Appendix

Sexual difference

Feminist theory proposes that our minds, thoughts, memories, phantasies and embodied sensations are shaped by the psycho-linguistic and psycho-sexual formations that constitute subjectivity. Psycho-linguistic formation links psychoanalytical theory to literary and cultural theory in the structuralist and poststructuralist moment of the 1960s–1990s. Psycho-sexual formation follows Freud’s theory of the psyche, an agency incited by human pre-maturity at birth. The infant is born into a dependency that directs its life-oriented drive towards the world, others and things, ultimately grooving iterative pathways across its body’s points of contact, entry and exit – eyes, mouth, skin, anus, genitals – shaped in the see-saw of displeasure (lack of food, discomfort, tension, etc.) and pleasure (satisfaction). To Freud’s bodily model, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan added a psycho-linguistic focus on language, tracing the passage from initial inklings of subjectivity and psychic life into culture, whose instrument and territory he identified with, and as, the Symbolic order.¹

For some, subjectivity is the opposite of objectivity. Being subjective implies seeing something from one’s own point of view, rather than taking a distanced, rational or disinterested stance. In cultural theory, however, subjectivity is the condition of becoming-being a thinking, feeling, acting person: a subject. Both a philosophical and a psychoanalytical concept, it signifies how we experience ourselves as thinking, feeling, experiencing and situated beings. This can be related to specific areas of life, such as political subjectivity, social subjectivity or artistic subjectivity. In philosophy, the subject refers to agency, consciousness, personhood, and as such corresponds to the grammatical position of the subject, I think, I feel, I act, I suffer. This meets the first sense of subjectivity as a located and personal way of thinking and feeling, while objectivity tries to set aside these colouring factors in pursuit of disinterested knowledge. Sociology of knowledge, however, discounts that possibility to argue that all knowledge is situated because we cannot escape class, gender, race, colonial, heteronormative and other inflections of our subjectivity even when we think.

Psychoanalysis theorizes the unconscious processes involved in the formation of subjectivity: the psychological condition created by its formation under the laws of culture. Subjectivity is not the object of its analysis,
but how do we become subjects psychically? What are the stages, registers, vagaries of that process of the formation of a psyche? What are the legacies of our formation? The answer is that we are split subjects. We are divided between conscious/pre-conscious (ego and superego) and unconscious dimensions. Hence, we cannot fully know ourselves. Our personal histories and structural formation imposed by the law and language shape us, while that formation process itself forms the Unconscious, repressed while constantly impressing itself upon the conscious subject through dreams and symptoms. In its uses in art history and cultural theory, and notably in feminist theory, the formation subjectivity is sexuating, creating sexual difference while, as a phallocentric Symbolic order, feminine subjectivity and sexuality become unknowable to those it subjectifies and sexuates as feminine subjects.

Subjectivity is complex. In grammar, the subject, the grammatical subject in a sentence, is an agent of a verb: doing, feeling, acting, speaking, etc. Paradoxically, subject can also signify the opposite, ‘being a subject of the Crown’ or ‘subject to attacks of anxiety’. These imply being subject(ed) to an authority, a condition or a system: subjection. Being a subject as agent is, however, lined with being subjected to a phallocentric Symbolic order, implanted as the Unconscious and articulated in Language itself. The system speaks as us as we use its grammar and words.

For psychoanalysis, we are not born as subjects. We have to become a subject through a tortuous, complex and even traumatic process at whose heart is a series of losses. Becoming a subject is subjectivization.

The formation of psychological subjectivity takes place within existing social, cultural and symbolic orders – orders of meaning, systems of practice that are historically and sociopolitically inflected. The Symbolic is continuous with language since language uses symbols in place of actual things. Symbolic orders have different histories and durations. For the last 3–4 millennia, a culturally patriarchal and psycho-linguistically phallocentric order has prevailed in many but not all societies, and certainly in the West since archaic, pre-classical times. The phallocentric Symbolic order demands every subject’s submission or subjection to an always-already, and yet constantly renegotiated, logic of what we theorize as sexual difference, which divides and installs human subjects as masculine or feminine. Becoming a subject in the masculine or the feminine is an effect of psycho-linguistic-cultural formation, not natural inclination or natal condition. Formation of subjectivity within psycho-symbolic and cultural systems and laws engenders both a psycho-sexual position – a relation to sexuality and desire – and a psycho-linguistic position in grammatical language. Sexual difference refutes any given difference between two existing sexes. Anatomy does not define us, even as our bodies and their diversity are critical in very profound ways to how we live as embodied
subjectivities. The very premise of these theories is that sexual difference, which we might better express as the psycho-sexual differentiation or sexualization of the born person into grammatically and psychically pre-given positions – masculine and feminine – is an effect of the psycho-sexual (Freud) and psycho-linguistic (Lacan) process not only of subjectivization – becoming a speaker, sexual and sexed subject – but also of subjectification within a phallocentric Symbolic order.

Sexual difference here refers to what psychoanalysis usefully revealed to us as a complex constitution of asymmetrical differentiation imposed on the born-human-becoming-a-subject that produces the asymmetrical relation of masculinity and femininity as hierarchically different positions in subjectivity and language. Freud identified the mechanism that obliges a child to adopt one or other position proposed to it by the society and culture into which it is being inducted. He called the key mechanism the Oedipus complex. We do not have a complex, as bad jokes about boys loving their mothers too often suggest. (‘Oedipus Schmoedipus, he’s OK as long as he loves his mother’ circulated on TV in my North American childhood.) Complex refers to prolonged psychological processes in which we contend with impossibly conflicting infantile wishes. Infant says: I want everything – but what I want is in conflict with the law of the culture into which we are born. Law replies: you cannot have what you want. There is a price for all subjects to pay, a sacrifice that must be made at the gates of culture – unhelpfully termed ‘castration’, which means symbolic castration by language. Through our entry into the Symbolic order, we are symbolically (i.e. by the signifiers of language) severed from our pre-linguistic infantile corporeal intensities, while the signifiers from culture’s signifying system nestle in their place, alienating the subject from the infantile passions that are then repressed to form the Unconscious.

In his studies of the rules of kinship – how cultures and societies manage relations to each other and relations between the generations, hence family and sexual relations – which are expressed in the rules about marriage and the distribution of property down maternal and paternal lineages created to manage human procreativity and social relations, structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that the foundation of culture/society and its symbolic orders lie in relations and laws of exchange. Exchange facilitates social bonds that traverse families to form social groups: kins, tribes, communities, societies. For exchange to operate, Lévi-Strauss discerned a universal rule: the incest taboo.

This is not a law against adult sexual abuse of children, which is a horrifying crime. It is a cultural law that obliges all children to separate from their primary attachments to their carers and become available, through exchange, as partners of non-family members in order to reproduce their society with others of their own generation outside the group defined as
their kin. This law is, however, the means by which children are designated sexually, not just as potential partners, but as future husbands or wives. Each term has a different meaning, a hierarchical one in terms of who receives a ‘wife’ in the exchange and who is exchanged as a ‘wife’: wife translating woman, which signifies: ‘to be exchanged’. In this division of children under laws that are not about sexuality as desire, but manage and determine socially regulated reproductive sexual activity as culturally necessary, to be a husband is not to be exchanged but to receive; to be a wife is to be exchanged and hence not to have ownership of your own body or desire. Thus, the terms man and woman are not symmetrical, but asymmetrical and hierarchically so.

In the oldest, still living societies that Lévi-Straus studied, this kinship system is visible, as it were, on the outside. Highly ritualized, it is backed up by real force or violence under the authority of the male elders with the compliance of older women enforcers. In more modern and seemingly less visibly socially policed societies, I suggest, kinship structuring persists, however, and is increasingly internalized, ideologized and circulated through cultural iteration. It operates not through paternal authority but by means of ideological inculcation and socialization, and both artistic and popular cultural representation places before us and demands conformity to images of each society’s ideological terms. The Oedipus complex, theorized by Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century, and borrowing its name from the myths and literature of fifth-century BCE Greek culture, identifies a mechanism for the internalization of these archaic kinship rules as psychological structures. A complex is thus a pattern of emotions, conflicts, unbearable demands for a sacrifice that have to be negotiated and resolved in order for us to take a predestined place in society and in the linguistic terms that signify its social rules.

The Oedipus complex lasts for many years (between the second and sixth year of a child). First, there is a dyadic pair – the androgynous child and the mixed adult world, structurally expressed as the needy child and Nurture, later linguistically resignified as Mother, whomsoever does the caring and keeping the child alive, fed etc. Then we all encounter a triadic structure. During this process, the one, the child, is confronted with a splitting of Nurture, with two others, two positions, represented as two forms of the adult world signified Mother and Father. The position-figures do not, however, have the same power. Nurture, the infant–carer dyad, is fractured by an Oedipal triangle, demanding the child’s alignment with one or other of these positions. These positions are signified by Language (Symbolic order) and in language, actual words, as asymmetrical pairs: he or she, son or daughter, brother or sister, man or woman, father or mother, etc. They are so not because of nature or anatomy, but because of culture, the formation of societies, for whom their own perpetuation has always
been a central operation (exchange for procreation) alongside the work of existing day to day (production).

The triadic Oedipal phase inducts the child not only into an alignment with certain, already loaded and culturally predetermined ways to name and speak of itself. It inserts the child into the Symbolic, the realm of Language, which is also the unconscious treasury of the laws of Culture. To become a subject, the child is thus *subjected* and *sexuated*. There is a price for becoming a subject.

All that the child, up to this point, in reality and phantasy, had wanted, needed, felt it could possess as a necessity to ward off its infantile helplessness has been invested in the *place and persons* representing *Nurture*. This is not a woman necessarily but typically so, and not a biological parent necessarily, and so, to avoid confusion, I name this primary Other *Nurture*: the array of adults who keep the helpless infant alive. *Nurture* signifies life and all that comforts. But, as it grows, the child has also begun to discover forms of comfort in its own body parts, its tiny genitals, its own mouth, or comforters, objects. It would also fear to lose these auto-erotic substitutes.

The Oedipus complex is the sociocultural method that forcibly detaches all children from their primary dyadic relation with *Nurture*/the maternal as the price of entry into Culture as a speaking subject. The force that imposes this is the symbolic Father, not the real dad or any person, but what Lacan identified as the *Name of the Father*, the cultural law that must negate the infant’s passionate attachment to the older generation who gave birth to it, with one word: No! You cannot have what you want.

We all desire to hold on to the sustaining body and presence signified as *Nurture*/the maternal. In the interests of its own future existence, Society and Culture will not permit this. The child’s desire, initiated in its need to be nurtured, with needs addressed to the adults that sustain its life, must be redirected by the paternal negation to later substitutes for its primary attachments and thus to others of its own generation. Need becomes *desire*. The mechanism for this is the Oedipus complex.

*Castration* acquires its threatening horror as a phantasized terror of mutilation of our imagined, auto-erotic wholeness that runs along a series of losses the child has undergone – of proximity to the maternal body; weaning – of the breast (real or substitute); and of its own body contents in learning to defecate. *Castration* catches all these losses to merge into the haunting anxiety of not-being. The price of entry into Culture is submission to castration – sacrificing the Mother to the Law of the Father and thus sacrificing all the infantile pleasures, the origins of sexuality itself, associated with infancy.

There is one further effect. Since that Law is the Law of Culture, the once all-powerful *Nurture*/the maternal is abruptly rendered symbolically
powerless before the No! / Name of the Father, whose symbolic prohibition invests the paternal position with the fullness that the infant and Nurture now appear to lack. The symbolic Father is why we call this a patriarchal culture or society. The signifier associated with the symbolic Father is what Lacan defined as the symbolic Phallus.\(^3\) The Phallus not an organ. It is signifier of the power of the No! Thus, we speak of a phallocentric order in culture. Because it is so organized, as having the power to say No!, creating the proto-subject’s powerlessness before that negation, the difference the Phallus orchestrates is sexual difference, and that difference is asymmetrical. Phallocentrism offers those who align with the Father an illusory masculine position; s/he who takes on the feminine subject position must internalize both a different relation to the Father and an alignment with the position that has now been dethroned, abjected, devalued – the Mother; hence the feminine now signifies not-power (paradoxical as it may seem that such a demotion of the maternal-generator Other could occur). That’s phallocentrism for you.

In this passage, moreover, sexual orientation is not determined, even as sexual desire is incited and directed towards things and others. Desire, in this theory, is an effect produced by the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Desire emerges from the complex as the endless and fruitless pursuit, via future substitutes, for what has, in effect, been lost in the passage to subjectivity. Looking to the future for a lost satisfaction, desire is, in fact, always unconsciously retrospective, desiring a lost world without the Law and seeking to escape the loss it demanded of us. What has been lost is our primary attachment to Nurture/the maternal, both pre-natal and post-natal, now phantasized as the primal bulwark against paternal Law and loss. Substitutes can, however, never satisfy because the hidden element is the desire to return to an infantile condition before the awful sacrifice demanded by culture’s Law, engineered by the Oedipus complex. This process of impossibly awful options distributes the one, the child, into the dual, differentiated, pre-existing cultural positions that Language pre-names men and women, and precipitates us into Language that codes these positions and predetermines the range of their real, social, cultural and psychological meanings, in advance, for all who are its subjects. The child who emerges from the Oedipus complex is now ‘sexuated’: a desiring boy or girl. This traumatic process has compensations for some boyed subjects, but few for those children who are now girled. The psyche of the now girled child must submit to the Law, but under terms that produce her as always already having been ‘castrated’, that is, lacking, secondary, the best she can do being to make herself desirable to the father-boys.

There is no innate, pre-given, psychological sexual difference that is based on their tiny anatomical reproductive organs, despite much autoerotic pleasure. Yet this phallocentric formation has effects on how
subjects imagine and live in their future, adult bodies, psychically mapped as *empowered* (+) or *lacking* (−). For instance, the feminine subject is never identical with the femininity that phallocentrism constructs. She who becomes the *girled*, feminine subject suffers a kind of profound narcissistic damage, for it appears she lacks what it would take to align with the power of the Phallus and the Father. She is cast as an internal exile, for what she is obliged to name herself, a woman, is the term for a *what* – an object of desire, not a *who* – a subject of desire. She has to internalize the devaluation of her like, *Nurture*, now termed Mother, the very femininity with which she must align.

In its many forms over the centuries, feminism has been a revolt not of women who want to be men, but of feminine subjects who wish to become women-subjects in their own, as yet uncharted ways, beyond the subjectivities offered under the phallocentric regime. If women want to be someone and so have access to possibilities and activities, it is not *as men* that they wish for this (even though Freud and his followers could logically only think that it was that women wanted to be masculine, suffering envy symbolically for the organ that seemed to approximate to the Symbolic Phallus). Women contest patriarchy and phallocentrism as people who have desires to be active, to experience for themselves, to work and to learn, to relate to others, to create and to lead, *but not only in terms normalized as privileged and masculine*.

If under phallocentrism, the feminine subject has become the disfigured and ‘castrated’ other of the phallocentric universe, the feminine is also that order’s (brutally) suppressed and unknown excess, what that system does not yet know or recognize, since the feminine only functions in this system as a negative, what the Phallus is not, what is missing, an emptiness useful only as a mirroring surface for the Phallus. The feminine signifies a *beyond the phallocentric concept of plus (m) and minus (f)* as the unmapped resource or energy of resistance to the limiting phallic sovereignty over all of human subjectivity and desire. A feminine sexual difference beyond the phallic version is a resource for non-phallic dimensions of subjectivity, and hence for other kinds of ethics (relating to others) and indeed, aesthetics.

*M* and *F* are thus not identities, categories, gender markers or attributes derived from the body or nature. They are signifiers in a system of asymmetrical and hierarchical difference. Yet the entire point of explaining these theories is not to accept them unconditionally. Psychoanalysis has so far itself unconsciously reproduced its own phallocentrism even as it made legible that this is the character of the existing system that subjectivizes us. What psychoanalysis revealed through its method was that it repressed, to save the narcissism of its masculine inventors, positions that dutiful theoretical daughters internalized as the price of being taken
seriously in the work of the fathers that they also brilliantly preserved and elaborated. Thus, I draw upon the proposition of the Matrix developed by artist and psychoanalytical theorist Bracha L. Ettinger, who discerns additional modes of proto-subjectivity that shift the absolute dominance of the phallocentric theory of subjectivity.

The matrixial dimension is not an alternative or a replacement for the Phallus; substitution would still be a product of a binary logic, either/or. The Matrix and its mode of meaning-production, *metamorphosis*, are not identified as, or with, the feminine in the phallic sense derived from phallocentric logic: presence/absence, plus/minus, masculine/feminine. They do, however, make another realm of meaning and affects ‘of/from the feminine’ thinkable, as both a primordial, non-relative feminine sexual difference, and a Symbolic that is not defined in negative relation to the Phallus. Ettinger’s theorization leans on the Lacanian distinction between the Real (unthinkable corporeal intensity, trauma), and the pair Imaginary (the realm of image and phantasy) and Symbolic (the realm of words and thought), to which she adds the ‘corpo-real’ of the pre-maternal who, as subject not as object, informs all human subjectivity, irrespective of later sexual or gender alignments.

Thus, the Matrix, like the Phallus, is to be understood as a Symbol, a signifier and not just a signified. The matrixial organizes aspects of subjectivity and meaning. Neither is it a body part, however much the very conditions of our thinking bear the continuing imprints of primary corporeal intensities and *aesthetic* registrations of sensations, as well as phantasmatic images of the body’s eroticized components (sensed as touch, sight, perceived via aurality, orality, anality, erogeneity). ‘The Matrix, whose primary meaning [in Latin] is womb/uterus, is not an organ but a Symbol and a concept related to a feminine Real and to Imaginary structures.’ Its conceptualization, however, does indicate and underline the significance of a female and maternal phenomenological and affective contribution to human subjectivity, as well as modes of sublimation from female corporeality that generate aesthetic and imaginative possibilities for the imprinting of this primordial dimension in post-natal, post-phallic creativity and psychological experience.

The Matrixial refers to the original, archaic operations of the late pre-natal event-encounters, shared unevenly and without mutual knowledge, between the becoming-infant in its final pre-birth trimester and the becoming-mother who is humanizing and subjectivizing her partner-in-difference in conditions of proximity-in-distance, even as the becoming-infant is maternalizing her. The event-encounters are transsubjective not intersubjective (the infant is not yet a full subject and the becoming-mother is partialized in this condition of *pregnance* (Ettinger’s neologism) – a psycho-corporeal, shared event not a medical condition.
They occur asymmetrically across a shared borderspace. The Matrixial is radically displaced by birth when the matrixially becoming-infant is precipitated brutally into its post-natal precarity. Yet traces of this prolonged fascinance and intimacy with the unknown but aesthetically sensed m/Other persist, may re-emerge, are particularly activated in aesthetic processes and encounters, in artworking.

Metramorphosis is the Matrix’s aesthetic-affective meaning-engendering process that refers both to sharing and dispersing affect-events across borderlines, limits, margins, fringes, thresholds and links, and to transformations of the I and non-I(s) in the Matrix. Metramorphosis is the aesthetic process of the Matrixial and generates aesthetic affects. Metramorphosis is to the Matrixial as metaphor (substitution) and metonymy (contiguity) are to phallic meaning. The metramorphic is closely related to the matrixial gaze, which is distinct from the voyeurism, sadism and fetishism that define the phallic gaze, with Oedipalized mastery at one end (the eye of power) and annihilating anxiety before the lost object a at the other. The components of a matrixial gaze are awe, wonder and compassion. A post-natal modality is fascinance.

Ettinger identifies several dimensions of post-natal feminine subjectivities – Woman-beneath-the-Girl, the Girl-beneath-the-Woman, the m/Other-beneath-the-Woman and the Woman-beneath-the-Mother – in matrixial encounter and transformation, opening up feminine subjectivities that are not defined by Oedipal sexual difference (masculine/feminine, plus/minus) but co-emerge in fascinance and asymmetrical relations between the different elements. Ettinger proposes that a feminine subject becomes an adult through fascinance: ‘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.’ Fascinance enacts a woman-to-woman matrixial feminine difference whose figure, pronounced in its French original, is ffAm, femme-fatale-Autre-mère. FfAm thus signifies ‘the desiring/desirable woman–m/Other’ encountered in parallel with, but shifting the post-natal feminine subject’s confrontation with, Oedipal phallic difference. Instead of a woman as different from a man, Ettinger is posing the Girl as different from but becoming ffAm.

Because the terms femininity and the feminine become very contested, misunderstood and theoretically complex, let me clarify my usage. There are three definitions of femininity to be clarified: social-behavioural, psychological and feminist. The first refers to what different cultures and societies deem as proper or necessary for women’s behaviour, dress, roles, attributes etc. The second derives from psychoanalytic theory, which identified how masculine and feminine subjects are formed in the crises following birth-dependency and separation from the mother and entry.
into culture as sexed, speaking subjects. Femininity is a psychological position, not a natural attribute. Feminist theory challenges the naturalness of social-behavioural concepts of femininity (perhaps we might call this gender identity) as much as it has challenged the dominant Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychological formation of the feminine subject as relative to the masculine in a phallocentric +/- formula, with masculinity as the plus and femininity as the minus, that is, lacking. But it is also deeply interested in 'the feminine' precisely as the unrecognized, unknown otherness beyond both the conventional social and phallocentric definitions. Is the feminine the negative force for renewal precisely as the excluded other of the phallocentric order? Is the feminine the as yet unwritten desire and pleasure of the phallocentrically repressed and abused female body and psyche? Is the feminine a distinct and supplementary dimension in subjectivity, ethics and aesthetics? These are the research questions we pose and explore with great difficulty and internal debate even as the very words, the feminine and femininity, cause consternation and are even repudiated entirely in some sections of feminist thought because they are heard only in the first two senses, which seem conventional, essentialist or psychologically compromised. Yet if the difficulty is abandoned, women, as feminine subjects, are left in silenced exile in a phallocentric universe and at risk in patriarchal cultures.

Ettinger’s proposition that there are more dimensions to subjectivity than the phallocentric has universal implications, notably for understanding aesthetics and its affects, and for ethics, for non-phallic relations we might enact towards our others. It has especial significance for women, for subjects in the feminine, who are exiled in the desert of phallocentrism. The feminine subject needs ways to grasp theoretically and affectively their archaic arousal into subjectivity in the matrixial rapport with the unknown partner-in-difference, the m/Other. They also need to be able to recognize the role post-natally of the desirable Woman, whom Ettinger articulates as ffAm, femme-fatale-Autre-mère (desiring/desire Other mother), which sounds like femme, the French word for woman, when spoken. The ff refers to a woman perceiving herself as desiring and perceived as an object of desire; the Autre, Other, so not the girl’s actual mother; and mère marks her as an adult sexual woman. While classic psychoanalysis only allows a place for the mother as castrated, abjected, lacking, damaging feminine narcissism and sexuality, the feminine in the phallic system can only imagine herself as becoming the object of phallic desire, becoming the Phallus for the masculine other. Matrixial theory argues that the girl becomes a woman through fascinance, a prolonged, durational, non-scopic gazing and wondering process at and with the ffAm, learning and being transformed in the process, which itself replays the primordial fascinance of pre-natal becoming. By introducing the
psychic significance of late pre-natality, Ettinger does not play into patriarchal control of women’s bodies and fertility. The reverse is the case, because matrixiality is always several. Women’s bodies are not reduced to being the biological ovens that men control as carriers of their property. The matrixial severality makes the becoming-maternal the solely responsible Subject of the events of her body.

Finally, matrixiality redefines sexual difference. Every born subject is the effect of and thus bears the imprints of the corporeal sexual difference of the sexual *female* body aesthetic ally (sound, movement, rhythm, breathing, resonance) and proto-ethically (sensing a partner-in-difference and aroused in wonder in this pairing of compassion and hospitality). Thus, Ettinger argues that in a phallic world under a solely phallocentric order, we are all in danger and lack the non-phallic psychic resources to act ethically towards others, be that people, animals, nature, the planet.

The French term *le féminin* is not easily translated by the English words feminine or femininity, to which have accrued connotations more typically disowned by feminists. *Le féminin* does not refer merely to prescribed ideas of what is proper to patriarchally defined women’s normalized, gendered behaviour. Understood philosophically as the negated other that consolidates the singular selfhood of the masculine One (de Beauvoir) or as a psycho-symbolic position in language, *le féminin* is defined by Julia Kristeva as ‘that which is not’. *Le féminin* cannot *be* in the ontological sense of defining the being of someone, as for example stating that woman is. Rather it functions positionally as a radical negativity (in the Hegelian sense) that generates renovation and sometimes revolution in the Symbolic, which, ruled by a phallocentric logic, places *le féminin* as its outside/excess. While I resist the absoluteness of Kristeva’s radical positioning of *le féminin* as only a semiotic radicality in phallocentric logic, I would want to propose that it is both *what is not yet known* (for lack of its signifiers in phallocentric language) and *what has inevitably and already been, often unconsciously, inscribed into culture* precisely by avant-gardist women artists and writers. As self-conscious avant-gardists, they participated in material, semiotic and creative dissidence with regard to the patriarchal, bourgeois Symbolic. Yet while the avant-gardist experimentation allowed the space or process for such ‘other’ inscriptions, the artist-women might not have themselves fully recognized what had been inscribed in culture through their aesthetic practices. The otherness of *le féminin/the feminine* in phallocentric culture remains obscured for lack of terms with which to recognize its difference, except as what does not immediately make sense to it. If, up to now, we lacked the appropriate terms to acknowledge *le féminin* as the haunting excess of a limiting phallocentrism, as a result of feminist work on language, art, theory and so forth, we can now both *desire to know* and *frame such difference(s)* via terms of analysis and recognition.
developed by feminist theory, itself an intellectual avant-garde intervention: that is, a disturbance of radical significance to the existing orders of meaning. Feminist theory and practice during the 1970s paid deep attention both to the body and to language, to both embodiment and affect. The intersecting aesthetic and theoretical moves that composed the feminist avant-garde moment necessarily raised to the level of representational and philosophical significance the ‘excess’ within patriarchal bourgeois society that had been formerly managed on the latter’s behalf by religion, but which now self-consciously radical women – feminists – took on. Kristeva stressed that it was religion that was contested by the avant-garde. Only once feminism articulated the issues of gender, sexuality and sexual difference, theoretically and aesthetically, could the full potential of that contest be staged.

By the very same token, feminist dissidence can do more than elaborate the psychoanalytical explanation of women’s masochism and penis envy. We can use its resources to explore what might be suppressed for lack of signifiers, rendered invisible for lack of imagination, and policed into silence for lack of courage to ask what aspects of a feminine difference might yet have been impressed into cultural forms, often unknowingly, but always intensely, by women. What might have been impressed, carved, painted into culture when certain artistic practices themselves both embraced psychoanalytical understanding of subjectivity and created forms of artistic practice uniquely open to the workings of the unconscious, speaking its energies and pressures through the gestures of the body at work, unfettered by existing systems of representation, figuration and imagery? I am referring to abstract art and especially the topic of this case study, abstract gestural painting.

Might linking artistic practice with the feminine undermine the concern with simply good art, which should escape all social inscription, being the very privileged locus of an unmarked individual? I do not think so. I do not know the final answer. I firmly believe that we need to spend more time with the issue, openly exploring and questioning difference as it is and has been enacted transformatively in artistic practice.