Book Review

Hospitality of the matrix: philosophy, biomedicine and culture by Irina Aristarkhova, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, 232pp, ISBN 978-0-231-15929-6

In the literature that takes the *maternal* as its object, there is a slow but certain turn from what have become the “new traditional” conceptualizations of the maternal—for example, a process of hospitality, and/or a model for ethical relations—and the uses these have been put to in critiquing grand narratives of freedom and autonomy in a wide array of disciplines. In addition, there are demands for the return of “actual” bodied mothers to our theoretical concepts of the maternal. Irina Aristarkhova’s book, *Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine and Culture*, is an advancement in this shift of focus. Aristarkhova aims to trace the conceptual development of the term *matrix* and how it has become able to “signify and evoke references to such a diversity of ideas, things, and phenomena as, for example, a pregnant animal and a mathematical array of numbers” while at the same time subordinating and obscuring its original connection to the maternal. Her genealogical and etymological analysis attempts to reconnect “the mother” to the matrix and vice versa as ultimately inseparable. This aims, in turn, to view the maternal as an *act*, and not simply an already designated empty space, waiting to provide.

Aristarkhova’s analyses is approached via three strands. The first is a critique of the philosophical concept of space and its associations with the maternal (from Plato’s *Timaeus* through to Derridian and Levinasian concepts of hospitality). The second strand analyzes how this perception of space-giving and hospitality has influenced biomedical approaches to, and perceptions of, the maternal. This is especially highlighted by Aristarkhova in her extensive analysis of the maternal in branches of medicine such as embryology, which misses the connecting “figure of the maternal body that spatially accommodates and nourishes [the] embryo or egg”; immunology, which discusses maternity in terms of grafts, transplantation, and “immunological paradox”; and the technologies of ectogenesis, which continues to operate according to the idea that “women want and need to have a choice to be “liberated” from giving birth to or nursing children.” The third strand of her analysis takes account of the bio-cultural phenomena of “male pregnancy.” She does so by first addressing the phenomenon of male couvade and its association with any masculine act of “creativity.” Secondly addressed is the experience of a transgender woman, who was able to give birth as a “man,” and lastly through the artistic representation of male pregnancy as being more than just, or not just, a biological process in the work of Lee Mingwei. Aristarkhova’s conclusions ultimately call for rethinking the matrix-maternal in terms of what it *does* rather than what it *is* as a means to “engagement with the maternal.”

This attempt to engage with the maternal and return “the mother” to the site of the matrix runs into two main difficulties. The first is the assumption that there is an actual mother to be reintroduced. The impact of maternity on a woman and the augmentation it delineates for her in a singular manner is not looked at in this study and psychoanalytic theory, for example, is not addressed. The narratives or descriptions of “actual mothers” are also not especially included in the study. There is, as such, no analysis of the great “trial of

subjectivity” that Julia Kristeva has highlighted as fundamental to the experience of maternity; a trial that personal narratives often confirm. Instead, Aristarkhova chooses the philosophical theme of hospitality to work from, in which she finds “the supposed passivity of the maternal relation is often employed to marginalize the role of the matrixial/maternal needs to be understood as requiring ‘work,’ as a way of letting the other be, become, breathe.” This leads to the second major difficulty in the work; the issue of passivity as inactive.

The question of hospitality remains a problematic one. For most feminist writers the idea of a discreet, self-effacing host is contra to the personal integrity needed for feminist agency. The formlessness of Plato’s chora-space, the dissolution of elements into their proper spheres to enable the creation of forms which has been a durable backbone throughout Greek thought has, as Aristarkhova highlights, been much criticized for supporting the classic view of maternity as a passive malleability of earth by the work of a god-father. This, however, continues to be a drastic (re)misreading of chora and the reasons for its association with maternity. The concept of chora offers a richer mode of enquiry than this because it opens the possibility of discussing maternity in a way that does not have the production of a child as its aim. It therefore offers opportunity to understand the reasons why maternity could ever be associated with formlessness. Chora as dissolution is not questioned by Aristarkhova and she, to some degree, colludes with a binary struggle of active/passive.

The demands hospitality makes, or the authenticity it pushes one towards, are not acknowledged and the “lab” of sublimation—that Kristeva, for example, characterizes motherhood as—is bypassed. If we recall also Pierre Klossowski’s idea of hospitality in his novel *Roberte, ce Soir*, where the host comes to know himself in the most extreme way by the demands made upon him of the guest, what is experienced as discreet absenting, what is perceived as a passivity by the guest is in fact experienced by the host as the most intense, interior strengthening of presence by the fact of being stretched to and beyond his absolute limits. While theorists of the maternal question this passivity, and criticize the thinking of maternal as silent sacrifice, the real issue—the real question of maternity—of authentic experience allowing self-realization is lost. This distinction between maternity and maternal often gets lost in feminist theory. While Aristarkhova takes the questioning of the theorization of maternal close to the issue of maternity, certainly in the chapters on biomedicine, she does not quite lift maternity out of the prejudice of a productive and/or ethical event. By not directly addressing the interiority of maternity, she therefore stays in the realm of maternal.

Reference

Klossowski, P. 2002. *Roberte, ce Soir and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*. Translated by A.Wainhouse. Chicago & Normal Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press.

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