

BOOK REVIEW

## Anti-Electra: The Radical Totem of the Girl

Elizabeth von Samsonow. Translated by Anita Fricke and Stephen Zepke, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019 (ISBN: 978-15179-0713-6)

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Girls slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce *n* molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 276–77)

[Electra's] words in crisis are, as a matter of fact, bare; mere cries of despair, joy, hate . . . But it is not so easy to decide what it is that gives these cries of Electra their power to cut and wound and excite. (Woolf 1984, 26)

Originally published in German in 2007, Anita Fricke and Stephen Zepke's translation of Elizabeth von Samsonow's *Anti-Electra: The Radical Totem of the Girl*, is a contribution to contemporary theorizing of subjectivity through the liberation of the girl from her mythical and psychoanalytic heritage to provide "an outline of a future world" (xvi). In recent years the girl has become a focus for psychological and sociological study that emphasizes her development or growth toward something else, a carrier of something external to her, rather than a subject in her own right. Contemporary "girlism" has gained prominence in popular culture perhaps epitomized by the success of Lena Dunham's HBO television series *Girls*, and the generative power of the short-lived punk bands of Riot Grrrl culture. In early twentieth-century fiction, the girl is the figure disrupting and connecting the machinery of the law in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and the machinery of logic and sense in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories. More insidiously, she has been depicted as both the unwitting victim and calculating seducer for capitalist consumption (Tiqun 2012). Samsonow selects the symbolic power of the ancient girl Electra whose cries, Woolf suggests, can be heard as the scream of cosmic crisis. Electra's ancient lineage is further complicated in being an assumed counterpart to the Oedipus complex. Though Freud rejected Jung's proposed Electra complex, her mythological association with his account of the castration complex that failed to recognize the differences of sexual development nonetheless implicates Electra.

There are many Electras. "Electra" shares the root of "electrum," from the Greek "electron," the natural or artificial alloy of silver and gold, the substance that develops electricity under friction. Electra was the pre-Hellenic Goddess of Light, the "radiant sun," before being claimed in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as the sacrificial daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. She has been represented

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differently among the tragedians: variously responsible for or incidental to Clytemnestra's murder even with their agreement that her brother, Orestes, commits the matricide. Sophocles and Euripides saw Electra as having a pivotal role in the murder. Aeschylus saw it as limited: she disappears before the murder takes place. Her agency (or not) in the matricide has been emphasized more than the (in)justice itself facing the House of Atreus.

The becoming-girl's molecular subjectivity is Deleuze and Guattari's privileged exemplar of nomadic subjectivity that aligns with Samsonow's search for anti-Electra. The author articulates the radical ontology and subjectivity of becoming-girl through the mother–daughter relation in the cultural unconscious. In a qualified alignment with Luce Irigaray's rearticulation of woman's maternal-feminine subjectivity, Samsonow reorients the girl's position in that mother–daughter relation to avoid what she describes as Irigaray's "female metaphysics of the womb" (xviii).

In chapter 1, Electra is deconstructed from her mythological and psychoanalytic associations through close readings of Jean Giraudoux's stage production and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's text (Hofmannsthal 1908; Giraudoux 1987) along with post-Freudian and post-Jungian interpretations (Halberstadt-Freud 2010, among others) to locate ways of escaping the complex to which Electra's story has been consigned. Samsonow:

Electra is the daughter of a Great Mother and thus inhabits a world where mother provides the primary identification. This world represents antiquity in both the history of social forms and an archeology of the psyche. The pre-oedipal comes before kingship; it designates the unrestricted sovereignty of the mother, a uterocracy. (17)

Rather than identifying with the father through her acceptance of penis-envy for his power, why not consider the vagina-envy of the mother in a pre-Hellenic world in which the mother is a sexually active and powerful woman? (18). The masculinized Electra in Hofmannsthal's text repudiates any joy in femininity and finds motherhood ridiculous. To reject the symbolic order in which the mother reigns, Samsonow queries, does this not expose that order to what precedes it: the imaginary? (19).

Samsonow reads against the grain of the ancient texts through modern interpretations to reorder the logic of the drama thereby prising open a wide space of the imaginary in which Electra's agency is viewed as irreducible to the castrating and suffocating consequences of the Oedipus complex. The theoretical ground is now prepared for Electra to be placed more squarely within her pre-Hellenic universe to establish an analogy between, on one side, the animal totemism of Minoan and Cretan cultures as a mode of becoming-human, and on the other, the pre-oedipal mother–child relation. Classically, totemism involves devotion to an animal or nonhuman entity, a becoming-animal and becoming-human dynamic of intercorporeality with the animal as the emblem of the collective. Samsonow's girl's "radical totemism" is associated with her body as it was pre-oedipally lived with the mother, personified symbolically as pre-human (or animal), and from which the girl also sees her potential to be "a body producing body" (xxv; 174; 201).

From the (girl) child's perspective, the mother is prehuman or animal in the "form of a landscape of affective organs" (xxiii). This primal relation is interrupted by family dramas dictated by the law of the father, but the erotic structure of the mother–child relation (as intercorporeally human–animal and same–other) enables the girl to see her mother as a body that produces bodies, and herself as *potentially* a body that

produces bodies. In the pre-oedipal stage, she is doubled or split, “schizosomatic” (99, 127), in that she is *not-yet-woman* (prehuman, animal) and nonmale, and she incorporates this latency and in-betweenness (xix; 36) of her embodiment into her world to live as the producer of bodies as objects; the girl is a fabricator, a technician, technically connected whether to dolls or gadgets. Rather than viewing the latency phase of her sexual development as the empty waiting room of her destiny, she fills it with objects that connect her to that space. Anti-Electra is a technologist, technician, fabricator. She is the “universal girl” (63; 202) extravagantly depicted in Samsonow’s counterimaginary as the affective, social, economic, and technical “infrastructure” of the Earth (xix; xxi). Samsonow outlines a radical totemism that eschews the primitivism associated with specific groups to be instead a “symbolic politics rooted in the *pre-oedipality of the girl*” (63).

From this structural analogy, Electra is liberated from the myth into which she is trapped in the post-totemistic universe of the Athenian polis and its demands for a patrilineal line of inheritance. Anti-Electra emerges as the girl who is not only restored in the transition from one form of collective to another, from the matrilineal to the patrilineal symbolic order, she is the symbol of the totem itself: the totem of what is lost and the totem of the foreigner. Her radical totemism locates the symbolic associations of human–animal intercorporeality to be found within the humanist, oedipalized universe that would otherwise segregate human against animal, and human against the machine’s technicity. The universal girl’s latent and in-between qualities, her “schizogamy” (56–57), connects with and carries the animal as well as the gadget/apparatus/machine intercorporeally into the symbolic order of the electronically connected contemporary world.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of sculpture and its pre-Hellenic associations of plasticity in funerary rituals that aligns with the plasticity of the body-producing-body of the girl. Samsonow aims to restore sculpture from its suppression relative to the image in art history because of its association with the “low arts” of effigies and mummies (105). Samsonow examines how sculpture functions as a surrogate image that can be just as readily claimed as deriving from a cult of life as one of death (105). She also examines how votive sculpture can be viewed as a schizosoma, a double-bodied intercorporeality that is transformative in its plasticity of form (104). The suppressed art-historical relation to sculpture also exemplifies the child’s relation to the toy: “in this toy we have the prototype of a votive offering, a plastic form for becoming-being. . . . The child forms a binomial with this figure, this sculpture, becoming its sibling or schizosomatic twin” (107). These plastic, schizosomatic identifications flourish beyond the toys of the child’s bedroom (107). In contrast to the surface of the image that, mirror-like, reflects the integrity of the body as its pseudo-container, the older plastic regimes of bodily identification and integration, such as sculpture, show that their “objectifying function produces humans within which (bodies that can produce) bodies display themselves” (115).

Chapter 4 focuses on the labyrinth as the spatiality that underlies female identification with its “interfering spheres of inside and outside” that constitute that space of the human-animal, primordial, pre-oedipal mother (174). It folds outside with its inside that is the primary cultic space of pre-oedipal societies (174). Samsonow’s aim is to show that this spatial imaginary can be transposed to the spatiality of the electronic satellite system, the plastic electronic medium that structures the world: “The cryptic world illustrated by the labyrinth reaches its Daedalian apex in the plastic electronic medium of a world-encompassing, satellite-controlled network. . . . an absolute technological

surveillance through impersonal ('transhuman') apparatuses" (162). In the pre-oedipal identification, the form and content of the labyrinth collapse so that the mother is both the content and the container. Samsonow rereads the mythology of Daedalus's construction of both the labyrinth and the wooden bull, a "wooden copulation machine" with whom the goddess, Pasiphae, couples. The forbidden relation challenges the King and the founding of Athenian culture. The labyrinth comes to represent the spatiality of the two different spheres of cultural life, Cretan-Minoan and Athenian, producing a polis derived from both the animal and human that should mark the end of the pre-oedipal. In the departure from the pre-oedipal mother, the human being transfers its identification to technical objects (162). It is a transfer, however, that allows for reconstruction as "the pre-oedipal constellation was only modified, not cancelled" (162).

Samsonow is an artist, writer, curator, and a professor of philosophical and historical anthropology at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. This is the first of her monographs published in English. The book's five chapters comprise closely detailed debates from Greek mythology, psychoanalysis, art history, and cultural anthropology. Its appendix documents the author's creative work, *Anti-Electra*, presented at Moscow's Solyanka State Gallery in 2017 along with an accompanying text that poetically conveys the analyses of the preceding chapters. A preface written for its English publication twelve years after the original contextualizes the book's approach. The wide palette of intellectual traditions requires the reader to be familiar with them to enter the argument. Intense engagement with the literature in some places may have been a working-through the argument rather than its demonstration. For example, the suppressed status of sculpture relative to the image within art history as a preliminary staging to the chapter's primary focus on sculpture's schizosomatic plasticity could have been trimmed to that latter focus. The discursive maneuvering within and across disciplines, the claim-making links, could have been made more explicitly. A conclusion would have helped this reviewer determine how all the links of the theoretical assemblage come together.

The book is dedicated to Gaia. Its feminist claim, its speculation, is that if the girl were to be returned to Earth from her sacrifice to the (mother-) Earth, her position as the body-producing-body could reconfigure the sacrificial human-Earth relationship as no longer a symbolic sacrifice. Samsonow tells us, "The girl is the significant political figure, it was her sacrifice that has supported the mythology of 'Mother Earth' up until today. . . . Only if she returns alive, if we celebrate her resurrection, does the *pathological* time of the symbolic order(s) expire" (174–75). This is an ambitious goal and well worth the conceptual efforts required to achieve it. *Go girl!*

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