to critical race theory, speaks of the gaze of black spectators. She considers the op-pressive dynamics found in a world-system, where black people have been systematically repressed, which affects their representation (or "absence" of representation) in film. bell hooks considers: "That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (hooks 1999, 116). Her criticism around Mulvey's article states that black people have been denied throughout history of their right to gaze or even, in the case of black women, to be an object of such, specifically referring to the *object of desire* which Mulvey configures the 'woman' to. hooks considers that Mulvey failed to recognize *an-Other* perspective through her binary male/female system of analysis, in such contributing to transferring the black 'woman' to a place of "absence" (hooks 1999, 118). hooks considers his to be reason to why black people have developed an *oppositional gaze* towards cinema.

This alludes to another concept present in the Matrixial theory presented by Bracha L. Ettinger, a concept which she named as *memory of oblivion* (1993a). Art-work, for Ettinger, is a form of *transportstation* of trauma. In a sense, art presents not only the "station" of the trauma-event in itself, but also "transports" subject(s) through it. This relates to Ettinger's work as a painter and her articulation of *copoiesis*, as the subject-painter when painting *an-Other* not only influences their own gaze, but also influences the gaze of *an-Other* in art-work.

Bracha L. Ettinger produced many paintings based on fragments of a traumatic photograph from 1940 taken in Mizroch, Ukraine, which she named *Eurydice*. These paintings are based on the fragmentation and replication of a historical document which shows a line of naked Jewish women, soon to be murdered in cold-blood by soldiers following the orders of Hitler into the Soviet Union.

Through fragments, Bracha Ettinger brings forward the lost gazes of many *Eurydices* she observes in the original photograph, resisting while at the same time outlining the *phallic-orphic gaze* which participated in killing them. Pollock considers the *orphic gaze* as one of the extremities of the *male gaze*, as the *orphic gaze* is the one that kills (Pollock 2004, 16). Pollock refers to Ettinger's words regarding her paintings in 1993 and 2000:

"Appearing and disappearing traced in the bleached monochrome by black ash, these spectral apparitions of a forgotten history then become the screen and support for the artists' re-peated and prolonged encounter with an affectively charged and traumatizing 'memory of oblivion.'" (Pollock 2004, 13)



**Figure 1** - "Eurydice n. 5" by Bracha L. Ettinger, 1994.

The Greek myth of Orpheus and *Eurydice*, under phallic logic, sees *Eurydice* as an object of a gaze rather than its subject. After pleading to Hades to bring *Eurydice* back to the world of the living, Hades gives Orpheus a simple task: to not look back to *Eurydice* until they reach the surface. When the couple is about to reach the *threshold* which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead, Orpheus disobeys Hades' order and looks back to *Eurydice*. *Eurydice* then vanishes, with her last words unheard. Orpheus, through his gaze, condemns *Eurydice* to the world of the dead.

"Not dead, nor yet alive, as a mytheme, *Eurydice* poses, therefore, a different question, a question of difference in arena in which Freudian theory so often stalls: femininity, but also, in a place which the whole question of contemporary culture's relation to trauma, history, memory and amnesia needs to make a turn to the feminine if only to avoid the trap of the Or-phic gaze that kills again." (Pollock 2004, 13).

Citing Homi Bhabha's (1983) studies in the colonial imaginary, Pollock (2004) explains the dangers of the extremities present in the phallic model: "racism, xenophobia, fascism are premised on an ex-tremity of the castration paradigm" (Pollock 2004, 6). Mulvey, through her article published in 1975, warned us of the many *Peeping Toms* present in traditional narrative cinema – that 'woman' is an ob-ject, fragmented and moulded to that of male desire. *Peeping Tom* is a direct reference to a film of the same name, released in 1960, which features a character who kills women after filming them with his camera.

It is also not a coincidence that the criticism surrounding Mulvey's article written by bell hooks, that traditional narrative cinema is so tied to white supremacy. If we consider hook's analysis on *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film still largely studied in film schools today, it directly considers the extremist views recognized by Pollock and Bhabha. Not by coincidence, *The Birth of a Nation* was originally named *The Clansman* as a reference to the KKK, an organisation known for its contribution to racial-violence directed to black people. bell hooks understands that black film-makers/camera/characters/spectators are directly linked to a place of repression and absence in/on the film-screen. As hooks explains, even "the act of looking" of the black community was repressed (hooks 1999, 116), she also explains that the act of looking – the gaze – is, therefore, an "act of resistance" of the black spectator (hooks 1999, 116). Considering Laura Mulvey's article, hooks recognizes a place of ambiguity for the black female spectator:

"Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed." (hooks 1999, 122)

hooks largely criticizes Mulvey's perspective due to not only the binarism present in her article, as she sees it in a way to perpetuate the values of patriarchy through such analysis, as well as the lack of the recognition of the black female in film history and theory. hooks considers that the "starting point" for feminist film theorists such as Mulvey, developed through a feminist analysis over the years, are present in the black female spectator since their first contact with cinema (hooks 1999, 125).

"It may be very well that [feminist film theorists] engage in a process of denial that eliminates the necessity of revisioning conventional ways of thinking about psychoanalysis as a paradigm of analysis and the need to rethink a body of feminist film theory that is firmly rooted in a denial of the reality that sex/sexuality may not be the primary and/or exclusive signifier of difference." (hooks 1999, 124)

Through Ettinger's notion of *memory of oblivion*, Matrixial theory also speaks not only on matters of gender, but also of racism. The naked Jewish women present in the paintings of Bracha Ettinger understands anti-Semitism as well as historical female oppression through their nude bodies. Olympia, the painting of Édouard Manet, as perceived by hooks and other theorists such as Lorraine O'Grady, explains that while the white woman's body is subject to the pleasure of the *phallic gaze*, the black body of the maid, nameless, is carried with racial stereotypes of servitude and sexual difference (or in-difference). It is possible to recognize, through art-work, the traumatic events present in *the memory of oblivion*.



**Figure 2** - "Olympia" by Édouard Manet, 1863. Oil on canvas. Paris: Musée d'Orsay.

Much alike to what Mulvey says identifying with the image seen through narcissism (Mulvey 1975, 10), and what hooks explains as the perspective of the oppositional resistance (hooks 1999, 116), Ettinger uses language to convey the significance of trauma, memory to the I in contact with the art-screen. Ettinger believes that art:

"is leading the transformation of the scope of art and aesthetics itself, in a bending toward an in-between borderspace between aesthetics and ethics, where I become fragile to/for the Other, who is, as Emmanuel Levinas has suggested, a trauma to me." (Ettinger 2020a, 280)

While hooks suggests that feminist film theorists' obsession with the "abstraction" of women leads inevitably to reinforce patriarchal roles (hooks 1999, 123), Bracha L. Ettinger considers it necessary to understand the place to which the feminine was condemned to, in order to finally understand psychoanalysis through a new light:

"If the post- and the pre-Oedipal *phallic gaze* banishes 'woman' as subject in art and propos-es itself in 'her' place or marks her as its object, the *matrixial gaze* restores 'woman' to a special kind of wandering entity as a link with-in several subjects, as assembled object for fragmented and severalized subjectivity, and as an affected conductible mediation." (Ettinger 2020a, 279)

This is to say, the *matrixial gaze* accounts for hooks' perspective on black femininity, as well as Mulvey's observations of the phallic implications in psychoanalytic film theory. Inside both theorists' observations, it is possible to recognize a somewhat unsatisfactory view on modern psychoanalysis and art theory. hooks criticizes the binary opposition, as well as criticizes how white men participate, in traditional narrative cinema, to the systematic oppression of black people. Meanwhile, Mulvey does not provide an alternative to the phallic model, and neither does she consider *an-Other* gaze related to traditional narrative cinema which is inherently oppositional. As hooks observed, Mulvey fails to consider how white women, despite being victims of the *phallic gaze*, participate in a system of racial-difference. hooks recognizes the possibility of a gaze which exists outside the contradiction of male/female as active/passive (hooks 1999, 121), as these cannot account for a feminine perspective which includes black subjects. A necessary distance from the phallic model is required, since 'male' sexuality has been allowed, through psychoanalysis, to create a universe imagi-

natively and linguistically hospitable to the Phallus, from which its subjectivity was obliquely figured. The feminine is listed as a “lack”, a “hole” and an “absence” not only of the Phallus but of its representation on the film-screen.

However, hooks’ criticism mainly involves the gaze of black spectators, and Laura Mulvey’s article on traditional narrative cinema describes three gazes associated with the film-screen, those to which are related and subordinated to the pleasure of looking. Mulvey considers the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of scopophilia “as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones” (Mulvey 1975, 8), associating it with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1975, 8). Pollock explains Ettinger’s theories:

“The erogeneity of seeing and being seen (mastery by sight and exhibitionism) can become arrested in the perversions: sadism and voyeurism. In the realm of sexual curiosity, seeing and not-seeing is inflicted by castration anxiety and is deflected by fetishism.” (Pollock in [Ettinger 2020a, 242])

According to Mulvey, there are three different looks associated with cinema: (a) the gaze of the camera, as it records the pro-filmic event; (b) the gaze of the audience, as it watches the final product; (c) and the gaze of the characters at each other within the screen illusion (Mulvey 1975, 17). Traditional narrative film, however, denies the first two in order to subordinate them to the third gaze: “the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience” (Mulvey 1975, 17). Ettinger’s *matrixial gaze* as a theoretical tool comprehends exactly what Mulvey would refer to as a “distancing awareness”, since it cannot create a symbiosis of the subject(s) and the screen, and neither create a cut between the subject(s) and the screen. The *matrixial gaze* of the spectator requires distance at the same time as it requires the proximity to which it observes the characters in the film.

Bracha L. Ettinger proposes the *matrixial gaze* using Lacan’s theory as a starting point to the concepts of gaze and the phallic *objet a* (to which Mulvey refers to as the Freudian *object of desire*), while at the same time, considering the scopic drive explained by Freud. The feminine, taken to Bracha L. Ettinger as an object ‘borderlinking’ between ‘presence and absence’ and between ‘presence and loss’; while also participating in ‘severality’ of a subject; is described as subjects *I(s)* and *non-I(s)*. The difference in language is a necessary point to understand a larger meaning, as the phallic subject *I* and *not-I*, based on the *castration* paradigm, configures *an-Other* subject to a place of negation of the self.

Pollock considers that in the Matrix a “screen spreads itself out to alter our understanding of the psychic meanings of the gaze” (Pollock 2004, 51), as through the *matrixial gaze*, eyes are not erotic organs as described by Freud, but ‘erotized’ (Pollock in [Ettinger 2020a, 242]). The eyes (and gaze) contribute to the “erotic aerials” or “antennae” of the psyche (Pollock 2004, 51). Bracha L. Ettinger carefully explains that “For such a *matrixial gaze*, it is the synergy between touch, movement, and vision which seems pregnant with aesthetic potentiality” (Ettinger 2020a, 279). The use of the term “pregnant” is no coincidence. Ettinger refers not to the physical *womb* itself, but to her symbolic signifier for the *womb*-organ, the Matrix, which encompasses incredible aesthetic potential due to its transgression from/of the phallic model.

“The *phallic gaze* excites us while threatening to annihilate us in its emergence on the screen; the symbiotic gaze invites us to sink inside it while threatening to annihilate us together with the screen.” (Ettinger 2020a, 242)

The Matrix can be understood through a process to which Bracha Ettinger refers to as *metamorphosis*, which is a key concept in differentiating the *matrixial gaze* from the *phallic gaze* as accounted for by Freud and Lacan, as well as from what Ettinger defines as the imaginary and phantasmatic symbiotic gaze (Ettinger 2020a, 278), the latter as a gaze which threatens to annihilate the sub-



ject through the screen. *Metamorphosis* operates through joining-in-separating with/from the other in an operation she defines as borderlinking that extracts Lacan's 'impossible feminine rapport' from its impossibility (Ettinger 2020a, 247). By uniting the words "metamorphosis" and "Matrix", Bracha conceptualizes this new term to refer to processes that occur between subjects in a shared matrixial *borderspace*, of which cannot account for "cuts" with *an-Other* as described by Freud and Lacan; nor for the complete "merging" into *an-Other* through symbiosis. *Metamorphosis* cannot have a focus or a fixed gaze, it accounts for transformations of the subject of in-between moments, dissolving itself constantly in favour of new boundaries.

Regarding the three gazes present in traditional narrative cinema, Mulvey (1975) considers that the gaze of film-maker/camera unites itself with the character's gaze, and subordinates this gaze to that of the spectator (Mulvey 1975, 17). As it may be, as the gaze of the camera often does, especially in the case of traditional narrative cinema, mirror the gaze of the character; however that character is a fragment of the film-screen, a subject of art-work which unites the film-maker/camera as well as the actor represented on-screen. The film-maker/camera/actor transports their own *matrixial gaze* to that of the characters in hope of its affective *linking* to the spectator. If, in traditional narrative cinema, the film-maker/camera is inevitably exclusive to the *phallic gaze*, such automatically dismisses a wider alternative for subjectivity. Even considering the film-maker or actor as part of the creative process behind the filmic-event is not recognized by Mulvey, as she only recognizes the gaze of the camera, merging different subjectivities to that of an object. As hooks carefully pointed out, this approach finds itself limited since it fails to consider gazes which have been systematically excluded from the filmic-event.

*Black Panther* (2018) directly reflects the traditional narrative cinema Laura Mulvey spoke of in her article. Written and directed by Ryan Coogler, featuring most of a black cast; being shot through a camera in the hands of a woman, Rachel Morrison; it cannot fit into Mulvey's perspective on subjectivity, especially regarding racial-difference. The *phallic gaze* referred by Mulvey does not consider a *memory of oblivion* which film-maker/camera is able to carry, in this case, regarding the systematic oppression of the black community in the plot; as well as consider female representation on-screen through the lens of a camera which is not exclusively phallic. Coogler and Morrison are not subjects of an identical gaze, but have, through *Black Panther*, achieved traditional narrative form. Even more so, despite containing mainly black characters, this film was viewed by spectators around the entire world, not limited to black audiences. It is possible to recognize, through a *matrixial gaze*, how *memory of oblivion* influences the plot and characters; as well as recognize that the three gazes of the film are not limited to an exclusive subjectivity of the Phallus, in which one gaze is entirely subordinate to the Other. This is to say that by having a psychoanalysis limited to the Phallus, it fails to consider analytically how *an-Other* subjectivity can affect the filmic-event.

This is not to say that black men cannot replicate the *phallic gaze*, nor that women are free from replicating such. As stated before in this article, the Matrix considers the Phallus as part of it, and these drastic cuts from film-maker/camera, character and spectator, which Mulvey relies herself upon, dismisses inherent subjectivities tied to the production of a film. hooks states that black film-makers are more than capable of replicating the *phallic gaze*, but does so carefully linking such gaze to repression. According to hooks, the gaze of the black man towards the white woman was historically repressed, and finds itself free of repression inside a dark auditorium, where black men can exercise the act-of-looking without fear. hooks recognizes that this repressed gaze participates in the pleasure of looking at an *object of desire*, as it masochistically participates in the power phantasy of the white man (hooks 1999, 118). The replication of such gaze from black film-makers is not understood, in her perspective, as equal to the *phallic gaze* described by Mulvey, since it carries the *transport-station* of trauma in their film through their *memory of oblivion*. I would even argue that

the “cuts” present in the phallic model analysed by Mulvey dismiss the contribution of *an-Other* subjectivity inside the filmic-process. The *matrixial gaze* can encompass such discussions, since it bases itself upon ana-lysing the complex links between subject(s), art-work and trauma.

It is also not to say that women cannot replicate the *phallic gaze*, such often is possible especially regarding *an-Other* subject as fragmented or displayed for pleasure. But even though it is not gender-specific, the *matrixial gaze* explained by Bracha L. Ettinger is an intrinsically feminine aspect. It is a feminine prism that transforms the way we analyse femininity in different genders and establishes the ‘woman-to-woman difference’. For more than three decades by now, Bracha L. Ettinger has worked on her series of paintings ‘*Eurydice*’, where with each painting she gives different answers to the question she had also brought to Levinas in 1997: “what would *Eurydice* say?” What will the figure destined to disappear say when she transforms herself from object to subject and occupies the position of a subject who is looking while being looked-at? *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), directed and written by film-maker Céline Sciamma, cinematography shot by Claire Mathon, exemplifies the *matrixial gaze* with the *transport-station* of trauma through art-work, as it also configures the *phallic gaze* observed by Mulvey. Like Ettinger, Sciamma is attracted to the enigma of *Eurydice*, having the characters actively discuss the myth during certain scenes, as well as produce art-work inspired by it. Throughout the film, the character of Marianne, a painter, fragments and replicates her object in painting, which is *an-Other* female-subject named Héloïse.



**Figure 3** – Fragments of Héloïse drawn by Marianne on paper. Céline Sciamma, 2016, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

This fragmentation through art-work results in a painting of Other subject, Héloïse, who considers lifeless; Marianne erases the painting dramatically, leaving it headless; and, thus, this painting must be redone, but only through the consent of the Other (Héloïse) and her mother. If we understand the *matrixial gaze* with the possibility of containing the *phallic gaze*, even through female characters, Marianne is observed in the film as replicating it - only to be dismissed by the subject of her painting. Afterwards, a *matrixial gaze* is considered by Marianne, in which the subject of her painting (Héloïse) actively influences and even participates in the painting of the art-work through the production of varied portraits in the film. As Bracha L. Ettinger explains:

“For the painter working in a *matrixial frame*, things look from the inside dispersed outside and from the outside diffracted within, and the painter joins and assembles the gaze by fragil-izing herself.” (Ettinger 2020a, 279)

The symbolic imaginary of the *womb* in the Matrix, however, does not exclude masculinity, for it creates encounter-events rather than an absence. Even though male characters have been excluded from *A Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, it is done so in a way in which accounts for Sciamma’s *memory of oblivion*, which has sys-

tematically excluded, throughout cinema history, of a space for lesbian cinema. The absence/presence concept, as already explained throughout this paper, requires a “cut” which can only be found in the phallic model due to the *castration complex*. So as Sciamma’s decision to exclude masculine-subjects from the film could be a reflection of the *phallic gaze*, such decision carries, most of all, the complexities of the *matrixial gaze*. As a theory, the *grid* of the Matrix is that of a web, which invites us to recognize that we are subjects linked to *an-Other* in a shared borderspace. What is specifically feminine-matrixial is the web of links created by the female figures in the film, that kind of web that goes beyond the scope of gender identity and makes it (and each one of us) fluid, transgressing beyond ‘our individual selves’.

“The *matrixial gaze* thrills us while fragmenting, scattering, and joining grains together and turning us into witnesses; it enchants us while reducing us into particles and participating in a drama wider than our individual selves.” (Ettinger 2020a, 283)

## Conclusion

I first began writing this article as an attempt to define the *female gaze*. For that, I have not found an answer. However, I have found an alternative: the *matrixial gaze* as proposed by Bracha L. Ettinger. Laura Mulvey found herself the necessity of a psychoanalytical theory which speaks more clearly of feminine matters (Mulvey 1975, 7); while hooks built an *oppositional gaze* where she recognizes the need for wider definitions than those imposed by the extremities of a system based on sexual-racial-difference (hooks 1999, 123). The Matrix, latin word for *womb*, *grid* and *frame*, is Ettinger’s answer to a dimension that was absent in the field of psychoanalysis.

The *matrixial gaze* takes into account the *transport-station* of trauma through a *memory of oblivion* and dissipates the fissure from the Other necessary to the phallic model. It cannot carry the cut of female/male, possession/lostness and presence/absence, for in the Matrix subjectivity is an encounter with the Other. *Metramorphic* processes are articulated as alternatives to the mechanism of cut and castration on the path from sensing and sense-making to meaning. Emmanuel Levinas, French philosopher notorious for his works in existentialism and phenomenology, speaks to Bracha L. Ettinger in their conversation published in 1997 under the title of her question: “*What Would Eurydice Say?*”. The myth of Orpheus and *Eurydice*, as explained earlier in this article, is linked to the extremities of the phallic model. It is as well, to Levinas and Bracha, a discussion around life/death, but it is also a category in which the Other is part of the future. Even though Levinas, up until his conversation with Bracha published in 1997, refused to speak of the feminine for many years, he suggested in his conversation with Ettinger (1997), that the feminine (and the Other) are a matter of *futurity*:

“(…) woman is the category of the future, the ecstasy of the future. It is that human possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own, that the death of the other is more important than my own death, that the Other comes before me, that the Other counts before I do, that the value of the Other is imposed before mine.” (Levinas in [Ettinger 1997, 27])

If the Other and the feminine are a matter of *futurity*, Matrixial theory has yet to begin to be understood under this perspective in psychoanalysis, even more so in film theory. Bracha L. Ettinger suggests that, in order for the Matrix to allow a new meaning, it must neighbour the Phallus side-by-side. In thinking of subjectivity we cannot ignore the cut, split and absence to which the Other is subjected inside the phallic model. In the Matrix, though, *an-Other* subjectivity, especially the feminine, can become w/hole, but in order to do so, it cannot forget the *male-orphic gaze* as its *memory of oblivion*. In the myth of Orpheus and *Eurydice*, both subjects can coexist without killing the other; as well as consider that Olympia’s gaze is not the most relevant to Manet’s painting. All these considerations are connected, as art-work as a *transport-station* of trauma, while also

carrying the severality of sub-jects within the Matrixial *grid*.

“In other words, I and the others will arise and dissolve together but not in the same mode nor in the same sense. Something of the Thing partly perishes in its diffraction among the sever-al, and something of it is also unconsciously present among them in different degrees; some-thing that has fallen away from the one passes to several others; something of one matrixial web also passes to other matrixial webs, since again each grain is a partner in several webs.” (Ettinger 2020a, 283)

As I have stated before, Ettinger carefully regards the *Matrix* not as a competitive counterpart to the Phallus, but as a symbolic concept which encompasses it and has other relations to corporeality. It uses the *womb* and the prenatal phase as means of expressing a symbolic concept, while keeping special links to the Imaginary and the Real in and of the feminine. Pollock attentively states that the Matrixial psychoanalytic theory is not gender-exclusive, sexuality-exclusive nor race-exclusive (Pollock 2004, 44); for Ettinger the matrixial is a dimension that informs transsubjectivity beyond gender identity and redefine femininity, in all genders, in new ways. Sheila L. Cavanagh, Canadian academic in the field of sociology and studies in sexuality, has made her own observations regarding these matters. By using Ettinger’s theories as a basis, Cavanagh argues for the discussion of transsexuali-ty to be dislocated from paranoia or pathology, and states that the *Matrix* is:

“(…) an Other axis of sexual difference accessible to us all, regardless of trans status and is not reducible to femininity or to gender identity” (Cavanagh 2016, 29)

To conclude this article, I want to point out, if the Other is a matter of the future, the *Matrix* has scarcely begun to be taken in consideration through this perspective in new media. Many discussions will arise regarding it not only in film theory, as have arisen with Mulvey’s observations decades ago, but its implications to virtual reality. What discussions can Matrixial psychoanalysis bring regarding new media, as Ettinger refers to the ‘webs’ between gazes? What can it have to say about social media? Ettinger has, in the past year, discussed society’s accelerated hyper-connectivity in a lecture she named *Digital PTSD: The Practice of Art and Its Impact on Digital Trauma* (2020b). The theme of digital connectivity and its links to subject(s) has already been taken in consideration through the theory of the *Matrix*. Pollock’s statement on Ettinger’s *Matrixial Gaze and Screen* (2020a) fits my con-clusion as she explains:

“Ettinger ends [*Matrixial Gaze and Screen*] in a way that seems today prophetic and more rel-levant to the actual social and cultural field with our new media, when she refers to the dan-gers of the symbiotic gaze that annihilates us as we merge with it and with the screen while the *phallic gaze* annihilates us by domination through the screen.” (Pollock in [Ettinger 2020a, 245])

Even if we consider recent developments in technology such as virtual reality and augmented reality, the spectator-player engages with direct points-of-view of subjects which aren’t even inside an audi-torium as cinema is. The *symbiotic gaze*, another concept observed by Ettinger, alerts us of the “merging” of sub-jects with-in the screen. In virtual reality, the spectator-player coemerges with differ-ent subjects within the *game-grid* and, in the process, becomes several while not losing their own subjectivity. Does, then, the spectator-player in VR become an artificial-subject(s)? While so, if the spectator-player has an online transmission of themselves playing the game, how does it speak of the severality of the subject(s) within the *grid*? The analysis of the *Matrix* inside the field of virtual reality engages many questions, all of which modern psychoanalysis cannot account for.

At its end, my article raises many questions across different fields, since through this study, I have barely reached the *thresholds* of Bracha L. Ettinger’s theories.

Her entire theoretical work encompasses far more terms and concepts than it is possible to fit inside this research. My analysis on psychoanalytic film theory provides some clarity into Ettinger's such complex ideas, which I have only just begun to explore. However, I happily present this article to any gaze as it can be seen, since it might be a gateway to inspire others to do the same.

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### **Filmography**

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