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The Pregnant Moment: Kant's "Mother Wit" in Aesthetic Reflection, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema

Absztrakt

The essay traces conceptual connections between key aspects of Kant's transcendental philosophy, especially aesthetic reflection, and basic psychoanalytic concepts that have figured prominently in the European film theory of the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, the essay proposes a reevaluation of the phallic economy of signification in placental-umbilical terms. Introducing the ephemeral materno-foetal organ of the placenta into psychoanalytic film theory as the biological prototype of the fetish, phallus, dream screen, virtual or lost maternal object and object of desire (objet petit a) promises to resolve the impasse reached by feminist theories keyed to Freud's and Lacan's *patriarchal* phallic economy. The placenta is seen here as having the same function as Kant's transcendental subject -- that of a focus imaginarius, a virtual memory organ furnishing the idea of both plenitude and lack, or castration, and making possible symbolic signification as synthetic a priori.

Szerző

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In this paper, I will attempt to reveal certain conceptual similarities between Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and Immanuel Kant's concept of the transcendental, especially transcendental subjectivity, as manifest through aesthetic reflection. I will trace these intriguing connections between Kant's transcendental critique *and* model of reason and Freud's system of the unconscious with the imaginative assistance of Gilles Deleuze, who has provided us with a bridge between philosophy, film theory, and a philosophically inflected cinematic practice.

What prompted my investigation was the urge to account for cinema's special gift to trigger a powerful aesthetic experience. I had long been drawn to and into the being, the essence, of a certain experience attained through cinema, an overwhelming, soul-stirring feeling that the *cinophilic* tradition often described as "love," and which Siegfried Kracauer would call a "sensuous and *immediate* contact" with "life as such" ^[1] (170, 169). This is the "life" that the Romantics have sought to grasp through their nostalgic longings. This is also what Deleuze yearns for as the impossible and unthinkable, and which Slavoj Žižek calls "life in excess" (*The Parallax View*, 63), and identifies as the pure drive (animation, emanation) that is the transcendental subject. I have found that Deleuze's and Žižek's intervention supported my intuition that my pursuit of the experience of this "life in excess," grasped through special encounters with cinema, should be tied to Kant's concept of the transcendental. In this prodigious Kantian concept I have found both the method that I needed for my research (which turned out to be a transcendental one), and the model of the type of limit, or threshold, consciousness (transcendental subjectivity) that I had been trying to grasp. Kant's notion of the "transcendental" allowed me to demonstrate the continuity between the 'old' and the 'new' within film theory, that is, between Romantically-inspired *cinophilic* approaches and Deleuze's allegedly radical "post-humanist" time-image aesthetic. Nevertheless, the most surprising, and to my mind most promising, discovery of the transcendental examination I have conducted has been the 'discovery' of the placental-umbilical dynamic of the pregnant and birthing womb as an analogue of the transcendental logic, and a manifestation of the rationale of Kant's foundational and ever unfathomable "mother wit" (*Mutterwitz*). In Kant, "mother wit" is the animating principle of schematism, or judgment itself, which becomes sensibly manifest in Kant's bipolar aesthetic reflection, the beautiful and the sublime. Of course, psychoanalytic film theory has routinely associated the regressive dreamlike state and "trance-like immersion" (Kracauer, 166) induced by cinema-viewing with a regression to

a pre-symbolic, even pre-natal state, the mother's womb. However, this, to my knowledge, has not been spelled out in transcendental philosophical terms. Considering the placental-umbilical logic of the pregnant womb as a biological analogue of Kant's philosophical construction of transcendental subjectivity has far-reaching implications. And so does the introduction of the placenta into the phallic economy of signification, which Freud and Lacan could only imagine in patriarchal terms. In what follows, I will sketch out key points of this argument. I will suggest that Kant's inclination to found meaning in an unfathomable, sustaining yet vacuous mother wit (*Mutterwitz*) may have prompted Freud's misogynistic Oedipal complex, which blames the unsolvable impasse, or split, of subjectivity – a male subjectivity, moreover – on woman's fundamental lack, her castrated and potentially castrating nature. Recall Freud's remarkable suggestion that women were trying to find substitutes for their lacking organ of generative power (assumedly the penis) by having a baby or by braiding their pubic hair! Regrettably, Freud's emphasis on women as disfigured, castrated men has muddied the waters with respect to what it is exactly that women lack (if anything). I believe that the time has come to revisit woman's castration, and to do so in light of the relationship between castration as de-cision (judgment, separation) and the inscrutable foundational mother principle of nature, or mother wit. In order to do this, though, we need to observe certain rules: (1) we need to take the distinction between the phallus and the penis seriously; (2) we need to reject the idea that women are lacking, castrated males; (3) we need to accept that it is the castration of the *mother* that is at stake, and, above all, (4) we need, in a Kantian transcendental spirit, to be willing to question age-old received ideas, notably, the notion of the phallus as an exclusive male attribute and possession. We need, in other words, to initiate a transcendental feminist critique of Freud's patriarchal Oedipal metaphysics, a critique that would aim at the interrogation of the shared *beliefs* of the male and female unconscious. As Deleuze and Guattari correctly observe, "the question is not that of knowing if women are castrated, but only if the unconscious 'believes it,' since all the ambiguity lies there" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 61).

1. Castration and a Placental-Umbilical Economy of a Maternal Phallic Subjectivity

Let us begin by considering woman's "bleeding wound" so often evoked in 'classical' psychoanalytic film theory as the horrifying reminder and threat of emasculation, which needs to be effaced by the memory image of fullness (preceding the split) created by the smooth continuity system of classical narrative cinema. This "bleeding wound" carried by women (and, again, not specifically the mother) is supposedly the sign of their castration, that is, their lack of a penis, which needs to be covered over, or screened by fetishistic cinematic signification. As Laura Mulvey tells us, this is done in classical narrative cinema by the styling of the female image – especially the image of the iconic star such as Garbo and Dietrich – as the supreme fetish that freezes the flow of action, creating a *flatness* and an iconic beauty to *pacify* the male gaze (Mulvey

203, 205). There are several problems with this assumption. The immediate problem is of course, the connection of women's "bleeding wound" with their lack of a penis, which would place this wound on the female pubic area, where, common sense tells us, there is no such wound. If women indeed have a wound, where would it be located? In the womb, of course, whose lining, the endometrium, sheds a layer, the *decidua*, every month during the menstrual period, unless the woman becomes pregnant, and the decidua is not shed, but remains in place – as a *past that is preserved*, Deleuze and Bergson might say – to embed the decidual part of the placenta. Perhaps here, with the double/faced *maternofoetal* placenta, lies the physiological model of Kant's, Bergson's, and Deleuze's two-centered world constituted by parallel temporal series: the phenomenal and the noumenal, the actual and the virtual, the present that passes and the past that is preserved. On one side, the placenta is connected to the retained decidua of the womb as a past that is preserved. On the other side, the placenta is connected to the foetus: a present that passes, whose passage, as well as whose end, castration and release into symbolic life, is conditioned on the decidual 'ground' of the endometrium of the womb. Continuing this train of thought we could say that the birth of the placenta (the 'afterbirth') constitutes the crucial moment of de-cision, that is, the cut off, or castration, of the pregnant decidua, which has come to full term. (Mark the etymological link between decidua and de-cision, which both carry the meaning of "cut-off," "fall-off," castration.) The birth of the placenta indeed leaves a bleeding wound, and so does the cutting of the *umbilical cord*, which is perhaps closest to the Freudian literal understanding of castration, to wit, the artificial cutting off of something essential – and for Freud necessarily male. In a word, it makes more sense to me to read the mother's castration as the detachment of the placenta from the womb, and as the cutting off of the umbilical cord from the placenta, rather than unthinkingly declaring the mother, and all women, as castrated, lacking males due to their (imaginary) lack of a penis. It is important to emphasize, moreover, that the secondary (although in time preceding) castration of the cutting of the umbilical cord, which leaves a stump that detaches spontaneously, may have served as model for Freud's penile castration, since the umbilical stump may be reminiscent of an infant boy's penis. All this, of course, does not invalidate the recognition that castration in general, whether it is understood literally or metaphorically, is an experience shared by all infants and has nothing to do with the mother's, or woman's loss of a penis. The morphological similarity of the umbilical stump and the penis, however, may help explain how the penis came to be (to my mind mistakenly) associated with the phallus, conceived as the master signifier and sign of symbolic power as well as stand-in (fetish) for the lacking object (or referent). The anatomical similarity and possible confusion of the umbilical stump and the penis has yet another important implication. *Perhaps it is the umbilicus, rather than the penis that is the phallic symbol par excellence.* After all, the umbilicus serves as a reminder of an ungraspable primary reference (a castrating, decidual mother wit) and its first stand-in, the *placenta*. The placenta, we are told, is an *ephemeral organ*. It is also, I believe the prototypical fetish, since it not only placates or pacifies the foetus by keeping it in an even state, or flow, of uninterrupted mutuality with the maternal blood system, but it also and at the same time shields the 'parasitic' foetus from the mother's immune system. This, to my mind, makes the *maternofoetal* placenta the prototype of the lost maternal

object, the object of desire that, Deleuze tells us, we can encounter “under various names, such as Melanie Klein’s good *and* bad object, the ‘transitional’ object, the fetish-object, and above all Lacan’s “*objet a*” (*Difference and Repetition*, 101). This object is, of course, not the ultimate or original term, as Deleuze reminds us – which is true, considering that the placenta was formed by the splitting of the egg and sperm cell whose other half constitutes the foetus. Also, on the other side of the equation, there is the nurturing and threatening outside of the maternal matter as object-support. However, if we continue Deleuze’s argumentation about the virtual object, the placenta does indeed perform a fetishistic-phallic function since it is “always missing from its place, from its own identity and its representation” (*Difference and Repetition*, 105). It is always already lost for the infant and lingers as a memory of desired, forever lost plenitude.



the Omphalos of Delphi

The supposition that the umbilicus may have a phallic connection is strongly supported by the Omphalos of Delphi, the sacred phallic stone that marked the *navel* of the world, providing access to the divine, the ultimate referent. Remarkably, moreover, the surface of this sacred phallic stone is covered with a carving of a knotted net, which recalls Michel Chion’s description of the intra-uterine experience as a horrifying “umbilical net” (Silverman 85), making one wonder about the source of Chion’s idea. There is also a similarity between the words “phallus” and “Omphalus,” which may be a coincidence and has no proven etymological root, but is compelling, nevertheless. In sum, I would argue, it may well be the navel that reminds us of the bleeding wound left by the artificial cut off, the castration, from the placenta, as well as by the natural ‘de-cision’ or separation, falling off, of the placenta. This supports my suggestion that phallic symbolism need not primarily lean on the male sexual organ as its prop, ^[2] and may, rather, take its model from the umbilicus-placenta dyad, and, more importantly, from the mechanism, the logic, that informs, and is exemplified by, the lingering symbiosis and spontaneous release (castration) played out

between the uterus, the placenta and the foetus mediated by the umbilical cord.

2. The Placenta as Transcendental Subject (Imaginary Focus), Dream Screen, and Mirror in 'Kantian' Psychoanalysis, and Cinema

Obviously, these physiological facts and processes – which Freud seems to de-emphasize – carry intriguing theoretical implications, some of which I have already sketched out very briefly. The first significant implication is the reevaluation of the phallus as the master signifier of a substitutive, differential signification according to a placental-umbilical logic, where the placenta-umbilicus dyad and not the penis may be the model of the phallus, a maternal phallus, moreover, which, Deleuze tells us “does not have a sexual character, but is rather the ideal organ of a neutral energy” (*Masochism*, 110). Reconsidering the phallus in placental-umbilical terms implies a readjustment of the notion of the “mother,” which is certainly not used here in the sense that it functions in Freud’s Oedipal mythology. As I have indicated above, the “mother” as placenta-host is understood here as the material object-support, analogous in its function to Lacan’s Real, as well as Kant’s noumenon or transcendental object (object = x), which, in turn, is inseparable from the unknown mother principle, or “mother wit,” underlying schematic cognition (judgment, decision). This unknown maternal objectivity is mediated to the foetus through the ephemeral organ of the placenta (and the umbilical chord), which, again, is the first virtual object, object substitute, or fetish, in a long chain of substitutive, displacing, and masking signification. According to this logic, the Name/No of the Father (Lacan’s Imaginary-Symbolic realm) operates on a maternal phallic, placental-fetishistic principle. Curiously, this primary placental-umbilical model of mediation has not received much critical attention in a Freudian-Lacanian inspired psychoanalytic discourse, at least in the strain that found its way to, and became influential in, the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s. It is, instead, the breast as the experience of plenitude and pleasure that Freud makes the basis (the screen) of his primary process, which operates as hallucinatory wish fulfillment, and which Freud describes as “the unconscious laws of thought,” governed by the pleasure principle, from which thought activity itself emerges (Rottenberg 67, 87). One may wonder why Freud has neglected to consider the placenta as this significant primordial screen. After all, the word ‘placenta’ is etymologically tied both to flatness, *plane*, and to placating, leveling out, and *pleasure*.^[3] Given all this, the placenta emerges as a primary screen of protection, projection, as well as the most basic object substitute, and as such, the prototypical fetish. This is so not only because the foetus and the placenta are doubles of one another, since they were both formed, by splitting, from the same egg and sperm cell, but because it is the placenta that screens and protects the foetus from the attack of the immune system of the maternal host. In sum, the placenta is the all-important ‘prop’ and key to the physiological and psychological development of the foetus. Would it not, then, be more feasible to consider the screening and intermediary placenta as the prototype of the “blank background” or white surface and indispensable support

for the projection, the formation, of images ^[4] in psychoanalysis and in film theory, rather than assigning the maternal breast as the “dream-screen” of an immersive cinematic experience? Isn’t it, moreover, more feasible to consider the placenta, rather than the maternal breast, as the prototype of the Lacanian mirror, which reflects an imaginary, ideal unity? I believe that the answer is yes. Let us recall that Freud conceives *projection* as a tendency of the mind to treat internal stimuli “as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the *shield* against stimuli into operation as a means of defense against them” (Freud 33). This formulation clearly recalls the original shield, the placenta, which makes possible the homeostatic continuity of the foetus by sustaining the pregnancy and providing for a smooth transfer and a safe separation between the foetus and the mother. The interchangeability of perception and memory, outside and inside that characterizes Freud’s hallucinatory wish-fulfillment primary process is no doubt a throwback to the smooth mediating role of the placental-umbilical junction. Deleuze’s time-image, where perception and recollection become indiscernible commemorates this placental-umbilical suturing moment as “dialectical transmutation” (*Masochism*, 46). And in the same gesture, the differentiating and suturing role of the placenta provides the root of our unconscious perception of *difference*, which, Elizabeth Rottenberg notes, is the condition of the possibility of Freud’s primary process or hallucinatory wish fulfillment and first fiction. The infant’s hallucination (or memory) of the breast, Rottenberg reminds us, presupposes an unconscious awareness of difference, displacement and non-identity. With all this in mind, it is interesting to reexamine Jean-Louis Baudry’s argument about a primary dream-state and hallucinatory wish fulfillment tied to mother care as the model of a dream-like film viewing experience. As a “simulation apparatus,” cinema “brings about a state of artificial regression,” Baudry claims, leading us back to an anterior phase of development, which is barely hidden, as shown by dreams and pathological psychic states, Baudry argues (312, 313). He attributes cinema’s specific pleasure to its reanimation, through its “dream screen,” of the baby-breast relationship, *as well as* a “rest position, warmth, and isolation” that protect the child from “excitement,” and which *recalls* the experience of the womb (313, 308). It is apparent that Baudry confuses here two separate developmental states, that of the intrauterine smooth exchange and homeostasis (protected from outside stimulation) sustained and mediated by the placenta, and that of the oral phase, where mother and child are no longer fused together through the placenta (as both one and two), and where the child’s hallucinatory wish fulfillment is prompted by excitation and systemic imbalance, due to her or his prior severance (or castration) from the maternal object and its intermediary, the placenta, at birth. Clearly, the “more archaic mode of identification” that Baudry characterizes as a “lack of differentiation between the subject and his environment” (313), and which he attributes to the oral baby-breast phase, is a much more apt description of the intrauterine placental-umbilical intermediacy between outside and inside, foetus and maternal host. All these correspondences make it even more curious why Freudian psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic film theory have disavowed, so to speak, the placenta as a possible model for the original fetish, the virtual object, the screen (or shield) or reflective and

focal plane (also dream screen), and found such substitutes as the maternal breast, the mirror, and, in general, the *objet petit a*. Perhaps the taboo placed on the placenta has to do with the idea of the *Doppelgänger* as harbinger of death, as well as Freud's conception of the "uncanny," the defamiliarized, alienated familiar that should have remained hidden but has been brought to memory. Perhaps it is the function of the placenta as the double of the foetus, and its uncanny nature as phantom double of the empirical (phenomenal) split subject that explains the reluctance of Freud and his followers to acknowledge the fundamental anatomical and symbolic role of this ephemeral yet substantial organ in the development of the human subject. But perhaps more is at stake here. I would like to pursue the intuition that the placenta, due to its structural-functional characteristics, may indeed be considered as a physiological counterpart of Kant's transcendental subject or imaginary focus, which is both and at the same time the condition of the possibility of objectivity and the imaginary unity that makes possible the experience of the I as unified consciousness. In other words, I would like to consider the possibility of treating the umbilical-placental-decidual dynamic of the pregnant womb as providing the rationale of Kant's and Bergson's bi-referential world and split subjectivity. We have noted that the placenta is a coin with two sides (it is a *maternofoetal* organ), serving as a link and as a shield, or block, between the infant and the maternal host. More precisely, the placenta is both shielding the parasitic foetus from the mother's immune system and is making possible a metabolic transfer between the mother and the foetus, ensuring its continuous homeostatic state. This dynamism also describes the functionality of the transcendental subject, which constitutes both a linkage *and* a blockage, or discontinuity, between phenomenal and noumenal realms. This dynamic of transcendental subjectivity is demonstrated, moreover, in the two-faced aesthetic reflection of pleasurable lingering and mutual connectivity of mind and matter in the beautiful, and the momentary cut off (castration) of all intuition at the noumenal limit in the sublime. *The sublime, thus, commemorates castration*, which in this context has been understood as the cut-off (de-cision) of the foetus from the placental lingering between sensible and supersensible realms, that is, between a substitutive imaginary-symbolic reality and its object-base and cause, the 'real.' If we want to be more precise, we need to qualify this birthing castration as a "double cise" (Derrida 144), given that there is a time lapse between the cut of the umbilical cord and the birth and death of the placenta. This latter is obviously not something that the infant can directly sense. However, the lost yet still lingering, 'alive,' ephemeral organ of the placenta may constitute a phantasmatic presence, a memory screen of a pure past for the new-born, who may sense the present-absence of something significant that is there yet not there – like a phantom limb, a dream screen and imaginary focus, like, a "blank background" or white surface as indispensable support for the projection, the formation, of images (Baudry 310). This time lapse of umbilical-placental castration may be at the root of the "too early-too late" moment of a subjectivity understood in terms of displacement and non-identity. If, then, to quote Deleuze, "an empirical subject cannot be born into the world without simultaneously being reflected in the transcendental subject which thinks it and in which it thinks itself" (*Cinema 1*, 73), this reflexive, dual or split subjectivity" ^[5] is made possible and held in place

by the ‘double cise’ of castration that is also the ‘double birth’ of the empirical infant and an ephemeral transcendental-placental memory. The placenta as transcendental focus and memory base is, I believe, fully comparable to the notion of the “‘other scene’ ... (closer to phantasy from the outset)” that Metz claims cinema offers a perceptible projection of, complete with a “*memory trace*” of actors, décor, and words “which is immediately so, without having been something else before” (Metz 43, emphasis added). It is the placental “phantom” time, the pure past of the object that has withdrawn, which is projected as and by cinema’s imaginary signifier. And it is into this placental-decidual time that Deleuze’s spiritual automaton or “ordinary man in cinema” (*Cinema 2*, 169) dives. The breast, which usually comes as first substitute for the placenta ‘naturally’ takes over the placenta’s role of imaginary focus, dream screen, and hallucinated memory of plenitude. Equally, the Lacanian mirror simply converts into scopic terms the original *aesthetic reflexive* placental-umbilical identification. Tellingly, both Lacan and Metz note that in the mirror stage the infant identifies with a *dual* image, that of itself together with the mother. As a flat surface facing both the foetus and the mother, and providing for their smooth mutuality, the *maternofoetal* placenta founds this dual specular identification.

3. The Placenta, Aesthetic Reflection, Mother Wit, and the *Maternofoetal* Transcendental Subject

The idea that placental identification is aesthetically reflexive adds further support to my original intuition that the ephemeral, intermediary, at once linking and blocking or shielding placenta has an analogous function to that of Kant’s transcendental synthetic a priori, or transcendental subject. Given, moreover, Kant’s move to designate *aesthetic* reflective judgment as the transcendental principle of determining judgment, or cognition in general, it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that *the placental-umbilical link and blockage provides a biological model for Kant’s curious construct of the transcendental*. If, moreover, this analogy between the structure and function of the Kantian transcendental subject and the placenta is indeed tenable, the analogies often drawn (e.g., by Metz and Deleuze) between the cinematic apparatus, and especially the camera, and transcendental subjectivity could be reinterpreted in placental-umbilical terms. Indeed, it would be intriguing to envision the cathode ray tube, the image-generating mechanism of televisions and computers, as a placental-umbilical structure, facing the viewers situated in the “desert of the real” (to quote Morpheus’s famous words from the *Matrix*) yet being immersed in a “general aestheticisation of experience” (Vattimo 55). Obviously, this is a fascinating idea that has no proof to support it – unless we return to Kant’s unfathomable and foundational mother wit (*Mutterwitz*), the “secret art residing in the depths of the human soul,” which cannot be learned but only practiced, and whose true stratagems “we shall hardly ever divine from nature and lay bare before ourselves” (Kant, *Pure Reason*, B181, 214). Nature is substantial and, thus, eludes the efforts of our phenomenal understanding to grasp it in itself. Yet, Kant assumes that the basic mechanism of

nature is shared by all natural creatures, and, thus, forms the foundation of the thinking subject. This is, no doubt, why he has designated “mother wit,” that is, nature logic, as the model and rationale of human cognition. Moreover, again, Kant singled out reflective judgment manifest through aesthetic reflection as the *heautonomous* (both heteronomous and autonomous) transcendental principle of judgment per se, where aesthetic reflection – a restful pleasurable lingering and mutual play of imagination and understanding – was considered as the sensible (but non sensuous) access to a *naturally attuned and driven* transcendental subjectivity. This tallies with the placentally sustained and mediated fetal situation, where the placenta ensures an even flow of metabolic exchange between foetus (phenomenal self) and maternal host (noumenal other). Thus, besides being the lost or missing object, the placenta appears to be the prototype of the art object, and especially natural beauty. It is, moreover, noteworthy that there is a curious correspondence between the Kantian concept of “*taste*,” considered as the intuition in the beautiful of an empirical-transcendental-transcendent harmony, and the pivotal role of the phallic “*oral* mother” in the placental-umbilical exchange. Aesthetic “*taste*” in Kant is conceived as a non-sensuous pleasure unaffected by immediate bodily needs. This is “a castrated hedonism,” or “desire without desire,” as Adorno has put it (*Aesthetic Theory*, 11), experienced, again, as the indeterminate restful *lingering* of the faculties, which is sustained (or driven) by regular pulsations of nature perceived reflectively. Similar to this, we can dissociate the “oral” aspect of the experience of the homeostatic pleasure of the womb (sustained by the placenta and the umbilicus) from a sensuous pleasure derived from a direct contact with and the consumption of the object. Rather, satisfaction in both the aesthetic and the intra-uterine lingering is rooted in the *suspense*, the indefinite deferral, of the moment of consummation (that of the object) – which in both cases is inseparable from castration. Incidentally, this suspension of the foetus on the umbilical cord, which keeps it at a distance from the placenta, its primary fetish object (or art object), may well be the condition of the possibility of the *scopic drive*, the passion for perceiving, and primarily looking, which Metz associates with a voyeuristic cinema spectatorship, as well as with the experience prescribed by “the main socially acceptable arts,” where pleasure is derived from keeping the desired object at a distance (Metz 59).^[6] In addition, this keeping at a distance, this suspending, freezing, and indefinite delaying of satisfaction offered and denied at the same time by an untouchable fetish object – an icy cold extremely rare intermediary female nature, an ‘oral’ or, I would say, placental mother – is the logic that sustains a masochistic aesthetic, according to Deleuze, to which I will soon return. Significantly, the harmonious mutuality and lingering of transcendental subject and its object in the beautiful is ensured in Kant by an added matter, a fluid substance with pulsations “in *uniform temporal sequence*” (*Critique of Judgment*, I, §14, 70-1, emphasis added). For Kant, these pulsations, manifest in color and tone, are a priori “formal determinations,” vibrations of the ether and of the air, which the mind perceives not by ordinary sensation but by reflexive perception. These were what Deleuze called pure optical and sound situations, and which he associated with the cinematic time-image, which made palpable cinema’s interstitial structure, communicating vibrations to the cortex. It is “the regular play of the impressions, and hence the *form in the connection*

of different presentations” (*Critique of Judgment*, I, §14, 70-1) that is at stake in aesthetic reflection, where the mind perceives repetitive sequences, relational patterns. I believe that the same process describes the fetal-placental-maternal interchange and mutual play, where the placenta has the function of Kant’s natural beauty (or work of art), relaying a rhythmic, regularly sequenced, patterned flow of an unknown material, sustaining the foetus in a steady state of lingering, but also imprinting in it the experience (as memory) of patterned, rhythmic relations, laying perhaps the base of pattern recognition. In Freud, we find a very similar formulation of the primary process as wish fulfillment, or fantasy (the unconscious law of thought as first fiction), whereby a memory image of plenitude, epitomized by the maternal breast, is substituted for its perceived lack, *Mutterpflege* or mother care, which according to Freud normally sustains the pleasurable, “apparently” self-contained and self-sufficient homeostasis of the infant. (Obviously, castration is already a fact in Freud’s primary process.) When the rhythmic flow of the ‘signaletic’ material is cut, the time that was put on a standstill begins to move ahead, the de-cision has been made, castration is a fact, and something has been released. The same thing happens in Kant’s aesthetic reflection whose reflexive lingering is cut short by the momentary self-loss of the sublime, caused by an imagination that overreaches itself in its cumulative, holistic efforts, stretching itself to its formative limit and breaking down. This moment of the emergence of the new, something that stuns the imagination, I believe, is readily comparable to the cutting short of the restful lingering and cumulative exchange between mutually irreducible dialectical terms (the foetus and the maternal host) by the moment of de-cision, the release of the foetus that has come to term. I believe that this dynamism of a lingering yet cumulative exchange between dialectical terms, which then is cut short, or decided, by a moment of release or separation (castration) of what is mature and ready to emerge is the secret art, or ‘*decidual*’ logic, of mother wit (*Mutterwitz*), which, again, for Kant constitutes the mechanism that informs human cognition as judgment or decision. As I have argued, the *maternofoetal* (intermediary, sustaining) logic of the placenta and the decidual (retaining and releasing) logic of the womb tallies perfectly with Kant’s concept of mother wit, in other words, the mother principle of a differential, castrated, empirico-transcendental subjectivity, working to dissimulate, to cover over, its differential nature by object substitutes, that is, relations. This argumentation suggests that Kant’s two-faced aesthetic reflection and judgment may indeed follow a *biologically-founded* dynamism (deliberation and decision), which is fully comparable to the phantasmatic experience of the restful intrauterine lingering sustained by the placenta – again, the namesake of the pleasure principle – and the subsequent moment of castration or birth. Freud’s conception of the pleasure principle as the rationale and drive of the primary process hallucinatory wish fulfillment – which, as we have seen, Freud considers “the unconscious laws of thought” from which thought activity itself emerges (Rottenberg 67, 87) – points to a conceptual kinship with the Kantian logic of a transcendental (imaginary) synthetic a priori (or transcendental subject) as the condition of the possibility of a phenomenal reality construction. In sum, the analogies we have unearthed between the mechanism of (1) Kant’s mother wit (*Mutterwitz*), (2) aesthetic reflective judgment as ‘sensible’ manifestation of

transcendental subjectivity, (3) Freud's primary process, and (4) the placental-decidual formation of the subject as empirico-transcendental doublet, have cast a completely different light on Kant's often decried transcendental idealism. In fact, if my argument is not mistaken, *Kant's transcendental idealism has a solid physiological, 'material' base*, which, in turn, brings him extremely close to Deleuze's own "transcendental empiricism."

4. Masochism, the Maternal Symbolic, and Mulvey Redux

My argument concerning the maternal phallus and the placental transcendental subject has many more ramifications, whose full exploration cannot be the task of this paper. One of the intriguing directions that I would like to point to, however, is Deleuze's discussion of masochism as developed in the writing of Leopold von Sacher Masoch. The logic of a masochist aesthetic as described by Deleuze shares the key elements of Kant's transcendental logic, and especially the latter's suspended aesthetic reflective lingering and 'disinterested pleasure' (or "castrated hedonism"), which I have connected with the intrauterine umbilical-placental mechanism of indefinite suspense and sustenance, whose pleasure is the restful, undisturbed continuity of exchange between dialectically opposed, and irreducible terms. The masochistic ideal is that of a parthenogenetic reproduction of the narcissistic ego as ideal ego through the agency of the maternal phallus. This process, Deleuze tells us, "rests on universal disavowal as a *reactive* process and on universal suspension as an Ideal of pure imagination" (*Masochism*, 32, emphasis added). What we find in masochism, in other words, is an imaginary process of de-Oedipalization, a temporal regression to a placental-umbilical stage, where castration is already a fact (the split of the foetus and the placenta), yet where full separation is not yet a *fait accompli* by virtue of the suspending umbilical cord and the mediating and filtering placenta. This simultaneous interconnectedness and separation between the foetus and the placental fetish keep the time of the inevitable de-cision or release on hold, creating a lingering sense of oneness with a m/other nature, a noumenal first nature, which, through the fetish (the placenta) is made to 'accidentally' harmonize with the desiring, needy fetal system. Thus, it appears feasible to suggest that the "intermediate" phallic oral mother of masochism envisioned by Deleuze, that of "the steppe (i.e., the *plain*), who nurtures and brings death" (*Masochism*, 49), ^[7] and who is between the uterine mother and the Oedipal mother, is most certainly a placental 'mother.' Again, the masochistic aesthetic follows the logic of a placental-umbilical, empirico-transcendental, subjectivity, manifest in aesthetic reflection.



Johnny Depp in Dead Man (Jim Jarmusch, 1995)

If, then, the Kantian experience of the beautiful is a ‘regression,’ it is so only in the sense that it is a *return* to a nature–law, one that confirms and harmonizes with the embryonic, the potential, the becoming life, the not-yet-being, the moment of hesitation and suspense. Thus, truth, a divine, transcendent truth that aesthetic reflection holds the key to, seems to be attuned in Kant to a mother wit rather than to a father law. The ‘disinterested’ (dispassionate), yet in fact fundamentally narcissistic, self-fulfilling and self-objectifying pleasure offered by aesthetic reflection, ^[8] and the masochist aesthetic, is fully comparable to the primary satisfaction tied to the pleasure principle, which, Freud reminds us is inseparable from the death instinct (Freud 77). Little wonder, then, that introspective and highly sensitive male film characters are often shown to respond to their disorientating symbolic surroundings by lying down on the ground and assuming the fetal position of restful lingering and (ideal) becoming that the masochistic, self-immolating aesthete seeks to recapture. James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955) and Johnny Depp in *Dead Man* (Jarmusch, 1995) exemplify this elemental longing for an ideal *and* material first nature, a mother law, which informs and enlivens the transcendental subject. Consequently, if, as Deleuze rightfully notes, “we must wonder ... why so many psychoanalysts insist on discovering a disguised father image in the masochistic ideal” (“and on detecting the presence of the father behind the woman torturer”) (*Masochism* 49), we must equally ponder why and how the Kantian transcendental subject and its manifestation through the beautiful (and the sublime) have come to be considered, and discarded, as the crystallization of the Enlightenment idea of Man. Would it not be more apt, rather, to associate the Kantian transcendental logic of “as if” manifest in an aesthetic of self-touching with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “becoming-woman” (and even “becoming child”), the prototype, it appears, of the post-modern experience of “becoming-other”? I do not think that this is a far-fetched proposition, provided we understand “woman” as “becoming woman” in the transcendental-placental sense. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari may have coined this term – “becoming woman” – mindful of the seldom-noted biological fact that all fetuses start out as females. In any case, Žižek confirms my proposition when he writes that the true subject in the Kantian sense is *woman*, woman who is *immature* and in need of a master, the

Other, rather than “man,” who as a symbolic construct is a “false pretender,” as Žižek insists in *The Parallax View* (91). Moreover, as it has been recast by the Oedipus complex, patriarchal reason is premised on an empty threat, that of castration (which is already a fact), and an empty promise, to wit, the avoidance of castration (the always-already given, the a priori) through a substitutive, displacing, masking symbolic production (Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring production”), which, as Freud has postulated, will always refer back to the primary object-substitute. ^[9] This object-substitute, I claim, is the placenta, and its “beyond” and animating force, the law of the (m)other, or mother wit. Given this, Deleuze raises a very timely question when he ponders why “even the most enlightened psychoanalytic writers link the emergence of a symbolic order with the ‘name of the father’” (*Masochism*, 55). If, then, primary symbolism is created through the fetal-umbilical-placental-maternal dynamism of the “intramaternal” order of the pregnant womb, one is given to wonder why the Lacanian mirror has come to be associated with an image of perfection tied to a *paternal* symbolism, the Name of the Father. Equally, if we accept that the transcendental subject proffered to us by aesthetic reflection and cinema (which recreates the conditions of ‘aesthetic regression’) can be understood as the phantasmatic experience of the ‘intramaternal’ placental-umbilical regime, we cannot help raising the question of why aesthetic pleasure and the voyeuristic gaze instrumental in obtaining it have been typically construed as male prerogatives in psychoanalytic cinema studies. Why has it been forcefully suggested that the Hollywood continuity editing system and the construction of the female star described by Laura Mulvey as supreme fetish – one that freezes the flow of action, creating a *flatness* and an iconic beauty to *pacify* the spectator’s gaze – are strategies servicing particular *male* desires? Is it not true that intramaternal symbolism and lingering is shared by all humans-to-be, who, moreover, start out as females (becoming-women) before acquiring a secondary sexual character? Would it not be more appropriate, rather, to follow Deleuze’s de-Oedipalizing masochistic logic, and propose that cinema’s fetishistic, voyeuristic, always withholding yet always proffering, teasing imaginary signification – enhanced by various techniques of suspense within narrative construction – invite *all* spectators, male and female, to a de- and re-sexualized, primary narcissistic, self-fulfilling and self-abnegating experience? Obviously I am not the first to pose this question vis-à-vis Mulvey’s rationale of male visual pleasure in classical narrative cinema. What I am proposing here is a brief rereading of Mulvey’s seminal article in light of Deleuze’s understanding of masochism. Moreover, it is my belief that our reinterpretation of the transcendental subject, aesthetic reflection, and Freud’s primary process in placental and “intramaternal” symbolic terms might allow us to further refine Mulvey’s still inspiring ideas, as well as to better understand why and how an in itself value-neutral sexual difference becomes entangled with symbolic power. For example, Mulvey’s recapitulation of Lacan’s mirror stage – which she, like Metz, compares to the power of cinema to reinforce the ego by causing its temporary loss – could be reexamined as a re-staging of a primary supersensory (or phantasmatic) ‘intramaternal’ placental identification, revived in the hallucinatory wish-fulfillment of Freud’s primary process. One is given to wonder through what conjuring trick the maternal *ideal ego* – projected as the joint image of child and mother – can be said to be “reintrojected as an *ego ideal*,” that is, as a male superego, in Lacan’s

mirror stage, as Mulvey claims (Mulvey 201, emphasis added). I do not contest that this conjuring trick in fact takes place. What I wish to do is to *emphasize* that such a switch of maternal ideal ego for paternal ego ideal does take place in some surreptitious manner in a patriarchal symbolic system and its cinema. Then, there is the question of whether the star system as a whole produces ego ideals, as Mulvey argues, or whether stars, at least certain stars (for example, Garbo and Dietrich), were in fact constructed to reanimate the phallic *maternal ideal ego*, which is the desired goal of the masochistic scenario of disavowal and suspense as described by Deleuze, and anticipated by Kant's aesthetic reflection. Is it in fact tenable to argue that the face of Garbo, or the image of Dietrich created by Sternberg as "ultimate fetish" and "perfect product" (Mulvey 205, 206), are in the service of a male superego, when these star images "freeze[...] the look, fixate[...] the spectator and prevent[...] him from achieving any distance from the image" (209)? An equally pertinent and related question is whether the investigated and punished (or saved) heroines of *film noir* in fact allow the male protagonist to assert sadistic control, or are these fatal women, as well as the genre of *film noir* itself, instead a castrating device, leading the (masochistic) male hero to the autonomy found only in death. With Deleuze's assistance, we may be able to shed more light on these intricate questions, of which Mulvey is aware, yet leaves unaddressed in her highly influential essay. Let us recall that the theatrical, mythic, and ritualistic world of masochism pivots around the woman torturer, who is at once the supreme fetish and the unattainable, abhorred-desired object, and who personifies a "particular, extremely rare feminine 'nature'" (*Masochism*, 38), an "indeterminate feminine type between the hetaera and the sadist: cold-maternal-severe, icy-sentimental-cruel" (*Masochism*, 45). These women are stand-ins for the oral (or placental-umbilical) mother, who is intermediate between the first, uterine mother – the generator of disorder, a hermaphrodite with a more pronounced female character – and the third, Oedipal mother, a tool of a sadistic male superego. The heroines of Masoch, Deleuze tells us, "have in common a well-developed and muscular figure, a proud nature, an imperious will, and a cruel disposition even in their moments of tenderness and naivety" (*Masochism*, 42). They function as "an image of death," as "the maternal mirror of death," in which the narcissistic ego contemplates the ideal ego imagined in terms of independence and autonomy (*Masochism*, 113).



Maria Casarés in Orpheus (Jean Cocteau, 1950)

In other words, this phallic maternal ideal ego and the women contracted to personify it connote a deathly ideal, which, ironically enough, has been routinely mistaken for signs of male *symbolic* control. Let us recall that the iconic “divine woman” acted out by Garbo, especially in the early, Hollywood modernist stage of her career, tends to bring misfortune, suffering, and ruin to her screen lovers, as well as to herself. Indeed, Hollywood punishes the woman torturer, but not before allowing her to exert her deathly powers. Beside the androgynous, imperious, cruel yet yielding performances of Garbo, Dietrich, and, to an extent, Lauren Bacall, we need to make a note here of the amazing act of Maria Casarés as la Princesse in Cocteau’s *Orpheus*, a film that to my mind constitutes a picture perfect enactment of the Kantian inspired masochistic aesthetic quest for a deathly yet rejuvenating, ice cold yet maternal, supersensuous ideal. (“You burn like ice,” the infatuated Orpheus whispers to the equally amorous yet ever distant, inaccessible Princesse.) Persephone, Demeter’s cyclically lost and regained daughter, the icy queen of Hades and the personification of the principle of gestation and rebirth, is, no doubt, the model of Cocteau’s Princess, as well as of the masochist’s intermediary, extremely rare feminine nature. Tellingly, the Orpheus of the legend secures Persephone’s support to win back his beloved from the realm of the dead.



Cocteau’s Orphic Trilogy

Indeed, the masochistic dynamic is the expression of a death wish, or death instinct at work. It testifies to a desire to turn back time and undo the castration into foetus and placenta, or, at least, to retreat to the pre-sexual, purely (supersensuously) erotic placental-umbilical suspense and

(re)creative lingering, the antechamber (zone) of both death and birth, the between separating non-differentiation and the chain of substitutive, displacing, and masking male phallic-fetishistic signification, Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring production." The incest taboo, violated by Oedipus, may well have served to ban this desire to reverse time and return to pre-castration, or, rather, to the suspenseful, expectant and self-sculpting lingering, or becoming, in-between castrations. It is this 'pregnant moment,' so to speak, that the masochist wants to revisit in pursuit of a parthenogenetic ideal rebirth through the neutral energy of the maternal phallus. Again, Cocteau's *Orpheus*, and in fact, his entire Orphic trilogy (*Blood of a Poet*, 1930; *Orpheus*, 1950; and *The Testament of Orpheus*, 1960), can be considered as variations on the theme of the de-Oedipalizing masochistic aesthetic search for the roots of creation – which the Romantic tradition to which Cocteau belonged has considered as an exclusively male pursuit. Indeed, what Deleuze does not spell out in his fascinating exegesis of the mechanism of masochistic aestheticism, but what a feminist, and in general, gender oriented, criticism of masochism should not fail to note, is that the masochistic ego that seeks an ideal rebirth from the power of the punishing and restraining superego is *male*, a self-castigating male, to be sure, who as victim "speaks through the mouth of his torturer without sparing himself" (*Masochism*, 21). It is, therefore, true, as Mulvey has noted, that the woman – both the iconic female star of cinema and the classic *femme fatale* as representative of the oral or placental mother – is mobilized to act as proxy for male fantasy. However, this fantasy is that of a de-oedipalization, a de-sexualization and a simultaneous re-sexualization that allows the enjoyment of forms of eroticism that the Oedipal order has declared as perverted, inverted, and abnormal (e.g., homoeroticism, masturbation, fetishism, and so on). These are subversive pleasures, which explains the dark fate of both male and female protagonists of the film noir. The ultimate, the most subversive pleasure for the Romantic masochistic seeker-artist epitomized by Cocteau's heroes is, of course, the vicarious access to the root of creativity. As we have seen, aesthetic reflection in Kant promises a fleeting feeling of the unfathomable and foundational "mother wit," the animating principle of nature and judgment. If this mother wit is indeed comparable with the decidual logic of the pregnant womb, as I have argued, then we can say that genius constitutes a direct link both to mother wit and the rationale of the maternal *enceinte*, the experience of being pregnant. After all, genius for Kant is the "innate productive faculty of the artist," through which "nature gives the rule to art" (Kant, CJ, I, §46, 168, Meredith). This is, of course, the point that Julia Kristeva makes through her conception of the *chora*, without mentioning Kant's conception of "genius" – for reasons of her own. I think, however, that it is important to spell out the conceptual analogies between, on the one hand, the Kantian notions of mother wit, the soul (*Geist*) as animating principle of the mind, the aesthetic idea, the creative imagination, and genius, and, on the other hand, the primary symbolic and dynamic arrangement of the *maternofoetal* exchange of the pregnant womb. Again, Kristeva's notion of the *chora* constitutes an important junction in this theorizing, as I discuss it elsewhere, together with my reading of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique*. Not only does this conceptual cluster imply that the *je ne sais quoi*, the *savoir faire* without knowing how, of artistic creation (genius), is modeled on the "innate productive faculty" of the female body – through which every woman-

becoming-mother replays in reverse, unwittingly but as embodied knowledge, the encounter with their own mother, the animating and castrating (decidual) mother wit. It is also strongly indicated – as Deleuze makes clear through his description of the male masochist aesthete’s pursuit of the maternal phallus – that what the Romantic male artist/genius seeks is the experience of the “becoming woman,” a pregnant and birthing woman, who lives the embodied reenactment of the mystery and miracle of creation, the foundation of “life,” the splitting of time. Cocteau’s stunning poem “L’Ange Heurtebise” testifies to this desire. And here I stop, mindful that transcendental investigation has no end.

Jegyzetek

1. The emphasis on “immediate” is mine. I believe that the immediacy of the feeling of something essential is what is at stake in Kant’s transcendental aesthetic experience.
2. Deleuze confirms my argument about the problematic use of the penis in a phallic function: “Before the opposition between the sexes, determined by the possession or lack of the penis, there is the ‘question’ of the phallus which determined the differential position of sexed characters in each series.” See *Difference and Repetition*, 107.
3. The word “placenta” means “flat cake” and is derived from the Greek “plax,” meaning “anything flat,” as well as from the stem “plak-” for “extended form of base,” which is related to “plane.” Moreover, the word “to please” comes from the Latin *placere* “to be acceptable, be liked, be approved,” and is related to *placare* “to soothe, quiet,” from PIE base **p(e)lag-* “to smooth, make even” (cf. Gk. *plax*, gen. *plakos*, “level surface,” *plakoeis* “flat”).
4. It is Jean-Luis Baudry who describes the dream screen in these terms (310).
5. The reflexive, dual or split subjectivity of poststructuralist discourses bears strong kinship with Kant’s phenomenal-noumenal subject-object and Freud’s split ego, besides Lacan’s “I is another” and Foucault’s “empirico-transcendental doublet. For Foucault’s terms “empirico-transcendental doublet” see, for example, Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 44.
6. Adorno stresses the importance of Kant’s insight that aesthetic pleasure is “disinterested.” “Kant was the first to achieve the insight, never since forgotten, that aesthetic comportment is free from immediate desire; he snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it.” *Aesthetic Theory*, 10.
7. In his description of the phallic oral mother of the steppe, Deleuze draws on the image of this earth mother figure provided by Freud in “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” in agreement with many themes from mythology and folklore.
8. Adorno insightfully notes that the taboo on art, through which Kant forbids that one take an “animalistic stance toward the object, that is that one dominate it by physically devouring it,” in fact carries an opposite meaning, since “the power of the taboo corresponds to the power that it prohibits.” Thus, Adorno continues, “There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, of what it repulses. If it is more than mere indifference, the Kantian ‘without interest’ must be shadowed by the wildest interest.” *Aesthetic Theory*, 11.
9. In a fascinating argument, Freud observes that we have no proof for the existence of “an instinct for perfection at work in human beings, which has brought them to their present level of higher intellectual achievement and ethical sublimation.” Freud believes that all symbolic activity is the result of instinctual repression, and that the repressed instinct will never stop to strive for complete satisfaction, which is a

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