

Matrix

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INTRODUCTION

1. Matrix = Womb.
2. *The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here, even in this room. You can see it out your window, or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth ... that you, like everyone else, was born into bondage ... kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste or touch. A prison for your mind. A Matrix.* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)
3. *What is Matrix? Simply ... the "big Other," the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us.* (S. Zizek, 1999)

What is Matrix? In the past years, the notion of the Matrix has become dominant in figurations of cyberspace. It seems as if it is the most desirable, the most contemporary and fitting equation; however, its gendered etymology is rarely obvious. On the opposite, the gender of the matrix as a notion and term has been systematically negated in such disciplines as mathematics, engineering, film studies or psychoanalysis. It is necessary thus to explore and critique the Matrix as a most "fitting" metaphor in/for cyberspace that has conceived it (cyberspace) as a free and seamless space very much like the maternal body (Aristarkhova, 2002). The challenge today, therefore, is to reintroduce the maternal as one of embodied encounters with difference, to recover the sexual difference and gender in the notion of matrix with reference to cyberspace and information technologies that support it.

BACKGROUND

There is nothing new in this equation of matrix and cyberspace. This equation points out to a long history

of use of maternal body as a source of "making sense" space as a foundational category (in addition to time). "Space" enables introduction of other notions, such as extension, arrangement, geography and body, among others. However, the origin of "space" itself is usually found in the maternal body, such as the case with "matrix" or its related notion: "chora." Once again, place for cyberspace has been found in a woman's body that has been misplaced, in this first and unique place (Irigaray, 1985), a house/home (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999; Derrida, 1997, 1999) or container (Aristotle, cited in Irigaray, 1985). While some might celebrate this fact as effecting a "feminization of the cyberspace imaginary" and thus potentially empowering women, others caution us that it follows the Western tradition of depriving woman of her own place, treating cyberspace, in fact, like her (body): an instrument, as a dismembered tool waiting to provide a place *for* man; his cultural, technological and political aspirations (Irigaray, 1985; Plant, 1997). Whichever way one decides on how such imaginaries empower women, it is particularly noteworthy that this gendered nature of the notion of the matrix has been historically and discursively neutralized by constant references to its infinite openness and indifference to difference, sexual or otherwise in these new technologies (e.g., in films like *The Matrix*, and their postmodern formulations). Despite the occasional and even foundational references to the gendered nature of the matrix, little has been done to theoretically recover its positive attributes for rethinking cyberspace as such.

We can name at least three associations that currently operate between notions of cyberspace and the matrix, making it so appropriate for representations of cyberspace:

1. Both are seen as infinite and ever expanding, where expansion is itself their function (as in mathematics, where the initial matrix forms the

basis for serial and cumulative development; or in contemporary cybertheory and cyberpunk literature, where cyberspace is often assumed to be limitless and fully imaginary, to be filled with any desirable content).

2. They are supposed (and wanted?) as empty spaces, passively waiting to be filled and occupied—a fact that also lands to its being conceptualized as *virtual* vis-à-vis real. It is simply “out there,” without having its own place, though providing a place for everything. As Doug Mann and Heidi Hochenedel define it, after Baudrillard (1994), “it is a desert of the real in which hyper real simulacra saturate and dominate human consciousness,” it is “a map without territory” (Mann & Hochenedel, 2002). Being appropriated by phallogocentric imaginary, matrix has become an empty space to be filled with any content, psychological, scientific, artistic or philosophical theorizations. It does not anymore belong to a body marked by sexual difference and gender.
3. Ultimately, both have been disembodied. Cyberspace has been invented as being nowhere and everywhere, which has no corporeal reference or geographical location. It is a place of ultimate escape, where we can explore our desires, anxieties and fears to become more stable, normal and healthier (in earlier social science literature, some assumed that exploring identity swapping in cyberspace would allow teenagers to overcome their fears of sexuality and “opposite sex”).

These characteristics imply that the “matrixial,” therefore, is indifferent to difference, that its infinite openness does not impose barriers on/to entry and participation. And also, participation is understood to be free and on equal terms. The matrix provides a sense of limits and spherical closure to limitless, borderless imaginary of cyberspace.

Thus, I argue there is a tension between the generative (as abstract) vs. maternal (as embodied) in definitions and representations of matrix as cyberspace. The appropriation of corporeal matrix and its relation to woman’s body and subjectivity through scientific, philosophical and aesthetic reductions and abstractions in Western culture has been instrumental in producing cyberspace, fantasizing it

as “self-reproducing,” matrix-perfect mega-computer. In fact, these domestications of the notion of the matrix serve to disarticulate it from its relationship to embodied sexual difference, and are the matrixial as matricidal economies of cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the issue at stake here is not so much a celebration of matrix as something that derives and undertsands woman’s power as man’s dependency on the maternal and the feminine, but rather, how the notion of the matrix serves as this mimicry of the maternal in cyberspace, as something that can be easily detached and performed without any references to sexual difference and gender. Therefore, a cyberfeminist critique of the certain recent appropriations of the notion of matrix is necessary in order to find alternative (to matricidal) formulations and images of spaces generated with the advent of information technologies.

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KEY TERMS

Chora: A Greek philosophical term referring to that which gives place and enables spatial dimension. Chora might take a variety of meanings, including a container, an interval (like a zero), a variable (like an X) and a receptacle. It could also mean a nurse, a maternal space. Today, it is mostly used in philosophy and architectural theory to discuss the concept of “space” and how space comes about.

Cyberfeminism: A recent movement in art, literature and academia, cyberfeminism deals with the relation between gender and technology, or gender and machines. It covers a wide range of topics and

practices, such as gaming, reproductive and biotechnologies, telecommunications, net communities and cyborg studies, among others.

Imaginaries: Introduced first in psychoanalytic theory, today the concept of imaginary is mostly used in sociology and other social sciences to refer to a system of values, laws and institutions “imagined” collectively within a certain social and cultural context in relation to a topic or issue. Here, it is used in plural to emphasize that there are varieties of imaginaries within a given context.

Matricidal: That which leads to the annihilation of the mother or of the maternal in cultural, social, economic, physical or political sense. Here, it refers to the substitution (as annihilation) of the maternal within studies of techno- and cyber-spaces by the concept of the matrix.

Mimicry: A biological concept, meaning a behavior of camouflage and self-concealment for the purpose of survival, has been adopted within psychoanalytic and feminist theory to refer to a desire for others through a response of fascination and an impulse to mimic.