

Trauma and transcriptum: towards a feminist methodology for the analysis of narratives of trauma

Trauma y transcriptum: hacia una metodología feminista para el análisis de las narrativas del trauma

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Resumen: Este artículo tiene un doble objetivo: ahondar en los conceptos psicoanalíticos de trauma y transcriptum, este último acuñado por Bracha Ettinger, a fin de abrir las puertas hacia una metodología de análisis de los transcripta literarios. El artículo está estructurado en dos partes. En la primera se revisan textos freudianos y lacanianos para ofrecer una definición de trauma y puntos relacionados tales como latencia, retorno de lo reprimido, repetición y encuentro. En la segunda parte, analizaré cómo las premisas freudianas y lacanianas se reelaboran en la teoría de Ettinger y propondré que el término trauma en cierto sentido es equivalente a lo que ella llama "memoria del olvido", asimismo analizaré cómo éste se inserta en su entendimiento del transcriptum. A manera de conclusión enunciaré de qué forma podemos aplicar más puntualmente el concepto transcriptum al análisis de textos literarios.

Palabras clave: trauma, repetición, latencia, transcriptum, matrixial.

Abstract: The objective of this article is twofold: to deepen into the psychoanalytical concepts of trauma and transcriptum (a term coined by Bracha Ettinger), in order to trace a methodology for the analysis of literary transcripta. The article is structured in two parts. In the first one, there is a revision of Freudian and Lacanian texts, offering a definition of trauma and related concepts such as latency, return of the repressed, repetition compulsion and encounter. In the second part, there is an analysis of how Freudian and Lacanian premises are reframed in Ettinger's theory, proposing that, to a certain extent, the term trauma is equal to what she calls "memory of oblivion", and that such memory is crucial for our understanding of the transcriptum. The conclusion describes how we can use the theory of transcriptum for the analysis of literary texts.

Keywords: trauma, repetition, latency, transcriptum, matrixial.

1. INTRODUCTION

From a Freudian and Lacanian perspective, trauma and traumatic situations have been positioned in the spheres of the incommunicable and the unknowable. On the one hand, the person is unable to fully understand the experience they have undergone. On the other hand, given that thought depends on language, the experience is often unaccountable; there is an impossibility of speaking out.

Despite these obstacles, art has been a fruitful realm for reflecting upon traumatic events. Artworks of all kinds have been created after the great magnicides of the second half of the XXth century, such as Latin-American dictatorships, the Rwandan genocide, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombs. As feminist psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger (2002) mentions: “the world carries [...] enormous traumatic weight, and we are unknowingly living it through its massive transitive effects on us. Transtextual writing and transcribed visual art bring transmissive posttraumatic effect into the surface of culture and produce images and words that might absorb and diffract it” (p. 267). In this way, the painter overhauls the blind spots of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and coins the concept *transcriptum*. This one designates a special kind of artwork that, being placed beside the symbolic and the imaginary, can convey a traumatic experience.

Ettinger’s proposal has the advantage of being intrinsically psychoanalytic and aesthetic, avoiding what Luciano Luteran (2010) denominates “loss of applied psychoanalysis,” (p. 20) i.e. a misuse of Freudian and Lacanian jargon to the analysis of artworks, dismissing the fact that both psychoanalysts neither had a special interest in art nor forged properly an Aesthetics (p. 20). Another advantage is that her feminist theory proposes to think of the womb as a place where thresholds communicating traumatic experience can be weaved —unlike traditional psychoanalysis, which explains trauma in relation to the phallic split.

Notwithstanding these advantages, using Ettinger’s theory as a benchmark has its limits. Despite the significant role of trauma in her thought and artwork, Ettinger does not offer a straightforward definition of this concept from her feminist perspective. In addition, although she has emphasised that “*painting* stands as a metaphore [sic] for an artistic operation” and that “*tableau* [...] is] a metaphor for other art objects, realizations or events as well,” (1999, p. 23; italics and bolds in the original), her examples are centred in pictorial art. These two factors might lead to a misapplication of the theory of *transcriptum* to the analysis of other artistic productions.

Specifically speaking about narratives of trauma, or what we may call literary *transcripta*, the challenge also arises by the antinomy of the terms. Ettinger has done some psychoanalytical approaches to Sylvia Plath’s, Marguerite Duras’ and Alejandra Pizarnik’s texts, nonetheless while *transcriptum* is placed beside the symbolic (language) and the imaginary (image), literature (from Latin *littera*, letter) is in essence language, and actually a language that may evoke images in

the reader. It is certainly NOT a rational and denotative language. Based on Roland Barthes one can assert that it is a translinguistic one, meaning that the Cartesian cogito has little dominance over the text, that the writer and reader play with language, and that there is a separation from the signifier logic. Nonetheless it would be important to point out how these characteristics are related to those of *transcryptum*.

In this sense, the purpose of this article is to trace a definition of trauma in order to shed light on the features of *transcryptum* and the methodological analysis of literary *transcrypta*. The article is structured in two parts. In the first one, I turn to Freud and Lacan in order to offer an extended (though not exhaustive) definition of trauma. In the second part, I will analyse how Freudian and Lacanian premises are reframed in Ettinger's theory. I will propose that trauma is equivalent to what she calls "memory of oblivion," and I will deepen into the characteristics of *transcryptum*. As part of my conclusion, I will sketch how we can apply the term *transcryptum* to the analysis of literary texts.

2. FREUD AND LACAN: TRAUMA AS UNKNOWABLE AND UNCONVEYABLE

Within a Freudian perspective, Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) explain that trauma comes from the Greek term τραῦμα, wound, and that it has been transposed from the medical realm to the psychoanalytic one in order to designate "**An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation**" (p. 465; bolds in the original, italics mine). This definition reveals the two poles of the word: the cause and the effect. On one extreme, there is the event that causes the wound; on the other extreme (marked with italics), the wound itself. Hence, Fractman (2005) underlines the difference between attribute and object. The former is the traumatic, and it is an adjective that identifies the cause of the wound outside the apparatus; the latter is properly trauma and it designates a harm in the psychical apparatus (p. 213).

This distinction is pertinent given the Freudian conception of the psychical energy. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010), Freud offers the following schematic picture of the psychical apparatus, to which I have added the terms traumatic and trauma:

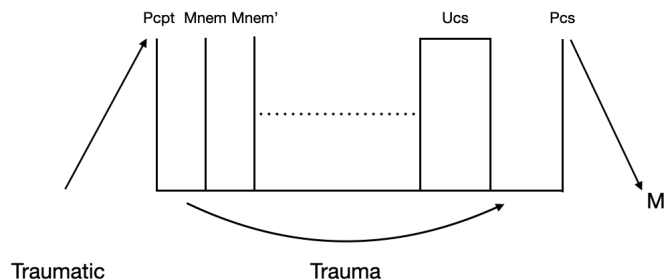


Fig. 1. Freud's schematic picture of the psychical apparatus in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010, p. 543).

In the left corner, there is the perception (Pcpt), “which is without the capacity to retain modifications and is thus without memory, that provides our consciousness with the whole multiplicity of sensory qualities” (p. 541). In the centre, there are memory-traces (Mnem) —which are the marks remaining from the received perceptions and are opposed to consciousness—; and the unconscious (Ucs). In the right corner there is the pre-conscious (Pcs) —which indicates “that the excitatory processes occurring in it can enter consciousness without further impediment” (p. 542) —; and a motor end (M). As it can be observed, in this schematic picture there is an outside, where the traumatic might be placed; and an inside, where transits a perception that might latter become a trauma and from where one deals with the traumatic.

Despite Freud's indistinctive use of trauma as cause and effect, this outline is useful for understanding Freud when he actually makes the difference. In a 1916 lecture, he observes that “The traumatic experience is one which, in a very short space of time, is able to increase the strength of a given stimulus so enormously that its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means” (1920, p. 288). Freud offers a similar definition in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961): “We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (p. 23).

In this last text, Freud compares the psychical apparatus with a vesicle whose surface has the function to protect the internal substance from external stimuli. Nonetheless, Freud observes that some events can harm the psychical apparatus causing economic disturbances. The main characteristic of such external stimuli is their connection to fright and death peril. The first one is defined by Freud as “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise” (p. 6). Therefore the harm that the apparatus suffers does not depend on the magnitude of the strike as much as on the preparedness of the system (p. 26). In other words, it is not necessary that the person runs into death peril to speak about a traumatic situation, however, in these cases it is almost impossible for the apparatus to remain unharmed.

Considering that a traumatic situation depends more on its unexpected feature rather than on its intensity, it is possible to analyse the characteristics of the wound, i.e. trauma itself. Caruth (1996) observes that in Freudian texts “trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not *fully grasped* as they occur, but *return later* in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other *repetitive phenomena*” (p. 383; italics mine). There are then three main characteristics: incomprehension, latency, and repetition.

A determinate situation causes a wound because the system was not ready to comprehend it, nonetheless this does not entail that it has not been received. Reprising Freud’s schematic picture, there is a perception—traumatic situation—that enters the unprepared psychical apparatus and, therefore, it cannot reach the extreme of consciousness; nevertheless there are memory-traces (Freud, 2010, p. 542). In this sense, for Freud there is always a sort of memory. Actually in *Moses and monotheism* (1939), he states: “The forgotten material is not extinguished, only ‘repressed’; its traces are extant in the memory in their original freshness, but they are isolated by ‘counter-cathexes’” (p. 152). Thus, from this perspective, memory is not equivalent to consciousness. In fact, memory is the reason of the repetition of traumatic situations.

Laplanche (2015) explains that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud faces the following problematic: in accidents and war neuroses, the dreams do not have the function conferred in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, they neither erase the unpleasure nor replace it with wish fulfillment; instead they unceasingly and with great precision repeat the unpleasant traumatic event (p. 14). Being at stake the primacy of the pleasure principle, Freud wonders if there is anything beyond, and overhauls the passage of the wooden reel. Freud (1961) mentions that his 18-month-old grandson, Ernst, did not cry when his mother left him for a few hours but that he instead had the habit of throwing a reel uttering “o-o-o-o,” and pulling it back hailing “da.” The latter in German means “there,” and Freud interprets the uttering as standing for the German word “fort” (gone) (p. 8-9). He also observes that the game compensated the mother’s departure; with the repeated action the kid dominated the situation, thus going from passive to active. Freud concludes that there is a “compulsion to repeat— something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides.” (p. 17)

In this sense, the objective of the repetition compulsion is to dominate the stimuli. If in a first stage the psychical apparatus was not ready, in a second (third, fourth...) stage, with the repetitive behaviour, it aims to create a protection. It is worth mentioning that it is an effort to comprehend the event, to move it to the right corner of Freud’s schematic picture. In addition, given that what was perceived during the traumatic situation remains as a memory-trace, the effect is not always immediate, one comes back to it afterwards (*nachträglich*). The period

between the experience of the traumatic situation and the tendency to repeat is called latency.

One can find a synthesis of the aforementioned terms in *Moses and monotheism* (1939), where Freud states: “Early trauma—Defence—Latency—Outbreak of the Neurosis—*Partial* return of the repressed material: this was the formula we drew up for the development of a neurosis.” (p. 129; italics mine) What is added in this summary is the *form* of the repetition: the memory-trace flows partially towards consciousness, i.e. it does not arrive intact. In Freud’s words: “In none of the [...] cases does the material that had been repressed succeed in reaching consciousness unimpeded or without change. It must always undergo distortions.” (p. 153) In addition, he identifies a characteristic of compulsiveness which overpowers logical thinking (p. 117) and an independence of the external world for it is a “state within the state” (p. 123).

This form of the repetition is attuned with the temporal characteristic mentioned in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), where Freud states: “We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’” (p. 22). This means that they are not temporally ordered, that time does not alter them at all, and that they do not fit in time representation (p. 22).

In this sense, Caruth (1996) observes that trauma “is in fact a break in the mind experience of time.” (p. 260) This break is inevitably related with the incapacity of comprehension, evidencing that a traumatic situation depends less on the impact than on the surprise factor. Caruth goes on asserting that “The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known” (p. 263). However, it is also important to notice that despite this partial factor, Freud (1939) denies complete falseness to the narration of a traumatic situation: “It has long been recognized that delusions contain a piece of forgotten truth, which had at its return to put up with being distorted and misunderstood” (p. 137).

After tracing the path of trauma and some characteristics of its form, a question emerges: what happens with traumatic dreams that arise little after the traumatic situation, and whose content is not always distorted? To the first point, one can answer with Caruth (1996) that “the experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist [...] in an inherent latency within the experience itself.” (p. 82) Rather than being the period between perception and repetition, latency in trauma is what remains suspended between perception and consciousness, between time and timelessness. This leads us to the second part of the question: the undistorted repetitions, for example, when the dream repeats the previous experienced event. It is here where the distinction between memory and consciousness becomes useful. Even if the dream recalls what the person endured in real life, there is something latent that they cannot deal with, something that they cannot push to consciousness and that remains as a memory-trace.

In his book *L'après coup* (2006), Laplanche notices that for Freud it is always a matter of events registered in the category of representation (*représentation - Vorstellung*): that which is represented (*se représente - sich vorstellen*) by the subject after a material event (p. 165-166). For Laplanche, the notion of representation is important for it underlines the need of a *traductive* model (*à traduire*) of the deferred action (p. 169). In this sense, dreams and traumatic visions are translations of something else, they point out to a latent knowledge which has not been entirely recalled.

On the one hand, such *traductive* model emphasises the transit between the dyad perception-consciousness; on the other hand, it reaffirms the linguistic feature that Freud attributed to dreams when stating that they “are submitted under the editorship of waking life” (2010, p. 519). Thus the linguistic oneiric vision might be opposed to the non-linguistic element which vainly claims for translation: trauma. Indeed, the apparent coincidence between dream and underwent event points out that something has been left out of the figuration and language of dream. Therefore, perhaps the term “distortions” is unprecise, instead one may describe them as “something” with no-figuration, no-location and, consequently, no-language.

This might be reinforced with Freud’s and Lacan’s analysis of the dream of the burning child. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010), Freud refers:

A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it [...]. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (p. 513-514; italics in the original)

With this case, Freud comes to the following statements. The first one: dreams are wish fulfillment; the kid is alive in the dream because such is the father’s wish. The second one: despite wish fulfillment, the father woke up because of the glare of light; this led the man to “the conclusion which he would have arrived at if he had been awake” (p. 514) and pulled him back to consciousness. However, the question remains: if the father’s wish was fulfilled, why did he wake up? Why did the dream not perpetuate the wish? Why wasn’t the kid’s life prolonged and, instead, the father was forced to see his dead child once again?

As mentioned before, Freud found the answer in his “repetition compulsion.” Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that the separation from his scheme—early trauma, defence, latency, outbreak of the neurosis, partial return of the repressed material—was not sufficiently explained. There is a period of a few hours between the child’s death and the dream and, perhaps more importantly, the dream points out an otherwise conscious conclusion. In this regard, Freud’s schematic picture referred at the beginning could also be questioned for if there is a coincidence between perception and consciousness, why is there repetition compulsion at all? Following Caruth, I have pointed out that these cases suggest the inherency of latency to the experience itself and the impossibility of pushing *something* to consciousness; but Lacan goes a step further by asking: what “something” is repeated?

In his “Tuché and Automaton” (1998), Lacan sketches the answer with a question: “How can the dream, the bearer of the subject’s desire, produce that which makes the trauma emerge repeatedly—if not its very face, at least the screen that shows us that it is still there *behind*?” (p. 55; italics mine) For Lacan, the reappearance of trauma is a screen which points out not only something else, but somewhere else. Such place cannot be further for it would be located in a point previous to perception or in the place of consciousness, and in either case, repetition compulsion could not be possible. Therefore Lacan explains that the cause of awakening is in “another locality, another space, another scene, *the between perception and consciousness*” (p. 56; italics in the original).

In order to support his argument, Lacan recalls a dream of his own, similar to the one referred by Freud: “The other day, I was awoken from a short nap by knocking at my door just before I actually awoke. With this impatient knocking I had *already* formed a dream, a dream that manifested to me something other than this knocking [a perception]” (p. 56; italics mine). Consequently, perception is not what awakens, it is rather the material to elaborate the dream—what awakens must be elsewhere. The rupture is not signalled by the glare of light, but by the question “don’t you see I’m burning?” Lacan asserts that “This is certainly what brings us to recognizing in this detached sentence from the dream of the grief-stricken father the counterpart of what will be, once he is awake, his consciousness, and to ask ourselves what is the correlative, in the dream, of the representation.” (p. 59), i.e. to question what is behind the screen, what causes the awakening.

Soler (2010) observes that for Lacan such other space, which is between perception and consciousness, is the Real (p. 84). This would explain Lacan’s definition of trauma: a failed encounter with the Real (p. 78). A simple phrase that entails complex questions: according to what it is failed?, where does that encounter take place? Soler notices that the possibility of defining trauma as encounter depends on the acknowledgement of a “program of the unexpected” in the unconscious. This is understood in two senses: firstly, the unexpected is already programmed within it; secondly, there is a program to foresee the

unexpected (p. 77). For this reason, if the program of the dream (the program of the unconscious) is a wish fulfillment, one wakes up because such program was interrupted. Trauma is then a failed encounter because the very program has no tools to face the unexpected. The wish to perpetuate the child's life fails pointing out elsewhere. This would also explain the repetition in/of traumatic dreams. As Freud stated, repetition compulsion is a defence mechanism, traumatic dreams aim to comprehend what was perceived but one wakes up because there is something that remains uncomprehended.

Indeed, Lacan (1998) states that “The real is beyond [...] the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle” (p. 53-54). This means that the Real is on the other side of the screen. According to Soler (2010), the fact that the Real is behind of what is seen in the dream and we, at the same time, wake up, shores up two points. The first one is that the Real escapes thought and it is outside the Symbolic. The second one is that we might conceive trauma as an apparition of the Real that fractures the Symbolic (p. 82-88).

Nonetheless a clarification might be addressed: the Real is not plainly outside the Symbolic, but behind the Symbolic which is located between perception and consciousness. In his Seminar, Lacan (1998) asserts: “The real has to be sought beyond the dream—in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative” (p. 60). The English translation dismisses Lacan's (1973) last phrase, but it is important to underline that he coins the term “*tenant-lieu*” to designate this “place”. Therefore, as suggested before, in the case of trauma, it is more precise to speak about non-figuration, non-location and non-language. The dream-screen does not show the Real, but the signs. Reprising Freud's schematic picture:

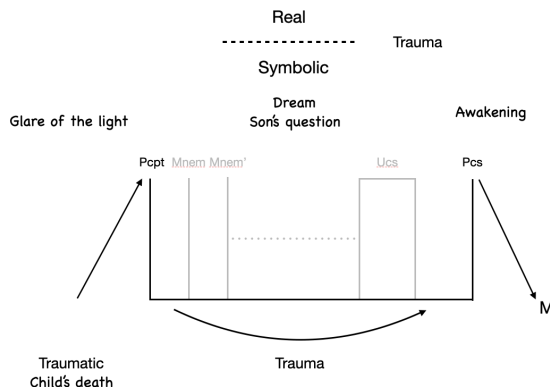


Fig. 2. The location of the Real based on Freud's schematic picture and Lacan's analysis of the dream of the burning child.

Trauma properly underscores the (failed) encounter with the Real which occurs from the Symbolic. Lacan (1998) traces this place turning to the passage of the wooden reel. For him “The activity as a whole symbolizes repetition [...] of the mother’s departure” (pp. 62-63), and it is a game “whose aim, in its alternation, is simply that of being the *fort* of a *da*, and the *da* of a *fort*. It is aimed at what, essentially, is not there, qua represented—for it is the game itself that is the *Repräsentanz* of the *Vorstellung*.” (63; italics in the original) Thus, Lacan parallels the role of the dream to that of the game: both are on the side of representation, of the Symbolic, while the Real is behind. The “place” of trauma is therefore halfway between *fort* and *da*. It is an alternating, fluctuating and unfixed “place”. Lacan’s (1998) conception of the time of trauma is not far from Freud’s one. He deems his *tenant-lieu* as deprived from time: “The primary process [...] must, once again, be apprehended in its experience of rupture, between perception and consciousness, in that *nontemporal locus* [in French: *lieu intemporel*]” (p. 56; italics mine).

Precisely due to its non-temporal locus, non-figurative, and non-linguistic features, trauma also implies a communicative and cognitive impossibility—how can we get to know something which cannot be delimited? One phrase can break the Symbolic waking the dreamer up, but the phrase itself is not the Real, it is the sign of a lack. One image might be exactly repeated in the Symbolic, nonetheless trauma remains a failed encounter with the Real or, combining Freud’s and Lacan’s proposals, a failed translation of the Real.

Hitherto I have signalled the characteristics of trauma, its relation to the Real and that, in terms of Lacan, trauma repeats itself. Nevertheless still some questions ought to be answered: *what* exactly does trauma repeat?, *what* does *itself* mean?, *why* is it repeated? It would be misleading to answer that the Real is repeated due to the pleasure principle for, as Freud states, repetition compulsion is a defence mechanism which aims to annulate the surprise factor. Indeed, with an ethical perspective, Caruth (1996) notices that trauma underscores the wish of consciousness to know: “The dream of the burning child does not simple represent [...] the wish—fulfillment of a single father, tired and wishing to see his child alive once again; but, more profoundly and more enigmatically, the wish fulfillment of consciousness itself” (p. 407).

If the entrance of trauma into the psychical apparatus is marked by a cognitive impossibility (latency), what is at stake is—maybe not the wish but at least—the possibility of knowing. Nevertheless such possibility should not be pursued through consciousness for, as Freud states, repetition depends on memory and, as Lacan asserts, trauma cannot be understood within the Symbolic, which is in turn located between perception and consciousness. In this regard, perhaps repetition compulsion comes from memory, and perhaps in certain conditions, trauma, instead of being a failed encounter or a failed translation, could be conveyable. This is exactly Bracha Ettinger’s feminist and psychoanalytical proposal.

3. BRACHA ETTINGER: TRAUMA AS KNOWABLE AND CONVEYABLE

In his foreword of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Laplanche (2015) underlines the importance of the German term *jenseits* (translated as beyond) for it does not necessarily point out to the future, but to something that could be placed on the other side or even on this side (p. 13). In this perspective, the book is the result of an evaluation, rather than of an evolution. Paralleling Freud's gauge of the repetition compulsion beyond [*jenseits*] the pleasure principle, Ettinger gauges Freud's and Lacan's theories, positioning her own proposal *jenseits* theirs. Ettinger does not radically step away from Freud or Lacan, instead she finds their blind spots in order to make an allegation of the knowability and conveyance of trauma.

Ettinger centres her attention not on the characteristics of trauma (in fact she eschews a straightforward definition of this term) but on the form that we commonly approach it, namely a psychoanalytic logic which is based on the phallic signifier, operates through the castration mechanism (split and lack), and leads to an Oedipal subjectivizing model. The logic of lack follows an "on / off" scheme: having is completely opposed to not having, in the same way as being is completely opposed to not being. A mechanism operating under dyads conformed by excluding elements, hampers the comprehension of trauma for *there cannot be what is lacking*. In other words, that which lacks language, image (figuration), time and a fixed space cannot enter the realm of language, image or space. Ettinger parts ways with other critics such as Irigaray and Deleuze whose pre-Oedipal and anti-Oedipal models depend on the Oedipus: the first one to precede it; the second one to deny it. Instead, Ettinger accepts the Oedipal model, but goes beyond it: she locates her theory in a more originary point, in another place where trauma might be knowable and conveyable: the matrixial borderspace.

In this section, I will explain how Ettinger weaves Freud's and Lacan's gulfs opening such borderspace and how from this spot, a *transcryptum*, namely an artwork which conveys trauma, may come to light. In this process, I will myself weave a possible definition of trauma from an Ettinger's side. Before continuing, I would like to address a clarification on the sources: I used two versions of the article "Transcryptum," the one from 2002 compiled in *Topologies of Trauma*, and the one from 2006 compiled in *The Matrixial Borderspace*.

Analysing Lacan's texts, Ettinger observes that "from the outset the phallus governs [...] all three spheres of the psyche: it is symbolic, it is imaginary, it is even *between* the Symbolic and the Imaginary; and it has a correlate in the male Real —the penis" (2006, p. 100; italics in the original). Furthermore, she also underlines the fact that, operating under the castration mechanism, "the symbolic organization of psychic experience is fatally linked [...] to the concept of lack" (2002, p. 252). This would explain why —from a Lacanian and even Freudian benchmark— trauma is a failed encounter or a repetition that cannot dominate the stimulus. The mechanism is operatively insufficient when approximating the

limit that *joins* the Symbolic with the Real because it is programmed under the lack principle. Nonetheless, Ettinger observes that in his last seminars Lacan accepts that there can be knowledge in the Real (2006, p. 160). This means that trauma itself is not unknowable —as stated with Caruth, it points out something that claims knowledge—, instead the mechanism has a failure which prevents us from knowing that which is non-linguistic, non-figurative, timeless and alternating; it prevents us from accessing the Real or, speaking in Freudian terms, what is inscribed as memory-traces.

If the castration mechanism is operatively insufficient between the Real and the Symbolic, one should precisely look at this margin, where in fact trauma has been placed. Thus, Ettinger (2016) challenges the meaning of margin as limit. She turns to its Jewish translation *Ketz*, which has its roots in *Katze*, a term that refers a “borderline as an open limit, an edge” (p. 158). The margin turns to be a space, a Subsymbolic borderspace which is beyond the phallus scope and which is organised by an originary referent: the womb.

This referent is carefully retrieved from Freud’s lacunae. As Ettinger specialist Griselda Pollock (2004) observes: “Freud acknowledged in his germinal essay, ‘The Uncanny’, [... a] *Muttersleibphantasien*, translated with his approval as ‘inter-uterine phantasies’. He thus recognized the possibility of other tracks than castration and the phallus as foundations of human subjectivity and its unconscious” (p. 29; italics in the original). Ettinger centres her theory in late prenatal stages, intrauterine dynamics and pregnancy, proposing a different and phallus free referent: the matrix. In Latin this term means womb but as Pollock (2004) explains “used abstractly, it means a grid or frame” (p. 34).

Given that in his last seminars Lacan proposed to envision the psychical realms as a braid, the matrixial space is also conceived as a net. The following image intertwines Freudian-Lacanian schematic figure with Pollock’s one:

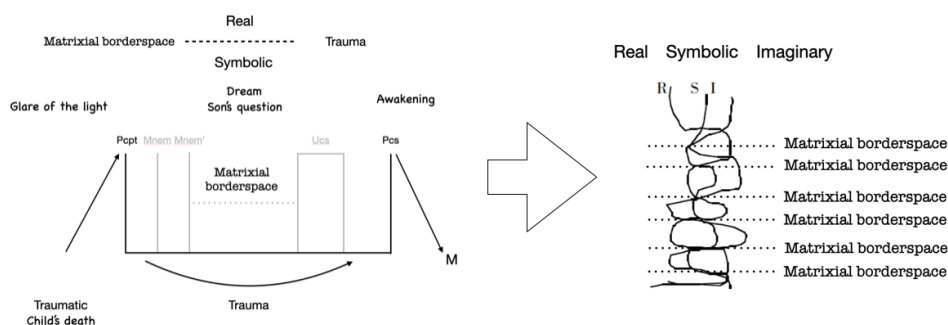


Fig. 3. On the left, the location of Ettinger’s borderspace based on Freud’s schematic picture. On the right, the location of Ettinger’s borderspace based on Pollock’s schematic picture (2004, p. 41).

It is certainly a small space, but here the phallus is not a referent and the castration mechanism does not operate. In the matrixial space the model of

subjectivation reprises what happened within the maternal womb: “The *becoming*-mother (the mother-to-be) and the becoming subject (baby-to-be) engender an alliance and turn into partial-subjects— (*I(s)* and *non-I(s)*) of the same matrixial time and space.” (2006, p. 66) Here it is not a question of having or not having the penis, for every single human experiences the womb. In addition, subjectivity does not depend on the absence or objectivation of one of the members (generally the mother), but both of them are essential. The woman is becoming mother inasmuch the baby-to-be co-inhabits her, in turn the baby-to-be will actually become a baby inasmuch the mother hosts him/her. The becoming leads Ettinger to understand subjectivity as partial, while the different roles promote the introduction of the term non-I. From the future mother’s perspective, the baby is a non-I; from the future baby’s perspective the mother is a non-I. In this sense, subjectivity is an encounter “where an-other is not an absolute separate Other” (2006, p. 144) and where, albeit essential, both members are different.

Furthermore, Ettinger explains that in the matrixial borderspace there is a transubjectivity. Ettinger’s model is located in a prenatal stage, but it is beyond [*jenseits*] the Oedipus. Even after the Oedipal stage, the matrixial model of subjectivation transits the borderspace where the phallus and the castration complex fail but where trauma shores up knowledge. Therefore, another mechanism should be operating: the *metramorphosis*.

The word *metramorphosis* comes from the Latin root *metra*, which is related with the word womb (Pollock, 2013, p. 30). *Metramorphosis* is a mechanism based in the inevitable and necessary encounter between the mother-to-be and the baby-to-be. In this sense, its function is to join; to weave relations and promote the transit of information without merging or fusing the partial subjects. In Ettinger’s words: “matrixial awareness engenders a disturbing desire for jointness *with* a foreign world, the unknown other, the uncognized [...], a stranger who by definition is never total stranger because it is unthinkingly known and traumatically accessed” (2006, p. 147; italics in the original). These functions enable then to conceive a Subsymbolic knowledge different from the signifier-signified one (castration mechanism) and, more precisely, a Subsymbolic knowledge of trauma.

Besides inevitable and necessary, the matrixial encounter is also traumatic. It is painful to accept that in order to affirm the existence of the I, it is necessary to negate its totality accepting a non-I. The traumatic encounter experienced in the womb, where “the *non-I* is unknown to the *I* (or rather uncognized: known by a noncognitive process)” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 64), offers a model to know posterior traumatic situations not only of one’s own, but of other people. Consequently, in the postnatal stage, even if most of the time our thought is ruled by the phallic signifier and the mechanism operating in the Symbolic-Real-Imaginary braid, there are some occasions when *metramorphosis* “infiltrate[s] just into the nonconscious margins of the Symbolic to enable the transformation to transgress the borders of the individual subject, and to establish inter-psyche designed

communication.” (Ettinger, 2016, p. 156) The limit is turned into a borderspace and information is weaved through the Subsymbolic net. In the end, the metamorphic function “is a swerve, intertwined in borderlinking, in plaiting and interweaving of borderlines” (Ettinger, 2016, p. 157).

In addition to these functions, in the case of the knowledge of trauma, another important factor is that of memory: “the oblivion that plays a role here [in the matrix] is double-edged. It is direct toward a future where that part of it that will be transformed will become a memory — the memory of that which was neither repressed nor forgotten.” (2006, p. 155) As Freud proposed, perhaps dismissing its implications, beyond consciousness there are memory traces. It is true that oblivion is intrinsic to memory (Palmberger, 2006, p. 527), but within a matrixial model it is possible to invert the phrase affirming that memory is intrinsic to oblivion. Indeed, as Caruth pointed out, latency is intrinsic to traumatic experience: a certain knowledge is suspended between perception and consciousness, between time and timelessness, and now we can add between memory and oblivion.

For Ettinger the information is not Subsymbolically repressed. It is *transcribed* in a place she calls —based in Torok and Abraham— “intrapyschic crypt”, which in Greek means hidden place and is a result of a traumatic loss. In this sense, the term trans-cryption (also written as trans-cription) is crucial to Ettinger’s theory. On the one hand, it includes the prefix “trans”, which alludes to the transit in *metamorphosis* and subjectivity; on the other hand, it incorporates the word crypt.

At this point it is where I find an opportunity to extract a possible definition of trauma from a matrixial perspective. In a crochet of the dyad memory-oblivion, Ettinger describes the “trans-cription as a inoubliable memory of oblivion” (1999, p. 18), a concept which she elaborates following Lyotard’s “L’anamnèse”. If, as I have been arguing, trauma is a mark of latent knowledge, then from a matrixial perspective trauma could be defined exactly as: the memory of oblivion. Even if such phrase may appear in other authors, to link it to the notion of trauma, of wound, opens new epistemological pathways. This conception does not dismiss Lacan’s encounter or Freud’s memory traces, for in both cases they involve knowledge, but it is beyond them. Instead of focusing on what is lacking to language, it emphasises the possibility of remembering and knowing in a Subsymbolic way. From the matrixial perspective, trauma is a transcribed encounter, a remembered oblivion.

This definition also goes hand in hand with Pollock’s and Butler’s references of trauma in Ettinger’s theory. The former distinguishes a structural trauma (birth, weaning, and loss of the mother) which corresponds to Lacan’s split (2004, p. 27), and a historical trauma which corresponds to the traumatic situation (2004, p. 12). The latter states that “we are not speaking only of the loss of childhood, or the loss of a maternal connection that the child must undergo, but also of an enigmatic loss that is communicated from the mother to the child.” (2015, p. 96)

In either a prenatal or postnatal stage, there can be a memory of an event that cannot be comprehended in the Symbolic or Imaginary Realms and, therefore, it is believed to be forgotten.

With a conception of trauma linked to memory, it is possible to continue overhauling the process of transcription. Given the process of trans-subjectivity and *metamorphosis*, the information of the crypt can be transferred from a partial subject to another partial subject. In turn, in the receiving partial subject a crypt is formed, and this one can also be transferred to another partial subject and so on (Ettinger, 2002, 252-255). Ettinger calls this process “cross-cryption” and describes it as “a transcription that becomes possible when coaffective tracing transgresses the boundaries of the individual Psyche” (2006, p. 167).

In this process the figure of the *wit(h)ness without event* emerges. Beyond Freud’s and Lacan’s scopic gaze, Ettinger proposes another kind of “gaze.” The baby-to-be is a witness to an event that s/he has not properly seen, however, in her/his psyche a crypt with such information is formed. Thus s/he is a *wit(h)ness without event*. The “h” is emphasised with the parenthesis for the event is experienced in the womb, thus *with* the mother. In the matrixial space the partial subject is always witness with another partial subject, and what is “seen” or “perceived” is not a re-presentation (signifier-signified) of the event, namely it does not have the *trductive* function of the dream or the screen, instead it is a trans-cryption which can only be comprehended in the Subsymbolic realm. Despite the model offered by the matrix, one question comes forward: in the postnatal stage, reigned mostly by the phallus, how can we access the Subsymbolic realm, by which means the information of a crypt is transcribed from one partial-subject to another?

Freud modestly opened a door in his *Moses and monotheism* (1939) when he described his book as a “historical novel” excusing the positivist scientific parameters of the time. Hence, Ettinger also finds a pathway in art. According to her, in our actual society, art can open the limits of culture being a threshold to convey (an own or other’s) trauma and to receive traumatic information. Beyond the phallic model, Ettinger proposes a model where “subsymbolic tunings [instead of signifiers] that do not function on the level of distinct units of signification create meanings that open up the boundaries of culture” (2006, p. 89). The tuning recalls also the transit—the weaving—, and it is different from the sight sense. In this way, during the process of creation and aesthetic experience, the artist and the spectator can momentarily move a step beside the Oedipal subjectivation, turning into a *wit(h)ness without event* and propelling “a metamorphic process of intersection and interchange [that] embraces and discharges unthought subknowledge from the knotted Real into meaningful co-inscription in artwork” (2006, p. 103).

Not all artworks are created by a metamorphic mechanism, but if they are, they are known as *transcryptum*. Obviously, this concept alludes to trans-subjectivity, trans-scription, and crypt—the place of trauma, the place of the

memory of oblivion. Echoing Barthes conception of art as a translinguistic text, for Ettinger “a crypt, considered the ‘nonsymbolizable’ par excellence, [...] is symbolized in the transtextuality of the transcriptum.” (2006, p. 168) Language (the Symbolic) and image (the Imaginary) may be primordial in a postnatal stage, nonetheless, being originary, the matrixial sphere remains and its mechanism may operate within the borderspace of the Subsymbolic net.

Ettinger (2002) defines *transcriptum* as follows: “the art object, operation, or procedure that incarnates trans-cryption of trauma and cross-inscriptions of its traces, where the artwork’s working-trough of traumatic amnesia is a transcriptomnesia: the lifting of the world’s cryptomnesia (‘hidden memory’ in Latin) from an outside with-in” (p. 256). The *transcriptum* dismantles the dyad subject-object, for it is not an object at the service of a creator or an spectator, but an encounter of (at least) two *wit(h)nesses without event*. Furthermore, since the crypt remains isolated from the phallic knowledge but, at the same time, is inside the psyche making its apparitions, the borderspace in art might be described as an “outside with-in.” Such spatial conception is better explained through the prenatal matrixial model: from the baby-to-be’s perspective, the mother is outside; whilst from the mother’s perspective the baby is inside. This leads us to develop further characteristics of the matrixial time and space.

In a revision of Ettinger’s theory in relation to Freudian and Lacanian proposals, Rowley (1999) observes that “the founding text for thinking the relationship between repetition [therefore trauma] and art making in a psychoanalytic context is, famously, Freud’s interpretation of the play of his grandson, Ernst.” (p. 85) As mentioned before, thinking in terms of a split between the presence and absence of the object, impedes us to apprehend the alternating locus of trauma. Thus Ettinger (2006) also offers her own interpretation of the aforementioned game: “Freud’s fort/da, which establishes an object in two distinct moments [...] can now be better explained as a spasm where appearing is bound up with a disappearing in one and the same movement.” (p. 159)

Ettinger uses the word spam in its two connotations; as a muscular contraction and as a sudden violent sensation which can be attributed to pain or creation: spasm of creativity, spasm of pain (Merriam Webster Dictionary). In this sense, Ettinger also thinks of art as a “a transport-station of trauma”, namely a place that recalls the *tenant-lieu* where Lacan placed trauma but featured it timeless.

Here it is not a matter of having or not having, being or not being, time or timelessness. In the borderspace there is a bordertime: “a matrixial time-space of suspension-anticipation” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 151). With a pun, Ettinger replaces “not being” by “suspension”, indicating that *absence* and *there* (Fort) are not absolute for *here is something pending* (Da). The suspension of the partial subject anticipates the apparition of another partial subject inasmuch the suspension of trauma in a borderspace implies its anticipation and enables a Subsymbolic

knowledge. Therefore Ettinger (1999) argues: “artworking is tracing a spasm in suspension, delineating recurrent intermittence of disappearance in appearance” (p. 91).

This idea of the artistic work also suggests a different type of traumatic art. Lack, split, failure are left beside; meaning is not created by the collision of signifiers but by the relations existing in the transtextuality of the *transcryptum*. This entails the possibility of knowing and conveying trauma. Ettinger (2002) asserts that “apparitions from traumatic cross-inscription are known in the transcriptum, even though what is ‘told’ is not a story and what is ‘seen’ illustrates nothing.” (p. 263) The *Transcryptum* neither re-presents a failed encounter nor testifies the insufficiency of language and image, instead it alters the Symbolic and shores up a latent information. The terms distortions or partial return of the repressed would be also unprecise for there is actually a transcription. Thus, from the Subsymbolic, *transcryptum* entails characteristics of “diffraction, severalty, dispersal and partiality, shareability and hybridity” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 167).

This different type of traumatic art also entails a different kind of reception. Since language cannot imitate what is non-linguistic, a different conception of time, space, seeing, and reading is compelled in order to access the Subsymbolic knowledge of trauma. Speaking of Ettinger’s artwork —the transcripta-par-excellence—, Pollock (2013) points out an important effect on the viewer: “[Such] quality has material effects as it frustrates vision, recognition and mastery” (p. 27). In this sense, Ettinger’s aesthetic proposal does not only point out a Subsymbolic realm that neither illustrates nor tells anything, but also goes beyond the scopic dominative desire which fails to approach trauma, opening a door to become a *wit(h)ness without event*.

A *transcryptum* does not annulate the phallic mechanism; this exists and operates independently from the matrixial one. But by frustrating vision the *transcryptum* invites us to step aside, to let the *metramorphosis* act, and to know Subsymbolically another *wit(h)ness’* memory of oblivion. Ettinger certainly admits that such invitation is not compulsory, but it is done.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have described the characteristics of trauma and I have shown two models to approach it. One in terms of Freud and Lacan; and one in terms of Ettinger. I have observed that both postures conceive trauma as a wound which is non-linguistic, non-figurative, with an alternating locus, and timeless (if we conceive time as something split in two separate moments). Nonetheless they offer two referents and two mechanisms to approach it: the phallus or the matrix, the castration complex or the *metramorphosis*, respectively.

These two models also entail two different aesthetical proposals. One is the model based on Freud and Lacan where the artwork is a screen that, like the

dream, represents the psychical split. Traumatic aesthetics are then conceived in terms of lack, failure and oblivion, whilst artist and spectator are subjects that vainly aim to dominate the object (repetition compulsion). The second model is Ettinger's. She introduces the term *transcryptum* to describe an artwork where the traumatic information of a crypt is transcribed and which serves as a transportation of trauma. Conceiving trauma as the memory of oblivion, this kind of artwork is described in terms of Subsymbolic tunings, diffraction, severalty, partiality, and hybridity, therefore it is an invitation to shun a dominative (rational) aim and instead adopt a *wit(h)ness without event* position. This kind of traumatic aesthetics calls for weaving, knowledge, conveyance and sharing.

To approach traumatic art from a Freudian or Lacanian perspective enables the analyst to enter straightforwardly discourse. On the contrary, since Ettinger parallels the characteristics of the *transcryptum* with those of trauma (non-linguistic, non-figurative, with a borderspace, and a bordertime), it would be impossible to make a punctual translation of the Subsymbolic knowledge that is being shared. Nonetheless, a new epistemological pathway to understand trauma as knowable and conveyable is opened. Furthermore, it is possible to express how the *transcryptum* works and which elements are used to bend the Symbolic, hence Pollock's and Butler's (just to mention two) analysis of Ettinger's artwork.

Notwithstanding Ettinger's statement that *transcryptum* is not constrained to painting, when trying to apply this model to literary narratives of trauma the first question that emerges is, precisely, language and figuration. The raw material of literature is language (Welleck&Warren, 1966, p. 27) and narratives may evoke images in our mind (Calvino, 1995, p. 90). In this way, the first approach to a traumatic narrative might be closer to the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Nevertheless, Barthes also points out that in art there is a translinguistic text which is actually quite apart from those realms. Paralleling Barthes' description of a translinguistic text with Ettinger's description of *transcryptum* may help to start tracing a methodology of analysis of literary *transcrypta*.

Firstly, translinguistic texts are distant from the Cartesian cogito, a characteristic intrinsic to narratives of trauma. Either addressed from a phallic or metamorphic process, trauma escapes a dualist and phallic structure which is the starting point of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Secondly, the loss of a dominative logical thinking implies that it is no longer possible to speak of meaning in strict sense, but of *signifiance*, for artist and reader struggle and play with language. In the case of *transcryptum*, rather than struggle (this would be more equal to fort / da) one would speak of "a game of a game", for the spasm presents the paradox of being an anticipating suspension, and this double game is what creates the Subsymbolic tunings. Finally, translinguistic texts are productive in the sense that there are at least two players: writer and reader, both creating *signifiance* (Barthes, 2002, pp. 142-144). In turn, *transcryptum* also involves at least two *wit(h)nesses* which are sharing Subsymbolic knowledge.

In literary texts it is certainly difficult to *observe* at once a *transcryptum*, but if we step beyond the Symbolic and the Imaginary it is possible to *weave* the tunings. As Pollock (2004) asserts, “we can bend the phallicism of language through play and neologism, through paradox, irony and indeed blasphemy” (p. 34). Other pathways might be found if we acknowledge diffraction, partiality, and hybridity as tools to transgress the Symbolic. Furthermore, it would also be important to notice how the paradigmatic and syntagmatic planes are operating, and which kind of spatiality-temporality they are creating. Perhaps other metamorphic processes and tools might be at work, however, since *transcryptum* is the artwork which incarnates trauma, first it was necessary to describe trauma itself from a matrixial perspective. This was precisely the aim of this article, hoping to shed light on future literary analysis.

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