

# **Male Gaze and the Objectification of Women: A Lacanian Reading of the Issue of Women's Representation**

*A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**IN**

**PHILOSOPHY**

SUBMITTED BY

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## **CERTIFICATE**

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### DECLARATION

I, UTSAV BANERJEE, hereby declare that this thesis titled **“Male Gaze and the Objectification of Women: A Lacanian Reading of the Issue of Women's Representation”** that I carried out under the supervision of Dr. Venusa Tinyi, Department of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad, is a bona fide piece of research work and no part thereof has been submitted earlier to any University or Institute of learning for the award of any degree or diploma. My thesis is free from plagiarism. I hereby declare that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### I.1 – The Issue of Women's Representation

As the title of this thesis (*Male Gaze and the Objectification of Women: A Lacanian Reading of the Issue of Women's Representation*) indicates, the focus of this work is a Lacanian enquiry into the issue of women's representation or, to put it more succinctly, the exclusion of women from the representational space. And *male gaze* is our point of entry into this inquiry. What precisely is the problem of women's representation? It is a complex, if not complicated, subject and it is, therefore, impossible to even attempt to put forth a straightforward, all-sweeping response. One only needs to start thinking about the question to appreciate its multilayered-ness. Is representation to be thought of in terms of numbers? Less or more representation? In schools as pupils or teachers, in public and private offices, academic and non-academic institutions, politics; as administrators, scientists, politicians, sculptors, hairstylists, fashion designers, fashion models, physical laborers, writers, historians, economists, litterateurs, chemists, filmmakers, painters, storytellers, doctors, actors, engineers; as offspring in households, decision-makers; in business, and so on and so forth? As we know, the list can perhaps be more or less indefinitely, if not infinitely, elaborated. But this relatively simple way of looking at *representation* becomes immediately convoluted if one is asked to clarify who exactly one has in mind when one speaks of *women* in the given context. Are we talking about those women who identify with the sex/gender that is assigned to them at their birth? In other words, cissexual, cisgender, or simply ciswomen (women whose sense of self or personal identity is derived from their anatomical constitution)? Or, is our focus area inclusive of women who do not identify with their anatomical

or biological gender/sex assignment (*transgender women* or simply *transwomen*)? How about those who do not conclusively identify themselves with either traditional gender markers (male or female) and who prefer to have a rather indeterminate gender identity (*gender fluid*)? At yet another level, it is possible to understand the issue of representation in terms of expression and the challenges women face in the process? So, can or cannot women express/represent themselves? What is it that women want to express? Are they naturally incapable of expressing what they want? Have they been historically deprived of the means required to express themselves? Do men, women's biological counterparts, prevent them from self-representation, deliberately or not? Are the reasons historical or natural? Lacan's answer to the question/problem of women's representation is antinomic—the reasons are both historical and natural and in fact they are natural because historical and historical because natural. His (psycho)analysis uncovers *language as the source of women's oppression*. The woman cannot be represented in language because the very medium in and through which the representation is sought is biased. Of course, when he talks about women (and men, for that matter), he has in mind rather femininity (and masculinity) which are specific resolutions of the Oedipus complex in the girl (and the boy) child. Thus, what is at stake here is that femininity and masculinity are psychosexual identities that girls and boys adopt as they try to cope up with their oedipal issues (castration anxiety). But femininity and masculinity must not be thought of as strictly coupled with the biological female-male or women-men categories. In Lacan, these two are loosely coupled with each other. To put it differently, men can be feminine, and women can be masculine—there is no necessary relationship between men and masculinity, and women and femininity. And in the course of this thesis, we hope that a picture will emerge in which femininity and masculinity will appear to co-exist—that is, the same person can have both

feminine and masculine moments, so to speak. It is important to bear this theoretical insight in mind as we engage with the question of women's representation from a Lacanian point of view. Given this, what we said earlier can be rephrased as the impossibility of representing femininity. What necessitates this impossibility? Lacan's answer is language itself. Though the purpose of this thesis is to explore the important premises which together bring about such an (absurd?) conclusion, it is perhaps not a bad idea to begin with an example which hints at the answer. Consider the following verse: *What defines a man—inner world of thoughts, or, outer world of actions? When consciousness is wrapped in dreams, and difficult it is to tell reality from dreams; then, what is reality? The trancelike perceptions of the world without? Or the bizarre experiences of the world within?* Suppose these lines are part of a character's monologue, written to exteriorize his inner conflict. Let us further suppose the character is conflicted between his regular, routine life and his desire to justify his existence to himself by making his life socially and politically useful. Now, let us ask ourselves the question—is such a conflict specific to a male character only; can a woman not be similarly conflicted? The question, of course, is a rhetorical one—there is no reason why a woman character cannot be in the afore-stated situation, speaking logically. Nevertheless, the problem arises when a woman character is made to voice these lines. Even if the situation remains exactly the same and the only change that is made to the situation is to imagine a woman instead of a man, it is obvious that the monologue cannot retain its original words (*What defines a **man**?*). Though it has been an age-old convention to read the entire humankind in the term *mankind*, for example, one cannot imagine why a woman would resort to a *manly* term to communicate her innermost thoughts. So, would then a simple substitution (*woman* for *man*) in the question solve the issue for us—*What defines a **woman**?* The question, again, is a rhetorical one. The answer is no, and that is because the moment such a

substitution is made, one seems to transition from, among other things, the question of class politics to the question of sexual politics. As a result, one seems to now deal with an altogether different set of complexities and complications. This indicates that the relationship between man and woman is one of asymmetry; if the relation obtained were a symmetric one, then the substitution would work without causing any cultural and semantic forfeiture. And this asymmetry is not specific to the example cited here—it seems to overdetermine each and every case that involves the two sexes, and *male gaze* is no exception to this generality. What is male gaze? Commonly understood, if the ogling subject happens to be the camera—of course, the object ogled at had to be woman, without exception—then the ogling act would be referred to as *the male gaze*. That is, when the camera ogles at the woman on behalf, or in place of, the man, or when women are eroticized for the sexual pleasures of men, what we have is the functioning of the male gaze. Now, suppose a film tells the tale of a man who discovers *her* true identity. One way to cinematically portray this metamorphosis would be to make use of the same camera techniques which are used to eroticize women's bodies. But what would an equivalent *female gaze* mean? To eroticize the male body? For the purpose of sexual gratification of women? In addition to the fact that the idea just does not sound right, even when the male body is eroticized for consumption, the eroticization works only because of a masculine basis for identification of the spectator with the male character on screen.

## **I.2 – ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’**

Laura Mulvey is accredited with coining the term, *the male gaze*, in her 1975 article, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in which she makes political use of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical frameworks to unmask the deep-seated patriarchy informing the production and reception of mainstream Hollywood films. One may safely indulge in the

generalization, without worrying much about its historical accuracy (it is almost always possible to legitimize generalizations, at least partially, on the basis of the logic of popular perception, which cares little about being grounded in facts; besides, perception plays an undeniably key role in the rise and fall of stock markets, does it not?) and without risking scathing criticism for caring little for a data-driven approach, that the most dominant form of communication—be it for the purpose of disseminating information or entertainment—has been, and is, visual; and, within the visual spectrum, the one form that has held the human psyche captive ever since it has exploded into existence is cinema. Nothing titillates the psyche more than looking at a montage of images, flash relentlessly before the eyes in order not to expose the interstices between successive frames—the interstices, if stripped naked, would exchange cinematic continuity for contiguity, an exchange that might cost the form dearly by dispelling its charm—in onward time, conjuring up diverse spaces, ordinary and fantastic, linear and not. What explains the irresistible(?) charm of cinema? Can one even begin to account for the hegemonic position that the visual form enjoys within the communicative and artistic spectrum? Mulvey has an answer—proclivities that an individual is susceptible to and that play a formative role in the individual's pre-cinematic reality, in addition to shaping the social system that the individual inhabits, re-manifest in cinema. What are these proclivities exactly? These are heteronormative codes that individually and collectively regulate, apart from governing gendered relations in the social order, how motion pictures are made and consumed:

...to use psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him. It takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. (Mulvey 1989: 14)

To be able to differently codify the language of cinema (codify it non-heteronormatively, that is), it is important to first comprehend how heteronormativity currently structures the film language, for which purpose Mulvey takes psychoanalytic recourse:

It is helpful to understand what the cinema has been, how its magic has worked in the past, while attempting a theory and a practice which will challenge this cinema of the past. Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form. (Mulvey 1989: 14)

Next, Mulvey goes on to summarize what she calls the paradox of phallocentrism. In Freudian and, in a perverse way, Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, the phallus (the anatomical organ, the penis) forms the basis for the semantic constitution of the social systems that we inhabit (in a perverse way in Lacanian theory because the phallus functions as detached from its biological origins in Lacan). “The paradox of phallocentrism”, to use Mulvey’s expression, lies in that the centrality of the phallus rests upon the “image of the castrated women”. Growing up in a world dominated by patriarchs, the child (male or female) encounters the image of the lack when it first sights a woman’s vagina, be it of the mother, the sister, or another girl. The experience is traumatic for the male child who realizes that he, too, might be subject to castration if he does not abide by the rules established by the father. In other words, the castration threat, literally speaking, is only potential for the male child. Non-conformity on the part of the boy might result in the loss of the biological organ—the boy might be in a state of *lack* at a future point in time. For the girl child, the castration has always already taken place. In her case, the threat does not merely exist as a future possibility; it is already materialized, even before she is born. The girl is naturally *lacking*, so to speak. She realizes that she does not have the phallus and her only way to possess one is through the shifting of her love-object from her mother (or of one from her sex) to the father (or to one from her opposite sex, one who anatomically possesses the *lost* organ). Their

specific resolutions of the Oedipal complex are preconditions for the girl and the boy child to enter the human *symbolic*<sup>1</sup>, which is governed by the phallic function. Thus, woman plays, and is confined to play, a twofold role in constituting and sustaining the symbolic order: “she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic” (Mulvey 1989: 14). The only way for her to gain access into the symbolic is to enter it via her penis-substitute, her child. Should she choose to abandon the symbolic altogether and not ready her child for it, the child would stay tightly coupled to the mother in the imaginary register and, therefore, never acquire subjectivity: “She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the symbolic)...[in which]...man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 1989: 14ff).

The task that Mulvey assigns herself in the article, and which she pursues with single-minded focus, is one of debunking and debilitating the erotic, visual pleasure offered by mainstream Hollywood: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article.” (Mulvey 1989: 16) The assertions that immediately follow make it clear that hers is an attempt to destabilize the dyadic structure, which pertains to the Imaginary, between a film’s characters and its viewers, in order not to replace it with a worthier pleasure-substitute but to annihilate and abandon pleasure altogether in search of a new medium of expression in which the feminine desire can be represented:

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<sup>1</sup> Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real are the three Lacanian registers/orders of human experience. These are described in detail in Chapter II.

The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favor of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire. (Mulvey 1989: 16)

A “new language of desire” is necessary because the existing language is structurally incompetent to represent what the woman desires. It may however be noted that the very words in which Mulvey expresses her desire to break away from a tradition of pleasure to forge a pleasure-free novelty reminds one of the movement away from the Lacanian Imaginary, which is the domain of maternal plenitude and pleasure, to the Lacanian Symbolic, which thwarts all pleasures and in which subjectivity arrives. That is, even when the author challenges the long-entrenched patriarchy, her language in which she expresses her revolt remains the language of patriarchy and which the author is not completely unaware of: “It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings closer an articulation of the problem, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy?” (Mulvey 1989: 15)

The very conditions of cinematic consumption promote scopophilia, the pleasure from looking. This is particularly true of films that do not violate what is known in the theatrical realm as the Fourth Wall Realism. The film innocuously plays itself, from beginning to end, indifferent to or rather unaware of being subject to the spectatorial gaze. The spectators, on the other hand, watch the film guilt-free inside the darkened space of a theatre and derive a sense of pleasure in the process. Things that one could not possibly indulge in without potentially facing serious



consequences outside the theatrical space—for instance, eavesdropping on others' conversations; watching people strip naked as they get ready for a shower or having sexual intercourse; leching after women, etc.—are normalized for almost guilt-free viewing inside the cinema. Care is taken to make comfortable even those consumers of cinema who would otherwise not feel comfortable about watching on-screen nudity in the presence of co-consumers by engendering a sense of privacy through darkness. Inside the cinema hall, the spectator is reduced to a mere ocular point in space, whose primary and, perhaps, only function is to quietly absorb the visual and auditory data projecting out from the screen in front, thereby precipitating a loss of subjectivity as it were:

At first glance, the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of the surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim. What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer. (Mulvey 1989: 17)

In the excerpt, Laura makes an interesting point—the exhibitionist tendency of the viewers inside the auditorium is repressed by virtue of their relationship with cinema and that what the viewers repress finds itself expressed through the actions of the on-screen characters. In other words, the subjectivity (which in this case is the ego) that is lost for the viewer who, having been reduced to an ocular point, is transfixed on his or her seat, is reclaimed via an Imaginary (the Lacanian

mirror stage) identification with characters on screen. This claim is diligently substantiated in the passages that follow. Inside the auditorium, you are cut off, quite literally, from the rest of the world. You lose your corporeal existence and are perhaps literally incorporated into the world of the film as an innocuous observer—you are the fly on the wall or rather the fourth wall itself—who is present in each and every frame for the film's narrative to continuously march forward, unbeknownst to and unaffected by the people who live and die in the narrative realm. The position of the innocuous observer might sound superfluous to the film, but that is not so—this position of superfluity is integral for a narrative to come into being, unfold, and subsequently arrive at a closure. For the next 90-120 minutes, your life outside the auditorium ceases to exist and all that matters is the action of the characters you see on screen—you are moved by them, repelled by them, you love them, you hate them, or you are unaffected by them. In short, your entirety is reduced to a series of identifications during the playtime. Film-watching is a break from your life-narrative. But does this amount to losing your ego altogether for the length of the film? No. Your ego is re-found in the on-screen action—you relive the mirror stage. This is true not only of films though. A similar temporary loss of ego at a point it is supposed to be and its reinforcement in an external locus is experienced in almost every activity that engages the ocular—watching a game of sports, for instance—but we will stay focused on films, which after all is the medium Mulvey is concerned with:

Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings, for instance), the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition. While at the same time, the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals, through the star system for instance. (Mulvey 1989: 18)

Thus, Mulvey identifies two specific forms of visual mechanism at work in cinema: 1) scopophilia, which is sexual pleasure derived from looking at others, and 2) narcissistic identification with the narrative disclosure on screen. The forms are mutually conflicting because the one reinforces the subject-object divide such that the object becomes a visual means for the ego's sexual gratification, while the other wipes out the divide and entails re-finding oneself in the other. On further probing, you realize that the specific fashion in which these visual operations structure a film's production and reception betrays the imbalanced sexual economy that one encounters in the real world. In the case where the look serves an erotic function, the agency of the look is male while the receiver of the look is female—thereby reinforcing the conventional gender roles, in which the male is the agency of action while the female is representative of passivity. The male is the voyeur, and the female is the exhibitionist. The male is the subject of sexuality while the female is the object of sexuality. The male drives the narrative, while the female is a breach (a temporary pause) in the narrative:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.... (Note, however, how in the musical song-and-dance numbers interrupt the flow of the diegesis.) The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. (Mulvey 1989: 19)

That woman functions as an object of erotic pleasure should be obvious to the viewer of mainstream Bollywood cinema, in which the only occasions when she occupies any substantive screen space are what are popularly known as the *item numbers*. The *item numbers* occasion

thematic digressions, thereby conforming to the misogyny ingrained in the social psyche which sees women as distractions to be avoided. Women characters thus serve as erotic objects both for characters on screen and for spectators off screen, where for the latter woman-as-erotic-object is accessible primarily through their identification with the former (presumably male characters in the narrative). The identification between spectators and male characters is, as indicated earlier, reminiscent of the correspondence between the infant and her/his mirror reflection—whereas the infant (and the spectator) cannot control her/his bodily movement just yet but achieves it in the mirror image (on-screen male characters). Mulvey draws the comparison specifically between the mirror image and the male protagonist, but the argument can be easily extended to other male characters, including those with antagonistic propensities. Thus, like the infant, the spectators find their Ego Ideal on screen, and therefore regain the sense of control that they willingly lose when they situate themselves inside the auditorium.

The tension between the two conflicting *looking* operations at work—scopophilia, which subjugates the woman in the film for direct sexual gratification of the spectator, and mirror identification, in which the woman is indirectly possessed by the spectator via the male characters—subsequently resolves in such a fashion that the spectator gives up scopophilia in favor of indirect possession of the female form. This yet again reinstates the conventional social outlook that sees woman in binary terms—woman as prostitute (impure) and woman as mother (pure). Woman-as-prostitute is open for public consumption, but woman-as-mother is secured for private consumption only. Thus, the transition that the woman figure undergoes is one of scope, and not of agency—she does not gain or regain any agency in transitioning from one binary to the other. Her primary status remains unchanged—she was a commodity earlier and she remains a commodity post transition. Her only solace is that while she could be publicly

possessed earlier, now her possession is restricted to private individuals. This possessional change should be particularly evident to anyone with any degree of exposure to mainstream Bollywood. The hero first spots the heroine on the road, in a park, inside a restaurant, at a theatre, at work, or in college, and his fantasy is immediately held captive by her image. He makes advances which are initially thwarted. Then, the hero and his entourage relentlessly stalk the heroine everywhere and particularly in musical sequences until the heroine gives in to his advances. Until the time the heroine gives in, she dresses revealingly for public pleasure. Thenceforth, she reveals only for the hero and more often than not is seen only in traditional Indian outfits (salwar kameez, kurta, saree, etc.) that resist skin show:

[A] tension between a mode of representation of woman in film and conventions surrounding the diegesis. Each is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis.... But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too. (Mulvey 1989: 21)

Having thus laid out the specular mechanisms that mold the process of filmmaking and reception, Mulvey goes on to further concretize her argument by analyzing the cinematic oeuvre of Sternberg and Hitchcock. She explains how the films of Sternberg are concerned with a specific configuration of scopophilia, namely fetishistic scopophilia; whereas the more sophisticated films of Hitchcock betray both fetishistic scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism. Fetishism, simply put, is a psychic mechanism to deny or refuse to accept the mother as

castrated. The always already castrated site of the mother's reproductive site is a source of castration anxiety in the child. The child reacts to this castration anxiety by investing his desires in an object (a piece of clothing, for example) that belongs to the mother, which thenceforth begins to serve as a substitute for the lost penis. Fetishistic scopophilia, by inference, therefore entails excessive libidinal investment in an object for the sake of itself, and not as a means to an end. In the context of cinema, if you would watch and re-watch a certain film just for the sake of repeated exposure to a particular scene, camera angle, music piece, image, etc., completely agnostic to the role that specific object of your interest plays in the narrative or completely uncaring of whether the specific object is even thematically integral to the narrative, then you can be more or less sure that your investment in the object is one of fetishism. When fetishism is restricted to the domain of the visual, what you are dealing with is fetishistic scopophilia. In fetishism, the object is decontextualized and appears independent of a story. It bears no relation with linear time as we know it. In a film focused on manipulating and promoting scopophilia of this sort, narrative action is incidental and secondary—all it furnishes are image-fetishes in the guise of visual storytelling. And this, claims Mulvey, is the conscious agenda of Sternberg in his films: "Sternberg once said he would welcome his films being projected upside-down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator's undiluted appreciation of the screen image" (Mulvey 1989: 22). What is interesting to note here is that in Sternberg's films, the fetishistic scopophilia is unmediated—that is, the spectator is not at the mercy of the male protagonist's look for stimulation. The female object-image is directly offered to him through sequences in which the male protagonist the female form is in love with is absent from the fictive space altogether. Even when there are other characters on screen, they are not representative of the spectatorial gaze. Rather, their gaze coincides with the gaze of the spectator:

“The high point of emotional drama in the most typical Dietrich films, her supreme moments of erotic meaning, take place in the absence of the man she loves in the fiction. There are other witnesses, other spectators watching her on the screen, their gaze is one with, not standing in for, that of the audience” (Mulvey 1989: 23).

As mentioned earlier, a more sophisticated treatment is meted out to the woman in the films of Hitchcock. There is fetishistic scopophilia but there also is sadistic voyeurism. His films do contain self-satisfying images of women, but they also explore the guilt of the woman—the woman must have done something really horrible to have deserved such a fate as castration—and its subsequent resolution in chastisement or redemption. Thus, linear narrative is an integral component of Hitchcock’s films, unlike the films of Sternberg: “Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end” (Mulvey 1989: 22). This is clearly the preoccupation of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, as seen from the eyes of the film critic, Jean Douchet. Jeffrey’s physical condition, a broken leg, has him confined to his apartment. To kill time, he uses his binoculars to peek into the lives of people in the neighboring buildings. He has lost interest in his girlfriend, Lisa, despite her repeated attempts to rekindle his interest in her—she comes to his apartment all decked up as an exhibit on display to be looked at by Jeffrey—continue to fail until she takes interest in what has clearly kept her lover occupied currently. It is only when she enters the visual frame which Jeffrey has been so obsessively inspecting with his visual prosthetics, that she becomes the object of his interest once again. But doing so makes her a guilty intruder in the eyes of a dangerous neighbor who, Jeffrey suspects, has murdered his wife and is now figuring out a way to dispose of the cadaver, in the process becoming a woman who needs to be saved. The irony of it all is that Jeffrey himself, too,

has been a guilty intruder but his guilt goes undetected. The film's spectators would have been aware of his guilt had they not identified themselves with him and his binocular gaze.

In the concluding part of her article, Mulvey summarizes the three different mechanisms of gaze involved in film production and consumption: 1) The gaze of the camera, 2) the gaze of the audience, and 3) the gaze of the characters within the film. The conventions of narrative film resist the materialization of 1 and 2 in favor of 3. The gaze of the camera, if allowed, will break the verisimilitude, the absence of which will thwart scopophilic functions. The camera must be maximally non-existent and minimally non-intrusive for the cinematic spell to do its job.

Similarly, if the audience does not undergo a temporary loss of ego/subjectivity, if the audience remains self-conscious throughout the narrative length, then that is detrimental to identificatory processes necessary for the spatio-temporal illusion. In brief, if 1 and 2 are operational, the reel cannot be real. Therefore, as long as one operates within the conventional context, one is compelled to subordinate the recording apparatus and the audience to the sexual needs of the man.

### **I.3 'Afterthoughts'**

The purchase of Mulvey's psychoanalytic investigation into how the patriarchal unconscious structures the film form, production and consumption included, which dictate a certain form of representation of the female figure so as to engage the spectator's scopophilia and narcissistic identification with male characters in mainstream Hollywood rests upon a certain oversimplified, overdetermined view of the cinema-viewer. To expose such oversimplification, one only needs to point out the already obvious fact that her analysis conveniently assumes that the spectator is biologically a male. In the absence of the assumption, her analysis would fall apart. To continue the problematization, assuming what Mulvey observes holds good for the male spectators, her



theory does not say anything about how the processes of scopophilia and primal identification work in the case of the female spectators. Another closely relevant subject of inquiry would have been what difference a film with a female character at its narrative centre might make to the identificatory processes explicated earlier, which too was left out of the original essay.

Subsequently, Mulvey engages with these three questions in her 1981 paper called 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)' (Henceforth, I will refer to this article as 'Afterthoughts').

As regards the issue of the spectator being particularly male in the original essay, Mulvey clarifies that she was interested in exposing the masculinization of the spectatorial position with respect to cinema. Of course, spectatorship on any given day consists of a mix of genders. However, the patriarchal structures that inform the film's processes are agnostic to the gender specificity of the empirical movie-goers. Her claim in the essay was that irrespective of the gender identity of the spectators, they would be masculinized in order to engage with the film's narrative. She continues to stand by the argument even at the time of writing her afterthoughts:

At the time, I was interested in the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinisation' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer. In-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as 'point of view'; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third position....

I still stand by my 'Visual Pleasure' argument, but would now like to pursue the other two lines of thought. (Mulvey 1989: 29)

The "other two lines of thought" are that of the female spectators in the audience and that of female characters occupying the centre-stage in the film's story. As regards the question of the female spectators, Mulvey upholds that it is always possible that female spectators may not give

in to the demands of masculinization for cinematic illusion to work and that she is not concerned with those woman spectators at all. She concerns herself with only those female spectators who accept a masculinized point of view, instead of rejecting it, and thereby allowing themselves to be worked into the film's text. Before diving deep into Mulvey's enunciation of the accepting woman viewership, it may be noted that it would not be irrelevant to ask the question here—Why does Mulvey leave the case of the unaccepting and alienated female viewership out of her investigation? Is not this leaving-out act an act of exclusion along the lines of repression that the child acts out in order to bring about his or her Oedipal resolution so that he or she could enter the symbolic order? The system never concerns itself with those who are not part of the system to begin with—its sole focus is those people who constitute it. Is something similar happening here? Non-accepting and therefore non-identifying women pose a greater problem—they not only resist the illusory charm of cinema but are equally resistant to conceptualization and theorization and therefore fall outside the sample set that Mulvey engages with. Is Mulvey guilty of that here? Now that the case of the female spectators who resist a masculine imposition is discarded, we are left with those who readily identify with the exploits of the male hero, particularly since this identification endows them with a sense of control over events in the film's narrative, something which they seldom feel in reality. Closely related to this trans-sex identification of women with the male hero is the plight of the female protagonist who swings between two identities—feminine and masculine—as she challenges and opposes normative notions of femininity, where the mutual relevance lies in that the woman spectator has to adopt a non-woman position if she has to be incorporated in the film. To further delineate the issue, Mulvey takes recourse to Freud's text on femininity. What she discovers, in the process, is that masculinity and femininity are loosely tied to the biological gender binaries, male and female,

but what is more important is that both biological female and femininity are understood in terms of opposition or similarity to the biological male and masculinity. Neither female nor femininity can be understood independently of male or masculinity, and should a woman choose the “correct road, femininity”, that has to come at the price of her active agency:

[T]he feminine cannot be conceptualized as different, but rather only as *opposition* (passivity) in an antinomic sense, or as *similarity* (the phallic sense).... This shifting process, this definition in terms of opposition or similarity, leaves women also shifting between the metaphoric opposition ‘active’ and ‘passive’. The correct road, *femininity*, leads to increasing repression of ‘the active’ (the ‘phallic phase’ in Freud’s terms). (Mulvey 1989: 31)

But this does not forever deter her from taking up a masculine/active position, which explains how a woman can find her identity reflected in the actions of a male hero. Next, the author analyzes the narrative structure of the film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, to throw light upon “the changing function of woman” in cinema based on her readings of V. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. According to Propp, *marriage* plays a precise function in folk tales, that of providing closure to the narrative. Marriage represents symbolic integration of characters into the heteronormative social codes. Rejection or absence of marriage would by inference be a rejection or absence of heteronormativity in favor of imaginary plenitude. It would therefore indicate that an individual is trapped in the dyadic structure of pre-symbolic narcissism. The dichotomy between symbolic integration and primal narcissism is embodied in the dichotomous attributes of the two male protagonists in the film, Ranse and Tom. The former subscribes to the legal code and believes in systematic justice, while the other follows a personal moral code that is independent of the established judicial system. They thus symbolize a split in the notion of the Hollywood hero, and no one experiences this split more than the female character, Hallie. The

dilemma in which Hallie finds herself subsequently resolves in the favor of the law-abiding and law-upholding Ranse, who she marries, thereby incorporating herself into the symbolic system.

An allegiance to Tom would have excluded her from the system:

This narrative structure is based on an opposition between two irreconcilables. The two paths cannot cross. On one side there is an encapsulation of power, and phallic attributes, in an individual who has to bow himself out of the way of history; on the other, an individual impotence rewarded by political and financial power, which, in the long run, in fact becomes history. Here the function 'marriage' is as crucial as it is in the folk-tale. It plays the same part in creating narrative resolution, but is even more important in that 'marriage' is an integral attribute of the upholder of the law. In this sense Hallie's choice between the two men is predetermined. Hallie equals princess equals Oedipal resolution rewarded, equals repression of narcissistic sexuality in marriage. (Mulvey 1989: 34)

Finally, Mulvey directs her analytic gaze onto King Vidor's film, *Duel in the Sun*, which figures in the title of her essay. The thematic concern of the film is the central female character's (Lisa) dilemma of sexual identity, in which the passive femininity and aggressive masculinity constitute the two opposing poles. Instead of being offered as an object of sexual stimulation, which we noticed is the case with Hitchcock and Sternberg's films, the central woman character in *Duel in the Sun*, Pearl, is now the agency through which the film explicitly explores female sexual identity. Her split identity is characterized through her love for two male characters with contrary attributes—Lewt and Jesse:

Jesse (attributes: books, dark suit, legal skills, love of learning and culture, destined to be Governor of the State, money, and so on) signposts the 'correct' path for Pearl, towards learning a passive sexuality, learning to 'be a lady', above all sublimation into a concept of the feminine that is socially viable. Lewt (attributes: guns, horses, skill with horses, Western get-up, contempt for culture, destined to dine an outlaw, personal strength and personal power) offers sexual passion, not based on maturity but on a regressive, boy/girl

mixture of rivalry and play. With Lewt, Pearl can be a tomboy (riding, swimming, shooting). Thus the Oedipal dimension persists, but now illuminates the sexual ambivalence it represents for femininity. (Mulvey 1989: 35ff)

Pearl's failure to enter into the symbolic system becomes explicit when Jesse gets married to Helen. In the end, her aggressiveness brings about her death—she challenges Lewt to a duel to save Jesse, and they eventually end up shooting each other to death. Even in her moment of death, the identity dilemma is manifest—in order to protect the symbolic order (Jesse), she has to go against symbolic prescription (accept passivity and reject masculinity) by taking up arms. Her eventual death indicates that the dilemma is left unresolved—neither the symbolic nor the pre-symbolic has space for her.

#### ***1.4 – Riddles of the Sphinx***

In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey expresses the need for an already emerging alternative cinema to usurp the stage currently occupied by mainstream Hollywood. Such a cinema can act as a counterpoint to the status quo and liberate the image of the woman from being a signifier of male sexuality. But how does it do that? Alternative cinema does and would do that by violating cinematic verisimilitude and maintaining the distinction between the reel and the real. Such a distinction, Mulvey indicates, thwarts the spectators' identificatory propensities, which is crucial for freeing the woman-image from the suffocating trap of the male desire.

As we examined Mulvey's two essays, we saw that her approach to annihilating the male fetish is one of freeing of the spectator from the clasp of the imaginary dyad (which necessarily masculinizes its position) and throwing the spectator into an endless play of substitution, an approach which, as we and Mulvey realize, appropriates and rests upon the selfsame conditions

that precipitate and empower the male gaze. Mulvey the filmmaker complements the work of Mulvey the theorist by providing an interesting cinematic rendition of the approach to the problem outlined by her theoretical alter ego. In her avant-garde film, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (which she co-directed with Peter Wollen), Mulvey uses a mix of experimental techniques that leave almost no space for any kind of identification that could bring about sexual gratification for the masculinized spectator. In the film, Mulvey practices what she theorizes in her essay—the film seems to be an exercise in anti-pleasure. In brief, the film documents a day in the life of a woman, as she grapples with the challenges of motherhood and a failing marriage, and this documentation is interspersed with near-distorted, low-quality images of the Sphinx and of Mulvey herself, who is at a table, reading unfeelingly from her notes. Louise, the woman whose life-slice we are shown, is seen cooking food for the baby and the husband, feeding the baby, walking the baby out to the playground, attending to the baby's needs, and discussing her life difficulties with a friend. And as the film captures these fragments from Louise's life, the camera keeps panning along the horizontal axis in a 360-degree movement. As a result, no part of the woman's body is offered enough for the masculinized spectator. Instead of confining the spectatorial gaze to the body of the woman, the ocular apparatus records and shows the atmospheric strictures imposed upon her, in which she is bound to play out her role thrust upon her by tradition, day in and day out. Even if one arrests the film's movement by hitting the Pause button on the video player, the grainy quality of the footage denies a good peek. The woman is forced to live in confinement, it matters not whether she is at home or outside—that is the kind of effect that the continuously revolving camera, which captures every detail, even if fleetingly, of the physical space she finds herself in, brings about. The camera shows everything that is to be seen, thereby reducing her life to a summation of visual details—*Riddles of the Sphinx* is a

woman-centric film, in which the camera movement ensures that the woman is almost literally at the centre of her world; but the irony is that it is a pretty small world at the centre of which Louise finds herself. Moreover, as if the visual disorientation caused by the inherently unstable camera were not enough, the accompanying background score further aggravates the condition by providing an almost unmediated peek into the destabilizing effect the physical backdrop has on her psyche. Though you never get a good view of Louise, the mechanics of her portrayal make you feel for her, for the life (or, the lack thereof) that she has (or, has not). In place of primitive identifications, Mulvey offers you empathy. Instead of encouraging your infantile fantasies, she plays the mother who prepares you for a life without closures, precisely by thwarting your expectations of a closure (that she serves as the agency who withholds pleasures from you and thereby prepares you for a life where closures are forever deferred, does that mean that she is acting from a paternal position?). In the Greek mythology, the Sphinx is a figure with the body of a lion and the head of a woman, who tells riddles to travelers and then kills them as they fail to solve her riddles. In Hegel's theory of art, the Sphinx represents the threshold—the moment of transition—between nature and culture. The moment when Oedipus correctly answers the riddle posed to him by the Sphinx, thereby killing it, is taken to be a landmark moment in the *Zeitgeist's* process of self-realization. There are inconsistent accounts of the riddle that the Sphinx poses to Oedipus as he is about to cross over into Thebes, but the riddle that is often cited is, "What is the creature that travels on four legs in the morning, on two in the afternoon, and on three in the evening?" Oedipus' answer, of course, was that the creature is none other than the one answering the riddle, but it is significant to note the stratagem inherent in his solution—the riddle could not have been answered had it been taken literally and had Oedipus' cognitive faculty not processed the riddle in terms of metaphor and metonymy (along

the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes in language). Literality, and the semantic isomorphism that it entails, would have led Oedipus to death. What saves him is an openness, conscious or not, to the linguistic processes of displacement and substitution that, though deny any sense of immediate fruition, one must expose oneself to and endlessly endure if one wants to successfully negotiate the symbolic labyrinth. Looked at this way, the Sphinx is the test which one must pass before one can take the plunge into the order of the symbolic—that is, human culture—and which Oedipus passes. It is no happy coincidence that Mulvey's film is titled *Riddles of the Sphinx*. The cinema offers itself as a conundrum to be solved—would it be far-fetched to seek parallel between the images of the Sphinx and that of the figure of Mulvey as she reads out excerpts from her notebook to the viewers? In the light of this reading, the Sphinx ceases to be the destructive force of femininity, always threatening to founder the symbolic economy, which is what it is widely taken to represent in the Greek legend. On the contrary, the figure begins to come across as championing the cause of the Father, the paternal rule-maker who must be abided by for one to enter and become a subject of the symbolic. Thus, the artist in Mulvey meticulously fulfills the desire expressed by the theorist in her—the desire to liberate the figure of the woman from being subjected to the vicissitudes of the male desire in cinema.



## Chapter II

### The Lacanian Categories of Experience – Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real

Lacan formulated three mutually interlacing experiential categories—Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—which can be made to serve as an entry point into his theory. These categories, or *registers* as he calls them, are infused with specialized significations, which we will presently explore. As David Pavon Cueller says in *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious: Lacan, Discourse Analysis and Social Psychology*, “to ‘understand anything’ about Lacanian theory, we should first learn to differentiate between its ‘three systems to guide ourselves by’” (Cueller 2010: 1). For the sake of epistemic convenience, we may initially think of these registers as sequential phases in an individual’s life, provided we agree to renounce the convenience as soon as its purpose is met, so that we may better appreciate their significations.

#### II.1 – The Imaginary Register

*Imaginary is the register* in which an infant, still disjointed in its motor coordination, experiences a unity of form in an exteriority—namely, in its *mirror image*, both literal and figurative. This phase is crucial to the infant’s *ego* formation. *Ego* is a unity that an infant is deprived of until it first sees itself reflected in an external object—on the mirror surface and in the eyes of the (m)other (or, in the eyes of any other who indulges the infant narcissistically). Let us spend a moment on the structural paradox underlying this event in the early months of infancy. The infant recognizes *itself in another*—it takes the image for itself. Recognition is, thus, marred by misrecognition, the counterintuitive part being the fact that what is internal to one’s being (*ego*) is formed outside of it in the specular field (in another). Prior to *ego*’s formation, the neonatal baby is an amorphous mass that is experienced as fragmented, though one may quite rightly wonder what experience

might mean in the absence of an ego. The baby's ego has not arrived yet, and its first sense of ego accords with its specular *(mis)recognition* with the external *inverted* image. The *(mis)identification* is carried long after into adulthood—we continue to *(mis)identify*<sup>2</sup> ourselves with our reflections in the mirror, do we not? Ironically, the ego is lacking in the formless assortment and surfaces only in another object—the ego is alienated at the very moment that it is born. In other words, *self* comes into being only after it is displaced from itself. Is not the logic of the paradoxical object whose identity entails what is external to it manifested here? As already said, the moment of unification originates when the baby (mis)recognizes itself in the mirror, which is what lends locus to the loose assortment that the baby is. Bear in mind that this unity is non-ontological—at the level of ontology, the baby is still fragmented. The unity is only at the level of the specular image, which therefore indicates a fundamental discord between *being* and *representation*. *Being* and *representation* can thus be seen as sharing an asymptotic relation—each is destined to approach the other, but their intersection never takes place within finite spacetime. This fundamental discord

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside, let me overtly direct your attention here to the idiosyncratic fashion in which I have typed the words—other, mother, another, and (mis)recognition. ‘O’ is deliberately italicized in ‘other’, ‘mother’, and ‘another’; and ‘mis’ is parenthesized despite the fact that ‘misrecognition’ is an absolutely legitimate term in English. And yet I have typed them untypically. Why? The answer lies in the question itself—the intention is to defamiliarize the readers of these words, to prompt them to view these terms with suspicion—the unusual usage must mean something more, must convey an excess which is not immediately accessible! In other words, to otherize the other. It is not a novel strategy and even the average academic reader is likely to be already familiar with it, but it had to be called out to block the possibility of it being overlooked. The defamiliarization is aimed at destabilizing the established semantics of the words, to disrupt the one-to-one correspondence between the words and their agreeable meanings.

between the baby and its reflection in anOther is cathected with the linguistic distinction between signified and signifier. As users of natural language, we know language as a means to an end—thus as a system of *signs*, language plays a subservient role to communication (i.e. transfer of meaning\intention) between individuals, which is the purpose that language is understood to serve. However, in the discord that we have just noted, we see a reversal of the roles that have been traditionally assigned to each component in the binary pair, *signifier\signified*—*signifier* is no longer an innocuous and inert entity that is out there to be made use of (for communicating the *signified*, to be precise), and *signified* no more enjoys autonomous existence in an insulated and incorruptible haven. Rather, the *signifier* (the specular image) penetrates the *signified* (the fragmented body), thereby irreversibly modifying (the specular image lends totality\wholeness to the body-fragment, long before the infant can master its body in reality) it. Be that as it may, the externalized totality is pleasurable for the infant. Freud calls this *primary narcissism*<sup>3</sup>, which is vital to a child's healthy psychic development. As noted earlier, the specular image is not to be taken as strictly literal. One may alternatively think of this image as the one that the baby finds manifested in its mother's affections (or, in the affections of any other who is cathected in it). The split between this image that animates the baby and the fragmented body drives the baby to idealize this image, which Lacan names as the *Ideal Ego*. It is an ideal ego as opposed to the neonatal body deficient in its motor capacity.

## II.2 – The Symbolic Register

But even at this point, the baby does not distinguish itself from what is external to it—it still thinks of itself as an amorphous continuity, with no divide between the inside and the outside, despite the

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<sup>3</sup> Freud shares his views on primary narcissism in his work, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*.

emergence of an ego, which was missing in its pre-Imaginary phase. It must also be noted that the kid is yet to enter the linguistic domain—its initiation into language has not happened yet. The infant's fixation with its (ideal) image in all its manifestations discloses a dyadic structure—between itself and anOther (mother)—which must be broken, if an individual must realize its subjectivity (in the Lacanian sense of the term). The dyadic structure is broken by the introduction of a third term, the-Name-of-the-Father. The Name-of-the-Father, in Lacanian theory, is the equivalent of the Oedipal complex (also known as castration complex\anxiety) in Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the child's cathexis in the mother is libidinal, which is disrupted by the castration threat (this tells us that we are looking at a male child) posed by a paternal, father figure. In crude terms, the threat takes the form—*Leave your mother for me and you can have your fulfilment in your wife later in life. Otherwise, I'll castrate you, and you'll forever be deprived of your sexual enjoyment.* This essentially boils down to the following two choices for the child—*Either I indulge myself in immediate pleasures and get penalized for it, or I defer my enjoyment until later*—the key point being rejecting immediate gratification and postponing gratification to a later point in time. With this understanding, the story of Oedipus takes on a newer import: Oedipus is castrated (he loses his eyesight; according to Freud, the eyes represent an erogenous zone in the body) because he sins by 1) killing his own father (parricide) and 2) then marrying his own mother (incest). The threat is manifested differently for the girl child, who thereby suffers from penis envy—as opposed to the boy-child who fears that he may be castrated, the girl-child is by default castrated—an opposition in which the boy-child occupies the primary term in relation to which the girl-child is determined and represented. In simpler terms, the child suffers a loss (whereby he is castrated) when he realizes that he by himself does not exhaust his mother's desire, that she has other desires, too, including, but not limited to, her desire

for his father. This loss is not an originary loss, the originary loss being marked by the fetus' separation from the mother's body at the time of birth. Turning back to Lacan, the-Name-of-the-Father is the signifier of paternal authority, which introduces rules and regulations into an otherwise lawless life of the child. It is essentially a placeholder, which has little to do with the biological father—the patriarch who is the designated figure of authority in every household—though its naming may be traced back to the latter. So, what is the function of the placeholder, 'the-Name-of-the-Father?' Like earlier said, the-Name-of-the-Father disrupts the narcissistic dyad of *imaginary* identifications and thereby thrusts the child into the domain of language—which is Lacan's *symbolic register*. The initiation into the symbolic register is necessary for the child's social and interpersonal wellbeing. It is in this register (also known as the symbolic order or the social symbolic) in which the human child gives up immediate gratification and learns to withhold enjoyment until posterity. The-Name-of-the-Father is a set of rules put in place to forbid certain actions from being carried out. One may ask, which actions are forbidden? Is Lacan indulging in some sort of universalism here? The answer is—*Not really, rather quite far from it!* This becomes clear when we glimpse at different manifestations of the-Name-of-the-Father. *Incest* provides a classic example of its prohibitive function. Sexual relationship between a mother and her son (and daughter), a father and his daughter (and son), between a sister and her brother, between sisters, between brothers—is prohibited. This prohibition manifests differently in different cultures. Let us take the case of various linguistic groups in India. Certain groups (in northern India) have tabooed sexual liaison between immediate siblings as well as between distant cousins—that is, incest is tabooed across the family tree. In certain other groups (in southern India, for instance), however, only immediate incest is tabooed. In fact, in some such groups, it is customary to marry the daughter to her maternal uncle (mother's brother), whose entitlement it is to be her first suitor.

It is only in the absence of such supposed or entitled first suitors that the family looks for a suitable groom outside the extended family (or, maybe un-prohibits the girl to play a proactive role in the game). A historical Marxist would see the latter case as a hegemonic way of retaining property within the family, but we shall disallow ourselves to pursue that thread. It may be noted here that, in West Bengal, it is not unusual for girls to subsequently become romantically involved with male acquaintances whom they would initially address by suffixing their names with *da*, derived from the Bengali word, *dada*, meaning elder brother. Take, for example, *Phalguni-da* or *Milon-da*. Every such address has a subtle, fraternal connotation. Should one read into it a reappearance of the prohibited incest in this phenomenon? The point that is pertinent to our discussion is the culture-specificity of prohibitive manifestations. It is not irrelevant to ask why incest is prohibited. It should be obvious that an answer to the question cannot be sought at the instinctual level, precisely because instincts do not disambiguate between incestuous and non-incestuous bonds (which is why there is prohibition).

Prohibition is symbolic, not instinctive. So, if instinct cannot address the question, what can? Why should not there be a sexual relationship between immediate family members? We may look to Levi-Strauss for an answer:

By establishing a general rule of obedience, whatever this rule may be, the group asserts its jural authority over what it legitimately considers an essential valuable. It refuses to sanction the natural inequality of the distribution of the sexes within the family, and on the only possible basis it institutes freedom of access for every individual to the women of the group. This basis is, in short, that neither fraternity nor paternity can be put forward as claims to a wife, but that the sole validity of these claims lies in the fact that all men are in equal competition for all women, their respective relationships being defined in terms of the group, and not the family. (Levi-Strauss 1969: 42)

Being the brother or the father of a woman in the family does not entitle a man to claim the woman for his sexual fulfillment. In the matters of sex, decision-making is a prerogative of the community to which the family belongs. This measure was put in place to address the unequal distribution of sexes within the community, to satisfy a higher (male) demand with a lower (female) supply—a relationship which posits women as sexual commodities and men as consumers of these sexual commodities. Levi-Strauss adds that this lopsided sexual equation works to the advantage of male individuals in such primitive societies because by giving up their familial entitlement (endogamy), they gain access to a larger set of women in the group (exogamy):

This rule also has advantages for individuals, since, by obliging them to renounce a limited or very restricted share in the women immediately available, it gives everybody a claim to a number of women whose availability, it is true, is checked by the demands of custom, but a number which theoretically is as large as possible and is the same for everyone. (Levi-Strauss 1969: 42)

It is generally accepted to be true that endogamous relationships within the family are detrimental to the family's survival, causing disfigurement and deformity in the offspring. Thus, the choice between endogamy and exogamy is essentially a choice between extinction and survival. Therein lies the answer to our question. The structural aspect of this social transaction between men of women is significant. Immediate women (women with whom men are in immediate relationship within the family and those who bear the-[sur]-name-of-their-father) are *exchanged* for distant ones. This signals a loose linking between the signifier, which is the-(sur)Name-of-the-Father and women as signified by the *surname*. What lends the guise of homogeneity to this otherwise heterogenous exchange is the phallic signifier, the-(sur)Name-of-the-Father:

The Law characterizing and constituting culture is that sexual relations shall not take place within the same bloodline or kinship group. Levi-Strauss established that the most fundamental prohibition in every particular set of kinship laws was the interdiction of sexual relations between father and daughter. Since mating could not take place within the immediate family, the incest taboo was understood to necessitate the exchange of women between families, in order for this intercourse to take place. (cf. SII: 261ff.) Exchange, involving the equivalence of two heterogeneous entities, indicates that the structure of the sign, in which one thing stands for something else, has already arisen. The very possibility of exchange is thus premised upon the arising of the symbol. The name for the very first symbol is therefore, 'the name of the father' (*le nom du pere*). That a certain consanguineous group has acquired a family name makes it possible to exchange women *between* families. Thus the origin of the symbolic order, the 'transcendental signifier', is the 'name-of-the-father'. (Lewis 2008: 50)

What strikes one, immediately or in retrospect, about this exchange is its immanent arbitrariness, which can be made apodictic by even a cursory probing of probably the most familiar form of exchange that all of us deal in—commodity exchange—the arbitrariness of which is always in plain sight but is seldom, if at all, registered. On the contrary, commodity exchange is so normalized that one who questions the normalcy of this exchange is likely to be considered anything but normal. In the pre-currency times, barter was the system of exchange, whose sole purpose was to ensure survival. This is because had the producers continued to amass their produce within a group without exchanging it with the produce of other groups, their collective existence would come to an end. A producer of rice could not have sustained solely on the basis of his produce. Minimally, the biological development and growth would depend on other food articles, too. So, he had to part with his produce to be able to gain another's, let us say, grams. The exchange would invariably be of the form, *x amount of rice is equal to y amount of grams*. The alien-ness of the equation derives from the arbitrariness of the equivalence that is assumed between two



intrinsically different objects, *rice* and *grams*. Even if  $x$  and  $y$  are numerically identical, the equation stays arbitrary. But the arbitrariness does not bother because it brings about exchange, a necessary condition for social continuance. The barter system eventually gave way to the monetary system of exchange, as if the system grew conscious of its inherent arbitrariness and responded to it by creating a level of abstraction on the top—money. Money masquerades the immanent arbitrariness of exchange by metamorphosing the equation— $x$  amount of *rice* and  $y$  amount of *grams* are now separately equated with  $Z$  amount of *money*. Signifieds (*rice* and *grams* in our example), therefore, are rendered inter-exchangeable vis-à-vis a third (money\currency), which comes across as enjoying a status that is independent of the dynamic exchange that it subjects all signifieds to. In this case, money is the-Name-of-the-Father owing to the fact that it dislodges the tight coupling which was characteristic of commodity exchange in the barter system and brings about a dynamism which was not there earlier.

That is one approach to making sense of the-Name-of-the-Father. To approach the problem differently, we need to ask the question—who is the prohibiting authority? Who prohibits? Countless examples can be drawn from our experiences in response to that question—teacher, doctor, cops, government, censorship, surveillance cameras, signs on the walls, mother (even mother), feminists, Marxists, religious figures, etcetera. The first and foremost example that should have come to mind is God (the paternal, Father figure) Himself. These are what Lacan calls the **Big Other** (among the above examples, God is the Big Other, while teacher, cops, judiciary, bureaucratic institutions, government, CCTV, etc. can be thought of as ‘big others’). What exactly is this Big Other? It is that which an individual wants to please and, more importantly, must not displease with her or his actions. What does the Big Other want and what would displease it? The Big Other commands acceptance and adherence, and hates defiance and rebellion, which it

penalizes with terrible consequences (remember the castration threat). For Lacan, the Big Other represents the *Ideal Ego*, as opposed to the *Ego Ideal* that we encountered in the Imaginary register—it is the ideal ego because you want to please it with your actions, because you are always under its *gaze*. It is important not to restrict one's understanding of the Big Other (or, big others) to the examples enumerated earlier (each of which participates in a social order and each of which is external to one's agency). Because that would mean that you are not under the gaze when you are alone, all by yourself—which is not at all true. This might give us a clue as to why one is wary of singing even in the privacy of one's self or feels *naked* when *nude* by oneself. This is because one constantly feels that one is *being judged*. The Big Other is this judging authority. It may be all right to disambiguate between a social Big Other and a private one—that is, the Big Other that watches you when you are in the presence of your empirical others may not be the one who is surveilling you when you are in the company of your self—but what may not be compromised is its omni and ever presence. It is there, quietly watching you, even when no one else is.

Zizek provides a beautiful example to illuminate the point. Sometimes, you write down a message, in the form of a letter or an email, let's say for an estranged friend or lover, but you do not deliver it. The message fails to reach its addressee. Yet you retain the message, instead of trashing it. In fact, you take careful measures for storing it out of others' reach, between the pages of a book or in a hidden folder in the inbox. Why? If you do not want to send the message to its intended recipient anyway, why do you not, having composed it, just destroy it and make it vanish into thin air, as it were? That would be a more foolproof method of making sure that the addressee never gets it—is not that so? But you do not. Is that because you make a distinction between a message-not-delivered-and-destroyed and a message-neither-delivered-nor-destroyed-but-safely-stored? For Zizek, the undelivered and the undestroyed message is nonetheless delivered to the

Big Other. This is a reference to what Lacan says in his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, 'The Purloined Letter'—"a letter always arrives at its destination" (Lacan 2006: 30) Let us understand the Big Other with another example—the *writing of personal diaries*. I have always struggled with the oxymoronic form of the expression, *personal diary*. Writing personal diaries is a phenomenon with which we become at least familiar early in our childhood. A personal diary is meant to be a written record of the diary writer's most intimate of impressions, feelings, and thoughts, unorganized or not, fragmentary or not. As such, it is to be accessible only to the writer her\himself, and practically non-existent as far as everyone else is concerned. What always bothered me is the question—why write if it is not supposed to be read by anyone other than me and when, as the one putting my impressions, feelings, and thoughts into words, I already am in the most proximate space with them? Then, why write a personal diary? Why should anyone write a personal diary for that matter? (The absurdity becomes even more prominent on contemplating the hypothesis—would one who is all alone in the world, without any audience whatsoever, write at all?) I cannot be writing for myself for the aforesaid reason. There of course is an instrumentalist response to the question—you write because 1) writing helps you get into the groove, 2) you develop a fondness for it which, over time, will make a better writer of you, 3) you can revisit your thoughts later in life, and so on and so forth. We have been exposed to such reasons from all quarters, and these reasons are not without their practical merit. Minimally, reasons such as these temporarily address a child's curiosity, until the child stops asking you, and then the child asks no more. But the question remains—why must what you write be strictly personal, inaccessible to any other? All the pragmatic rationales would retain their usefulness even if you are writing a socially sharable diary, so to speak. Thus, we are back with our question. I think that a possible response to the question would be to say that we are not entirely alone even when we are alone,

writing a personal diary—we have your silent reader in the Big Other. Does not the proverbial saying—*You can hide from everyone but yourself*—mean this? The *self* that one cannot hide from is the Big Other. We encounter the Big Other in the symbolic dimension—that is, in language. It is my exteriorized, disembodied self, watching me closely from an imaginary point in space, whose *scrutinizing gaze*<sup>4</sup> I cannot escape from. It is in this sense that the Big Other is the ideal ego—I want to be like him, but I am not there yet. This brings in another level of alienation—in addition to the alienation that we encountered in the Imaginary ego ideal, an individual is also alienated from her\himself in the ideal ego. The Big Other as language is responsible for my symbolic constitution in language. I write, even when I am certain that no one else will ever read what I write, precisely because I want to encounter my Big Other in, and as, language. The Big Other can perhaps also help us understand why *exhibitionism* is considered passive whereas *voyeurism* is considered active. After all, syntactically speaking, if a woman exhibits, does she not retain the agency as much as the voyeur who decides to gaze at her? She may be the receiver of the gaze, but is not she the one who decides and directs the reception? So, assuming that the exhibitionist is passively positioned, how does one account for the difference in the two agencies? One way to grasp the difference is to think of the voyeur as one who escapes the gaze temporarily by virtue of his position, which is that of playing the Big Other to the voluntary exhibitionist. In other words,

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<sup>4</sup> Must one compare it with the gaze that is at work in one's dream, which watches oneself in one's own dreams from an external, disembodied—yet concurrently embodied in the body of the dreamer—point of view? The camera seems to reproduce this operative logic of the dream-gaze, but there are crucial differences between the latter and the gaze of the camera—the dream-gaze is firmly bound to the dreamer, whereas the camera-gaze has no such obligations.

the only way to escape the gaze is to become one yourself, which is positionally denied to the exhibitionist.

Enjoyment can be understood as that which one feels when one's efforts in, let's say, deciphering a text pay off and meaning emerges. The semantic emergence happens only retroactively, which means that a seemingly meaningless event acquires significance only at a future point in time. Meaning is always a retroactive construction. In simpler words, the meaning of a sentence-(in-making) is deferred until the final punctuation arrives. Similar to *being* and *representation*, *being* and *meaning* share an asymptotic relation. Displacement from a certain position is integral for the position to bear meaning, and for us to feel nostalgic about the position from which we have been temporally castrated. As a system of symbols, language is characterized by differentiation, displacement, and deferment—it is a signifying chain in which a signifier refers to, contrary to popular understanding, another signifier, which in turn refers to another signifier and so on and so forth (and in which each signifier contains a differential trace of another), such that the signified which is supposed to ultimately ground this process of signification is infinitely postponed. Displacement as metonymy and substitution as metaphor are knit to the very texture of subjective existence in the symbolic order, a classic example of which is our spatio-temporality—each moment in time, howsoever infinitesimal the magnitude of the moment be, is continually substituted by its sequential other; and, as beings entrenched in and inhabiting this substitutive process, we are continually displaced, against or despite our will. The signifiers of my present coordinates in space and time—the *here* and the *now*—conjure up the illusion of immutability that I can hold on to, while the signified underneath continues to corrode away through surrogacy and through dislocation. The signified is infinitely postponed because, as signified, it refers to an extra-linguistic entity, whereas a signifier can only refer to another signifier in the signifying chain and,

therefore, cannot as such refer to a beyond, a transcendental entity outside the linguistic domain. For Lacan, this transcendental signified, which grounds language as a system of signification, is nothing but the ultimate signifier, ‘the-Name-of-the-Father.’ In other words, the Name-of-the-Father is a signifier of the symbolic order—it is a *signifier of all signifiers* (signifier of language, that is). The-Name-of-the-Father as the signifier of all signifiers must therefore be the signifier of language itself, language being the set of all signifiers, past, present, and future. Now, a signifier of all signifiers is still a signifier. This makes the-Name-of-the-Father ambiguously positioned with respect to language.

What relationship obtains between the *signifier of all signifiers* and *language*? Is it one of homogeneity, thereby occupying a space within language? Or, is it one of heterogeneity, thereby situating itself outside language? Language as a differential system indicates that a signifier cannot be self-contained, that it is always directed at something other than itself, and that it bears in its kernel the absence of another signifier as a constitutive trace. In other words, a signifier derives its meaningfulness exogenously—its semantic identity entails another (an earlier event takes on meaning at a later time—the semantic identity of the earlier event thus incorporates the subsequent outsider). It follows that the-Name-of-the-Father, as a signifier, must belong to the totality that language is and, as such, cannot ground language semantically. For it to provide the necessary semantic support to the linguistic network, the signifier of all signifiers (also known as the primary, the primordial, the master, or the phallic signifier) must be heterogenous to language—that is, the primary signifier lies outside the network of language with which it must, therefore, share a meta-relationship. This renders Lacan vulnerable to a Derridean deconstruction. The-Name-of-the-Father is to be thought of as an exception that is critical to building the system of signification. It means that *Do as you please, except this*. What lends meaning to the symbolic order is the one

thing that is excluded from it—in other words, it is the un-accommodability of the Name-of-the-Father that makes possible the coming into being, as it were, of the symbolic order. According to Lacan, this primary signifier is *the other of the Other*, the big Other being the linguistic order itself. But does not this *other of the Other*, by the very fact of being excluded from the symbolic system, form a beyond of the system, thereby compromising Lacan, instead of salvaging him? In the pretense of defense, does one not come across as subverting Lacanian theory from within? Derrida has clinically demonstrated that all metaphysics is logocentric—that is, all metaphysics is a metaphysics of presence. There is nothing problematic about it except for the fact that, as Derrida has shown in his works, every presence, upon decomposition, reveals a perennial interplay of absence and presence, and that absolute presence is an impossibility.

Any detailed examination of Derrida's accusations of logocentrism against Lacan is beyond the scope of my current endeavor, let alone taking a stab at salvaging Lacan. Right now, we shall have to stay content with the following excerpt from Derrida, which provides a sneak peek into the nature of charges levelled against Lacan:

The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form [...]. As centre, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible [...] is forbidden. [...] Thus it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the centre is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure—although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the *episteme* as philosophy or science—is contradictorily

coherent. And as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire.  
(Derrida 2005: 352)

In the excerpt, *structure* is a metaphor for the symbolic order that is language, whose coming into being and persistence thenceforth depend on its *centre*, a metaphor for the primary signifier. The primary signifier not only carves out the linguistic order but also concurrently delimits the order's infinitude by transforming it into a totality. All the signifiers in language are subject to inter-substitution, except the primary signifier. This is precisely what Derrida says about the regulative centre—all the spatial points inside a circle, including those that collectively make up its circumference, may interchange their places (thereby undergoing correlative displacement), except the one that regulates the circle from within. At the same time, this regulative point within the circle simultaneously locates itself outside the circle, which explains its escape from substitution and displacement. The formal aspect of the structural paradox that Derrida uncovers here—the centre being simultaneously located outside as well as inside the structure—is intriguing, to say the least. Substituting *centre* with the primary signifier makes the intrigue more prominent—the-Name-of-the-Father, which forms the symbolic structure via its exclusion from the structure (this is because exclusion is a necessary condition for structural formation; the circular structure drawn on a white paper is parasitic on the white space that is precluded from it), re-appears in the structure. This, in Freudian terms, is *the return of the repressed*. In other words, that which is refused access to the symbolic order and, therefore, denied symbolization, returns in it. This brings us to the third Lacanian register, the *Real*.

### **II.3 – The Real Register**

What is the Lacanian Real? To begin with, the *Real* is not to be taken for the reality as we know it. The reality that we inhabit and that provides the content of our day-to-day experiences is what



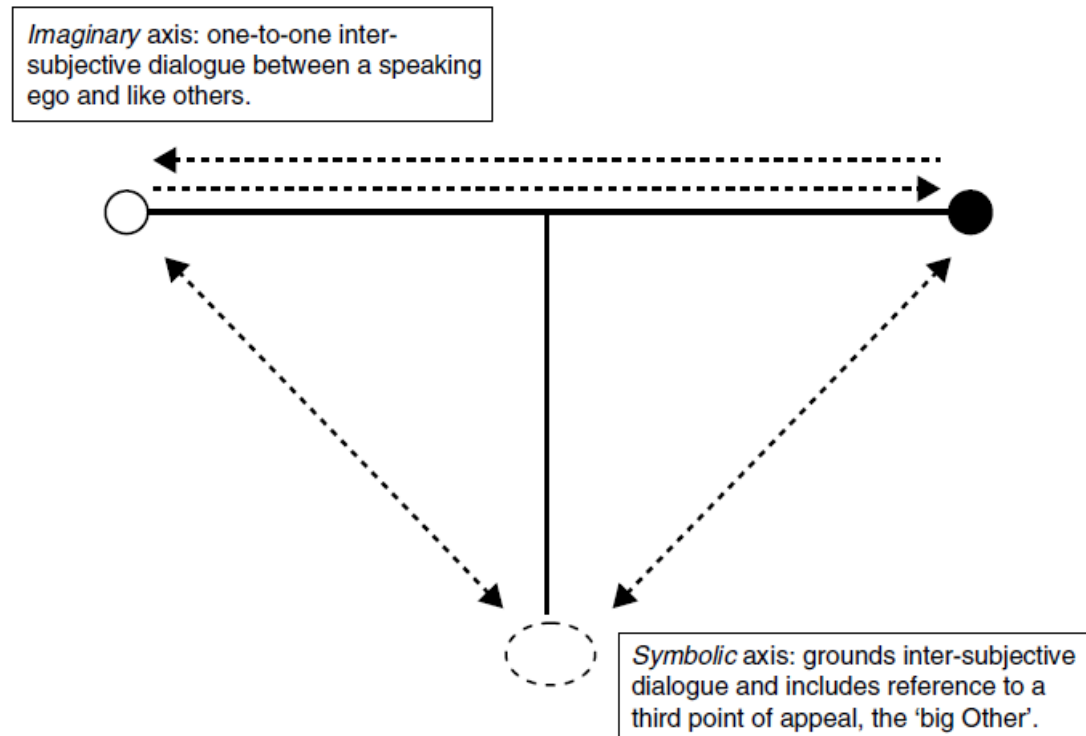
Lacan refers to as the symbolic order, which we have discussed in detail. The reality as we know it is articulable—we can and do symbolize it in language all the time. More importantly, we constitute this reality in the very attempts that we make to articulate it—we do not just inhabit it, which should make clear the structural similarity between Lacanian symbolic and what Kant says about reality—Reality is that which I represent. What must be noticed is that by describing reality as that which is articulable, describable, in other words representable, I have already hinted at what the Lacanian Real might be—it is that which is inarticulable, indescribable, and therefore non-representable. It is that which one cannot speak of, since each and everything that one can, and does, speak of is thereby accommodated in language—within the symbolic order, that is. Yet again, we are reminded of Kant’s noumena, which is excluded from reality. How far does the similarity go and what their points of departure are, are important questions, irrespective of whether they bear any immediate or distant relevance to our thematic concern. However, it warrants a separate research undertaking and, as such, falls outside the ambit of my present engagement. So, on the one hand, we have the articulable reality, which Lacan calls the symbolic order, and, the inarticulable Lacanian Real on the other. This way of outlining Lacanian Symbolic and Lacanian Real—adjectivizing the symbolic as *articulable* and the Real as *inarticulable* posits the two oppositionally—does not quite help Lacan against a deconstructive attack. Though we have decided not to deal with Derrida’s critique, that does not make the critique vanish into thin air; like the Freudian repressed, it will keep returning to make its presence felt and to undermine our illustrative accomplishments. The irony inherent in our informed exclusion of Derrida and the destabilizing effect that it may subsequently have on our systematic understanding of Lacan, thereby threatening to defeat the very objective that the exclusion is supposed to help us achieve, is that its operational form is precisely that of the Lacanian Real. The Real as inarticulable is that

which is denied access to the symbolic order and that which cannot be symbolized. The just concluded sentence is a composite of two semantically distinct clauses—*that which is denied access* indicates that the Real is that which is forced out, whereas *that which cannot be symbolized* portrays the Real as intrinsically non-symbolizable. Be that as it may, the Real seems destined to exclusion from language in either case. One may point to the paradox inherent in our expository undertaking as regards the Real—how is it that one tries to describe something that is immanently indescribable? The Real as Lacan conceives it is indescribable, there is no doubt about that. But, at this point, we seem to have acquired an understanding of the Real. The paradox can be explained away by forging a distinction between *Real as the object of enunciation* and *Real as the object of statement/proposition*, taking our cue from the Lacanian distinction between *the subject of statement* and *the subject of enunciation*. The distinction is conceptually useful in making sense of Lacan’s words, “Hence the paradox by which one of my most acute listeners, when I began to make my views known on analysis as dialectic, thought he could oppose my position by a remark that he formulated in the following terms: ‘Human Language (according to you) constitutes a communication in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form.’” (Lacan 2001: 63). The idea of the “sender receiving his own message from the recipient of the message in an inverted form” is baffling, to say the least. As the excerpt makes clear, these are not originally Lacan’s own words—these were told him by one of his “most acute listeners.” But that precisely is the point that he seems to be making here—that my (sender) message came to me from the other (receiver—the “most acute listener”). It is no wonder that the words have received extensive commentatorial attention. While it does not make sense to exhaust the diverse interpretations these words have received (and this is not to claim that even if it had made sense, it would be possible to exhaust the interpretations), it is useful to look at a few possibilities that

have been explored. In his book, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, Lorenzo Chiesa reads in Lacan's words a movement from a conception of the unconscious at the level of the individual to a conception of the unconscious beyond the individual. As Lorenzo sees it, this movement is manifested in terms of the movement from speech to language. In other words, one way to make sense of Lacan's words is to see them vis-à-vis the difference between speech and language, where speech is to be understood as operating at the individual level and language as operating at the transindividual level (that is, including and beyond individual contiguities). Next, Lorenzo goes on to explain the different semantics of the words. At one level, the words mean that the speaker of the words is by default a listener of the words. He may not be the intended addressee, but he definitely is one of the addressees—that is, the speaker literally hears his words in his voice (this not applicable to just verbal communication—as I write, I become the immediate consumer of what I write, literally; my sense of touch, too, is similarly informed—the pattern that manifests itself is that the *ego* locates itself in things that are exterior to it, which in this case happens to be language). Read differently, he continues, the words refer to the fact that the speaker appreciates a fuller import of his or her statement only after he or she has said it, thereby registering it in the symbolic economy. Once the statement is claimed by the symbolic, it suffers a loss of semantic fixity over which the speaker had complete authority until moments ago. This may not be too difficult to grasp though and may be illustrated to the unconvinced reader through a commonplace example. Suppose you and your friend are talking about a common acquaintance. You tell him how trustworthy the acquaintance is: *I don't think she'll betray us*. The friend retorts: *Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?* The confrontational question (confrontational in the sense that it presents an alien entity in your person, of which you were unaware, to you) hints at the silent presence of a third listener, eavesdropping on the conversation, as it were. The inherent

autoreferentiality of the example is that it is called into being to convince *the reader-hinted-at* about a hypothesis that involves *the reader-hinted-at*. In regular conversations, we seldom pay attention to the silent interlocutor because we read metaphorically what ought to be taken quite literally. We miss that which is in plain sight, which is how the unconscious (which is “structured like language,” to use Lacan’s words) works. Coming back to Lacan’s distinction, the subject of statement is the syntactical subject of a sentence in the first person, whereas the subject of enunciation is the subject spoken to or the subject spoken about. The difference is not to be understood as one between what is said and what is meant. Speech in which the speaker identifies him\herself with the sentential indexical (*I, we, you, he, she, they*, for example) belongs to the Lacanian imaginary (because of the obvious reason that you identify yourself with the syntactical subject) and, therefore, amounts to what Lacan calls *empty speech*. Speech is *full* only when its imaginary identification, which we have learned manifests a dyadic structure, is renounced for subjective exploration. This subjective exploration involves the paradox of giving up of your subjectivity in the imaginary (the narcissistic identification between the signifier *I* and the signified that we all are) only to recover it in the symbolic. This slipping away of the identity underneath the syntactically and semantically assured certainty of the deictic is what constitutes *full speech*. In his paper, ‘Empty and Full Speech,’ Derek Hook says that contrary to what we think, dialogue manifests a triadic structure. The triadic structure should immediately evoke the primary signifier, ‘the-Name-of-the-Father.’ Hook explains that intersubjective communication among human beings assumes an external frame of reference which grounds communication between any two human beings, and that communication between strictly two reference points without an external third point is something that belongs to the imaginary register. In the figure below, reproduced from Hook’s paper in the book, *The Social Psychology of Communication*, the horizontal line

represents the imaginary axis, which corresponds to two intersubjective participants, and the vertical line represents the symbolic axis, which metamorphoses the dyad into a triad:



(What is conspicuous by its very absence in the figural representation is the Lacanian Real.) This is something that we find in Lacan himself when he talks about the “inadequacy of the conception of ‘language as a sign’” (Lacan 2001: 62). He describes how a bee, which has gathered nectar and is on the way back to its hive, points other bees, with precision, in the direction of the source of nectar, while simultaneously indicating the nearness or farness of the source. This demonstrates successful communication between bees, but does this communication qualify to be language? Lacan’s answer is in the negative. The successful communication underscores an infallible, point-to-point mapping between the designator and the designated, and yet it is not language. Why? It is precisely the infallibility of the communication that disqualifies it from being language:

It is now generally admitted that when the bee returns to the hive from its honey gathering it indicates to its companions by two sorts of dance the existence of nectar and its relative distance, near or far, from the hive. The second type of dance is the most remarkable, for the plane in which the bee traces the figure-of-eight curve...and the frequency of the figures executed within a given time, designate, on the one hand, exactly the direction to be followed, determined in relation to the inclination...and, on the other hand, the distance, up to several miles, at which the nectar is to be found. And the other bees respond to this message by setting off immediately for the place thus designated.

...

But is it necessarily a language? We can say that it is distinguished from language precisely by the fixed correlation of its signs to the reality that they signify. For in a language signs take on their value from their relations to each other in the lexical distribution of semantemes as much as in the positional, or even flectional, use of morphemes, in sharp contrast to the fixity of the coding used by bees. And the diversity of human languages (langues) takes on its full value from this enlightening discovery.

Furthermore, while the message of the kind described here determines the action of the socius, it is never retransmitted by it. This means that the message remains fixed in its function as a relay of the action, from which no subject detaches it as a symbol of communication itself. (Lacan 2001: 63)

Language stands out from the communicative mechanism of the bees by virtue of it being a differential system, in which signification occurs as a result of the interplay of varying intra- as well as inter-verbal differences (and perhaps extra-verbal, too), which is lacking in the precision with which bees communicate. Moreover, though the message transmission governs the *social* actions of bees, it has no usefulness beyond its immediate context, unlike the languages of the humans. Human language does not function as a code to be deciphered, despite the human tendency to regulate its semantic dynamism. Having said that, though language belongs to the symbolic register, imaginary forces are forever in play to lend it semantic finality. What is it that

deprives language of its finality, desirable or not? What is it that denies language its totality? It is that in language which is more than language—it is the surplus of language, a non-accommodatable, non-symbolizable remainder, which causes meaning to slip away from our grip, so to speak. We have seen that the non-accommodatable and the non-symbolizable is the Lacanian Real. Thus, the Real is that which must be repressed, if the formation of the linguistic system is to take place, but the repression does not make the Real disappear altogether—it returns in language only to deny language its completeness, thereby exacting its vengeance, as it were. To further understand the distinction between the subject of statement and the subject of enunciation, think of the assertion, *I'm lying*. It is paradoxical—if I am lying, then I must be saying the truth, which means that I am not lying; or, if I am not saying the truth, then I am lying, in which case I am saying the truth. The paradox is generally held to be engendered by the autoreferentiality of the assertion. But when looked at with the distinction in mind, the assertion appears valid and the paradox dissolves. How? The one who is lying is the indexical I, but in the process I am saying the truth about the subject of enunciation. In other words, I am lying to say the truth about my lying. What the assertion also underlines is a split in subjectivity, an absence of coincidence between the subject that states and the subject that enunciates. What is it that prevents the coincidence? Nothing. What distinguishes the two subjects is absolute emptiness. Recall what I said about the self-contradictory aspect of the expression, *it goes without saying*; in some sense, whatever goes without saying does not go without saying, and hence needs to be said. The goes without saying is the *emptiness* that could not have gone without saying and thereby had to be represented through words such as *nothing*, *nothingness*, *zero*, *0*, or *the empty set*. As Jacques-Alain Miller points out in his paper, 'Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', this absoluteness emptiness is incorporated in the symbolic order as the subject. To conclude a point

about the Real, it is unspeakable and yet we are speaking about it—this is explained by that the Real thus described is the object of statement (a representation of the Real), whereas the Real as indescribable is the object of enunciation; and, as object of enunciation, the Real eludes symbolization.

A question that emerges is, if the Real is unspeakable, what explanatory purchase does it have? Why is it even important to talk about? Could not Lacan have just spoken about the other two registers and spared the Real? The question can be formally answered by saying that the Real is as integral to Lacanian theory as the numerical *0* is to arithmetic, the empty set to set theory, or the word *nothing* to the English language. But such a formalistic response seldom satisfies the curiosity and is likely to be dismissed as an attempt to avoid the question. Let me furnish an example, to stay consistent to the spirit of the dissertation, from cinema. In the opening scene in Quentin Tarantino's film, *The Inglorious Basterds*, a Nazi officer, Col. Hans Landa, arrives at the farm of one Monsieur LaPadite in Nazi-occupied France. Landa is there to interrogate the farmer about the whereabouts of Dreyfuses, a Jew family that was part of the farming community. We soon realize that the Dreyfuses are hiding under the floorboards, and Landa artfully extracts the confirmation from LaPadite. The scene ends in a bloodbath. What is relevant to our discussion is how Landa describes Jews to LaPadite: Jews are like rats; we hate rats for no particular reason; we do not feel the same animosity for squirrels who look like rats and belong to the same class of animals (rodents); on the contrary, we find squirrels quite innocent and charming, while we find rats repulsive. The import of the talk seems to be that the Nazi animosity for Jews cannot be rationalized either and that the Nazi has access to that in the Jew which is more than the Jew:

COL. LANDA:



If a rat were to scamper through your front door right now, would you greet it with hostility?

LAPADITE

I suppose I would.

COL. LANDA

Has a rat ever done anything to you to create this animosity you feel toward them?

LAPADITE

Rats spread disease, they bite people—

COL. LANDA

Unless some fool is stupid enough to try and handle a live one, rats don't make it a practice of biting human beings. Rats were the cause of the bubonic plague, but that was some time ago...has a rat ever caused you to be sick a day in your life? ... any disease a rat could spread a squirrel would equally carry...except for the fact that one has a big bushy tail, while the other has a long repugnant tail of rodent skin, they even rather look alike, don't they? ... You don't like them. You don't really know why you don't like them. All you know is, you find them repulsive.

What is in the Jew that the Nazi has access to? It is the surplus that escapes the symbolization that the Jew is. It is inarticulable. It should be obvious that we are dealing with the Lacanian Real here. We do not have to restrict ourselves to cinema for illustration. We are all familiar with identity-based hate rhetoric. The hatred does not appeal to reason. The hatred of one community for the other can be neither factually nor rationally justified. All the justification that is put forth by politicians falls apart and turns pseudo when tested. But that has no impact on the hatred, which comes across as tautological—I hate them not for this reason or for that reason, I just do. The hatred is logical and is in no need of empirical causality. It is a manifestation of the Real that was excluded from the symbolic order but returns in the order to disrupt its harmony. Also, it is a

dialogue which takes on significance with respect to the presence of the third-person, the Jews hidden under the floorboard and the viewers hidden in front of the screen. The scene is extremely important. Why? How? In addition to the above, the gestapo who delivers the speech is extremely stylized, polished, as opposed to the uncouth farmer. The gestapo makes an impression that is long lasting. It is his scene, and he owns it to the end. He is an evil guy. But we admire him. This is a subtle way of incorporating the unacceptable into the symbolic. In some sense, the film does that.

#### **II.4 – Concluding Remarks**

When I started introducing the three Lacanian registers, I said that it may be convenient to think of the registers as sequential phases in one's life and qualified the suggestion by adding that one must give up the convenience once it serves its purpose. Why is that necessary? Assuming that it was indeed convenient to think of the registers as temporal phases, should it not make sense to hold on to it? It should be given up if one wants to avoid the dangers of critical conservatism. Freudian theory was dying because of the critical orthodoxy that Freud's followers had imbued it with, until Lacan resuscitated it—that is the famous “return to Freud” call of Lacan. He freed Freudian theory from reductionist chains by subjecting it to creative distortion and, in the process, modifying it irreparably:

Freud himself—in spite of his claims as to the revolutionary character of psychoanalysis—kept it essentially in the status of a regional science which is submitted, or ready to be submitted to theoretical jurisdictions other than its own.

Lacan's intervention has consisted in breaking with the system of the “reception,” precisely to make psychoanalysis itself intervene in the theoretical field-going so far as to propose something of a new course for the entire configuration of the one and the other, and of the one in the other.

In fact, it was first a question, as we know, of redressing or rectifying psychoanalytic practice, insofar as, once it returned from its exile from Europe, it was following the path of a “reinforcement of the ego” under the aegis of Anglo-American pragmatism and psychologism....

In order to remove psychoanalysis from this orthopedic function, it was necessary that it be attuned to itself once again. And this is why the practical task implied a theoretical reconstruction. At least this is the way Lacan's discourse establishes itself: according to the system of an articulation of the “theoretical” with the “practical,” and according to the movement of a reconstitution of proper identity, through a return to origins. (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1992: 6ff)

It is Lacan who saw in Freud's works the linguistic mechanism of displacement and substitution. Conceptual convenience assumes semantic fixity, which, as must have become evident by now, belongs to the imaginary dimension (but this observation itself could not have been made had we not surrendered the convenience since, taken literally, the imaginary dimension should be restricted in its application to the structural arrangement of the infant and the mother). “What does x mean?” is a valid question to ask if one appreciates that beyond a certain point one must figure out an answer for oneself. But the question remains, why? Conceptual convenience enables understanding, which invariably entails a rigid correspondence between the signifier and the signified. This rigidity is precisely that which must be thwarted and surrendered—if one thing that should be obvious from the discussion of Lacanian symbolic is this itself. It is important to look at what Lacan says on understanding:

The notion of understanding has a very clear meaning....It consists in thinking that some things are self-evident, that, for example, when someone is sad it's because he doesn't have what his heart desires. Nothing could be more false—there are people who have all their heart desires and are still sad...

I would like to insist on this. When you give a child a smack, well! it's understandable that he cries – without anybody's reflecting that it's not at all obligatory that he should cry. I remember a small boy who whenever he got a smack used to ask – *Was that a pat or a slap?* If he was told it was a slap he cried, that belonged to the conventions, to the rules of the moment, and if it was a pat he was delighted. But this isn't the end of the matter. When one gets a smack there are many other ways of responding than by crying. One can return it in kind, or else turn the other cheek, or one can also say – *Hit me, but listen!* A great variety of possibilities offer themselves, which are neglected in the notion of relation of understanding.... Understanding is evoked only as an ideal relation. As soon as one tries to get close to it, it becomes, properly speaking, ungraspable. (Lacan 2001: 6ff)

That understanding consists in thinking that a certain thing is self-evident can be illustrated with the help of an example, which having served its purpose will also help us to get a grip on hegemony. The term *university* evokes countless notions associated with it. One such notion is *student politics*. For the sake of the argument, let us say that a university's political space is constituted by two student wings, one that is right-inclined and the other that is left-inclined. Further suppose that it is the left-inclined wing that more or less dominates the campus politics. The one that dominates invariably projects the university in a way that is favorable to its ideological affinities, and the other struggles to counter such a projection. To make things more concrete, how many times have we heard left-leaning student leaders claiming that their university encourages free speech and debate and that they will continue the fight to protect the liberal character of the university against any and every onslaught of conservatism? Now, if we keep aside our own political positions, whatever those positions be, and ask ourselves the question—is the university by default ideologically loaded? Or, is ideological neutrality the immanent character of the university?—it is likely to occur to us that the university per se does not care for politics, left or right. But that does not deter either party to claim the space as its own. And whichever party occupies the centerstage through the outcome of student election, is empowered to paint a picture

of the university that is agreeable to its own ideology. The relationship that obtains between the university and its politics is that of the signifier and the signified. All signifieds constantly fight each other to usurp the signifier; and the one that succeeds, gets to exercise its hegemony. As a concluding remark, one may ask—how is democracy as a political system different from its historical predecessor, monarchy, for example? Even if electoral choices that one has access to in a democratic system begin to seem as a façade, this façade was missing in erstwhile pre- and non-democratic systems. The façade of choices thus emerges as the experiential differential as one moves from monarchic or autocratic socio-political systems to democracy. Though these choices are rarely experienced at a real level (if they were, the choices would cease to be a mere façade, but that is not the case), the signifiers are offered in the language of democracy. In other words, the transition from monarchy or totalitarian forms of government to democratic forms of government is primarily a transition of and in language, which colors and conditions what we experience by manipulating how we experience it (in and through language)—one feels less claustrophobic in democracy.

## Chapter III

### Subjectivity in Lacan

In our discussion of the three Lacanian registers in Chapter II, which we classified at the outset as Lacanian categories of experience, emerged an outline, howsoever vague and incomplete, of the Lacanian psychoanalytic subject, or simply the Lacanian subject. We will now make an attempt to further and more directly develop the contours of this subject through a two-step process in which we will first arrive at an understanding of a generic, and thereby asexual or gender-inclusive, subjectivity and then come to understand its gender-specific manifestations through an exposition of Lacan's formulae of sexuation/sexual difference, which would prove crucial in recovering the import of perhaps one of his most controversial statements ever—that “the woman does not exist” and that “there is no sexual rapport”.

#### III.1 0 (Zero) as a Logical Coverup

In his book, *The Foundations of Arithmetic – A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number*, Gottlob Frege inquires into, as the title suggests, the concept of numbers. When faced with a question such as, *What is number 1?*, the typical response is that *1 is a thing*, which, as Frege points out, is not a definition sought by the question by virtue of the fact that the predicate *is a thing* that follows includes an indefinite article (a) and that the response at best tells us that the number 1 is a member of the class of things without indicating any specificity of the thing so much so that it could be anything depending upon the class of things one chooses (apples, pens, buses, countries, planets, etc.). Such a response therefore opens up the possibility for subjective interpretations of the number 1, a possibility that is nothing short of being preposterous to mathematicians and, therefore, is untenable. The definition or concept of a thing, formally

speaking, must specify a set of conditions or attributes, which are individually necessary but jointly sufficient, that are satisfied by the thing. In other words, a definition of a thing is that which conclusively establishes the distinctness (or distinctive identity, if you will) of the thing. In the book, Frege undertakes a critical examination of several answers that have been offered by different philosophers across history, none of which is either tenable or sufficient. Then, he goes on to derive a logically tenable concept of Numbers in general and of the individual numbers—0, 1, and  $(n+1)$ —in particular. In the process, Frege clarifies a number of concepts such as *definition*, *unit*, *identity*, *distinguishability*, *the difference between the property of a concept and its component characteristics*, *the difference between the property of a concept and the property of an object falling under the concept*, etc. In the final analysis, he uncovers the operative logic that incessantly necessitates the auto-progression of numbers in the whole number series. As we will see shortly, it is in this operative logic that we encounter the logic which governs and determines subjectivity as understood from within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis—this comes through most clearly in Jacques Alain Miller’s exceptional undertaking, ‘Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)’. As Miller demonstrates, there are three crucial components of the operation that Frege carries out in his logical analysis—namely, concept, assignation, and objects that fall under a concept. Before we get into the specifics of Miller’s undertaking, it is important to get a sense of some of the concepts that Frege clarifies for us.

**Unit**—a unit carries or presupposes an apparently contradictory semantics. It suggests both distinctness and identity. A unit suggests distinctness or distinguishability in so far as it is a concept which disambiguates objects that fall under it in an exact fashion, without subjecting those objects to the operation of division. In other words, an indivisible and distinct object constitutes a unit. At the same time, a unit suggests identity. The seemingly opposite semantic suggestions can be

reconciled with the help of an example. Think of the proposition, *The English alphabet has twenty-six letters*. In this proposition, *letter in the English alphabet* is a unit. Evidently, the concept picks out each of the twenty-six letters (a, b, c, d, ..., z) in the English alphabet. On the basis of the description of the unit concept that we earlier provided, we can say that each letter in the English alphabet is indivisible and distinguishable and that the relationship that obtains between each letter and the unit *letter in the English alphabet* is the same as (or, identical to) the relationship between any other letter and *the letter in the English alphabet*. Thus, both identity and distinguishability are retained in the unit concept without compromising coherence or precipitating any absurdity.

**Identity**—Two things are identical with each other if one can be substituted for the other without incurring any loss of truth value.

**Properties of a concept vs. component characteristics of a concept**—The properties of a concept are not to be confused with the characteristics that collectively constitute the concept. That is, if x asserts something about a concept, it does not assert the same thing about objects that fall under the concept. Similarly, the properties of an object that falls under a concept do not say anything about the concept at all. For example, in the concept *equilateral triangle*, *equilateral* is not assertion about the concept—it does not qualify the concept. Instead *equilateral* qualifies or is applied to the triangles that satisfy this criterion and therefore come under the concept. Now, in *2 equilateral triangles*, 2 does not say anything about objects to which the concept is applied. Therefore, it is not a component characteristic of the concept, which would be *equilateral triangles*. The number 2 is rather an assertion about the concept itself. We will shortly see that it is a special type of assertion and is not to be understood as a property attributable to the concept. 2 or for that matter no number whatsoever should be thought of as a property because, Frege insists,



numbers as objects studied by mathematics are self-subsistent objects and as such cannot be predicated to another object.

**Extension of a concept**—This is perhaps the most difficult or opaque expression that Frege uses in *The Foundations of Arithmetic* and has therefore caused much controversy since it was used. He introduces it in his attempt to define numbers. He first says that numbers are those that belong to concepts (*belongs to* is to not be understood as a property of something or a member of something with respect to numbers, as mentioned earlier). But then insists that the expression “a number belongs to a concept” is in need of clarification. When the clarification subsequently arrives, it takes the following form: “the Number which belongs to the concept *F* is the extension of the concept ‘equal to the concept *F*’” (Frege 1960, 79ff). In a footnote provided on the same page in connection with his use of the term extension here, he says that “extension of a concept” is the same thing as “a concept”, the implication being that the two expressions can be used interchangeably without any loss of meaning and then anticipates the two objections that his usage of *extension* is likely to meet—1) If the extension of a concept is (the same as/identical to) a concept and since a number that belongs to a concept is (the same as/identical to) an extension of a concept, then the number that belongs to a concept is (the same as/identical to) a concept, which leads to the obvious contradiction in the light of the fact that the claim which Frege makes previously, namely numbers are self-subsistent objects (Frege 1960, 67). To make the contradiction explicit, a number is thus both a concept and an object (self-subsistent). 2) If a number that belongs to a concept is the extension of a concept, then it follows, as we will see in a short while, that two intensionally distinct concepts can have the same extension. In Frege’s words, this means “that concepts can have identical extensions without themselves coinciding” (Frege 1960, 80). Should the logical absurdity of this claim not be clear yet, it amounts to saying that a

number  $n = a$  and  $n = b$  but  $a \neq b$ , as Steven Wagner describes it in his paper, ‘Frege’s Definition of Number’, the difference being that Wagner proposes  $a$  and  $b$  are objects, while in Frege the players in the equation are concepts. Wagner’s mathematicization of the Fregean proposition asserts the relationship of identity between a number and a concept. This articulation is of course grounded in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, when Frege says that the *is* operating in the statement “the number of Jupiter’s moons *is* the number four, or 4” is functionally different from the *is* operation in the statement “the sky *is* blue” functions—in the second statement, *is* predicates the property of being blue (or, blueness, if you prefer) to *the sky*, whereas in the first *is* establishes identity between *the number of Jupiter’s moons* and 4 (Frege 1960, 69). In other words, the two signifiers—*the number of Jupiter’s moons* and 4—signify the same (self-subsistent) object. This assertion of identity seems straightforward until one reads it in conjunction with “the number that belongs to a concept  $F$  is an extension of the concept: equal to the concept  $F$ ”. So, for all values of  $F$ , the number that belongs to or is assigned to  $F$  answers the question, *What is equal to the concept  $F$ ?* To take another example, consider the two concepts *the letters in the English alphabet* and *the states in India except West Bengal, Delhi, and Telangana*. The number that can be rightfully assigned to each concept is the number 26. Said differently (following Frege, of course), 26 is equal to or identical with *the letters in the English alphabet* and *the states in India except West Bengal, Delhi, and Telangana*. The number that can be rightfully assigned to each concept is the number 26. Said differently (following Frege, of course), 26 is equal or identical to *the letters in the English alphabet* and *the states in India except West Bengal, Delhi, and Telangana*. While instead of settling the matter, such examples only seem to aggravate its logical absurdity, alluding to the Kantian question of whether the truths of mathematics or of mathematical propositions are analytic or not should at least arrest the absurdity if not assuage or eliminate it. Consider the

mathematical proposition A)  $1 + 1 = 2$  or B)  $4 - 3 = 1$ . What does the proposition A or B mean? Common understanding is that (as regards A) when the mathematical operation of addition (+) is carried out on two distinct instances of the number 1, what is instantiated is the number 2. But enough literature has been produced to demonstrate that such an explanation is not tenable. Similar is the case with B. The signifiers on either side of the equation are conceptually distinct and yet are co-extensional, which is established by the = (equals to) sign. Not only that, each expression can be substituted for the other without any change in truth-value, which thereby renders them co-intensional as well.

Be that as it may, our focus is not to put the Fregean expression—extension of a concept—to further logical investigation, which as must be clear by now (ironically, due to the ambiguity inherent in the expression) is an enterprise worthy of pursuit. What we are currently interested in is taking the Fregean proposition at its face value and following its implications to its logical end. And when we do that what we will encounter there is a logical dimension to approaching the question of Lacanian subjectivity, as Miller has demonstrated in his paper. A couple of observations must be made before we take that route. An attentive student of Lacan can already see in Wagner's mathematization ( $n = a$  and  $n = b$  but  $a \neq b$ ) of the Fregean proposition the Lacanian triad—what the proposition in effect does is that it subverts the transitive property in mathematics. Just as the introduction of the third term (the-Name-of-the-Father) breaks the imaginary dyad (mother-and-child), the lack of identity between  $a$  and  $b$  seems to put in question the coherence of the identity that obtains between  $n$  and  $a$ , on the one hand, and between  $n$  and  $b$ , on the other. This, in turn, has a destabilizing effect on meaning itself. But, in experience, we do not feel this effect, do we? Mathematics cannot do away with transitivity and yet remain coherent. The conceptual or logical incoherence that we just discovered is symbolized (in terms of numbers)

and then exchanged for coherence, which therefore remains hidden out of sight. In the light of this, Frege's enterprise can be seen as unearthing the incoherence that lies at the core of arithmetic, whereby arithmetic as a system of mathematics is founded. A logic of exclusion seems to be at work here—incoherence is excluded in the very act of building a coherent, consistent system. That should again sound eerily similar to the process in which the Lacanian Symbolic comes to be (by excluding the Lacanian Real, that is). But as we discussed earlier, the Real that is repressed for the Symbolic formation returns in the Symbolic, threatening to bring it down. One may dare to read such a return in symbolic logic, which is founded on *the three laws of thought*—the law of identity, the law of the excluded middle, and the law of non-contradiction. The law of non-contradiction asserts the impossibility of contradiction— $(A \& \sim A)$  must be excluded out of any system of logic. But then how does one account for its return in the form of the paradox of material implication (the falsity of the antecedent guarantees the truth of the propositional relation)? In the Fregean proposition, one may alternatively read the bringing together of distinct, heterogeneous concepts in a number, thereby taking the first step in the direction of interchangeability. Considered in themselves, heterogeneous concepts do not offer themselves for intersubstitutability. But the introduction of the third term (number) engenders the abstraction required for such an exchange. The illogicality of such a claim would disappear if we think of the role that financial currency plays in our lives. In this connection, it may be worthwhile to reproduce the observation that was made earlier—money is the-Name-of-the-Father because it dislodges the tight coupling that was characteristic of commodity exchange in the barter system and brings about a dynamism absent in the erstwhile system.

I believe we now have the conceptual wherewithal to review Frege's text with help from Miller, the goal being to recover or see in Frege the germs of the logic that governs Lacanian

subjectivity. We already have a definition of number, that “a number which belongs to a concept  $F$  is the extension of the concept, *equal to the concept  $F$ .*” What Frege gives us next is the definition of the number 0—0 is identical to *not identical with itself*. In other words, 0 is “the number which belongs to the concept ‘not identical with itself’” (Frege 1960: 87). Since no object falls under the concept *not identical with itself*, the number 0 is assigned to it. We now have 0. But how do we deduce 1? What is the definition of the number 1? Logic dictates that the definition of 1 cannot be based on anything other than what we have already established. And all that we have established is that 0 is the number that belongs to the concept *not identical with itself*. *Not identical with itself* when expanded takes the form, *an object  $x$  is not identical with the object  $x$* . Since the object in question is 0, the proposition therefore becomes *0 is identical to not identical with 0* (or, 0 is the number that belongs to the concept *not identical with 0*). It may here be pointed out that there are countless numbers that are not identical with 0 but then one must bear in mind that we have not logically deduced those numbers yet. All we have is the number 0. Performing negation on the concept *not identical with 0*, we get the concept *identical with 0*. The question now is, what is it that is identical with 0? The answer is 0 itself. What I mean is that 0 is the object that falls under the concept *identical with 0*. Given that, what number must be rightfully assigned to *identical with 0*? The answer is 1. 1 is the number that belongs/is assigned to the concept *identical with 0*. It is important to view this in the light of the following complex proposition that Frege offers us:

there exists a concept  $F$ , and an object falling under it  $x$ , such that the Number which belongs to the concept  $F$  is  $n$  and the Number which belongs to the concept ‘falling under  $F$  but not identical with  $x$ ’ is  $m$ . (Frege 1960: 89)

In the light of the aforementioned definitions of the numbers 0 and 1, the proposition amounts to making the following constituent claims:

1. F is the concept *identical with 0*.
2. The number 0 is the object x that falls under F.
3. The number 1 is the number n that belongs to F.
4. Identical to 0 but not identical to x is the object that falls under the concept *falling under F but not identical to x*.
5. But from statement 2, we know that x is 0.
6. Following 2, 4, and 5, we have the contradiction identical-to-0-but-not-identical-to-0.
7. No objects fall under *falling under F but not identical to x*.
8. Therefore, 0 is the number m that belongs to *falling under F but not identical to x*.

Frege further states that the proposition given above is semantically equivalent to saying, “n follows in the series of natural numbers directly after m” (Frege 1960: 91), a claim which as we see is completely justified. He subsequently goes on to formulate the more generic proposition according to which for every natural number n, there is another natural number that directly follows it and that this number is  $(n + 1)$ . We need not get into its details here, because the logic that we were looking for is something that is already available to us now (and this very logic can be shown to guarantee the progress of successive numbers in the series of natural numbers) and which is made explicit through the table below, in which the three columns represent the three aspects of the Fregean operation as described by *Jacques Alain Miller*<sup>5</sup>:

| Concept | Number assignation (Number that belongs to the concept) | Objects that fall under the concept |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Jacques-Alain. ‘Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)’. Screen, Volume 18, Issue 4, Winter 1977, Pages 24–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/18.4.24> Published: 01 December 1977.

|                                          |           |                 |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Not-identical-with-itself                | 0         |                 |
| Identical-with-0                         | 1         | 0               |
| Series of whole numbers<br>ending with 1 | $(1 + 1)$ | 0, 1            |
| Series of whole numbers<br>ending with 2 | $(2 + 1)$ | 0, 1, 2         |
| Series of whole numbers<br>ending with n | $(n + 1)$ | 0, 1, 2, ..., n |

Thus, one may put forth the conjecture that the logical deduction of the entire series of whole numbers solely on the basis of the concept *an object is not identical with itself* signified by the number 0 (or, to which the signifier 0 is assigned) can be taken as a logical demonstration of *creatio ex nihilo*—things are created from nothing. An absolute lack/gap/nothingness at the ontological level is symbolized and, therefore, otherized in zero (0) in the service of identity (1), an identity which then logically necessitates the succession of numbers in the whole number series. Miller calls this logical coverup *suture*. To suture is to sew, to stitch a wound. The wound must be hidden out of sight. 0 is the signifier that sutures the ontological wound so that an entire logical system can be built. Such a coverup is necessary because the truth that is covered up is unbearable. The immediate gratification of such an unbearable truth must be given up, its arrival postponed to a future (indefinite or infinite) point in time. The Real-0 must be exchanged for the Symbolic-0, which then serves as the foundation for the Symbolic order. The exchange engenders the process of inter-substitution. In the mappings between object and its assignation—{ } and 0, and {0} and 1—not only is manifest the mechanism of metaphor (one thing taken for another) but also the

mechanism of metonymical dislocation-in-relocation (the thing is always already displaced from the point to which it rightfully belongs). In the process, what emerges is Lacan's theory of the signifier and of the subject through the signifier in contradistinction to the Saussurian *sign*, which signifies something for someone: "When Lacan faces the definition of the sign as that which represents something for someone, with that of the signifier as that which represents the subject for another signifier, he is stressing that in so far as the signifying chain is concerned, it is on the level of its effects and not of its cause that consciousness is to be situated" (Miller 1977: 33). In Lacan, the subject is no more the cause of signification. On the contrary, the subject is an effect produced by continuous sliding of meaning in the signifying chain. Viewed from within the Lacanian framework, the subject is not the subject of signification but is rather subjected to the process of signification, as it were. There is no subject outside the signifying chain. It is born precisely at the moment of exclusion of the impossible object (the Real-0), which coincides with its entry into the system of languages and which the subject tries to retrieve in the field of the Other (of language, that is). That which is forever lost can be endeavored to be found and re-found only in the system that was founded on this originary exclusion. But such an enterprise is structurally doomed to fail because of the *non-conceptualizable* being is sought in the realm of the conceptualizable—this would be analogous to locating a non-dimensional object in a space that is characterized by dimensions. As Alfredo Eidelsztein says in *The Graph of Desire – Using the Work of Jacques Lacan*, "we permanently want to make the two-dimensional object a three-dimensional. Why? In order to find it in the real world" (Eidelsztein 2009: 7). The sutured subject (0) relentlessly pursues the impossible object that lends fixity to its being but the signifier that can supposedly do the job is indefinitely deferred along the axis of signification.

### **III. 2 - Lacan's Formulae for Sexual Difference**



Now that we have a preliminary understanding of the notion of subjectivity in Lacan, it is now time to make sense of the gender-specific forms it takes. In other words, do men and women have equitable access to this subjectivity? Of course, not. Lacan resorts to the universal and existential quantifiers available in predicate/quantification logic to produce the following logical formulations of gender-specific manifestations of human subjectivity:

|                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| $\exists x \neg \varphi x$ | $\nexists x \neg \varphi x$ |
| $\forall x \varphi x$      | $\neg \forall x \varphi x$  |

The symbols on the left (let's call them M)— $(\exists x \neg \varphi x)$  and  $(\forall x \varphi x)$ —together provide mathematization of masculine sexuality, whereas the symbols on the right (let's call them F)— $(\nexists x \neg \varphi x)$  and  $(\neg \forall x \varphi x)$ —mathematization of feminine sexuality. Thus, M represents the following two propositions:

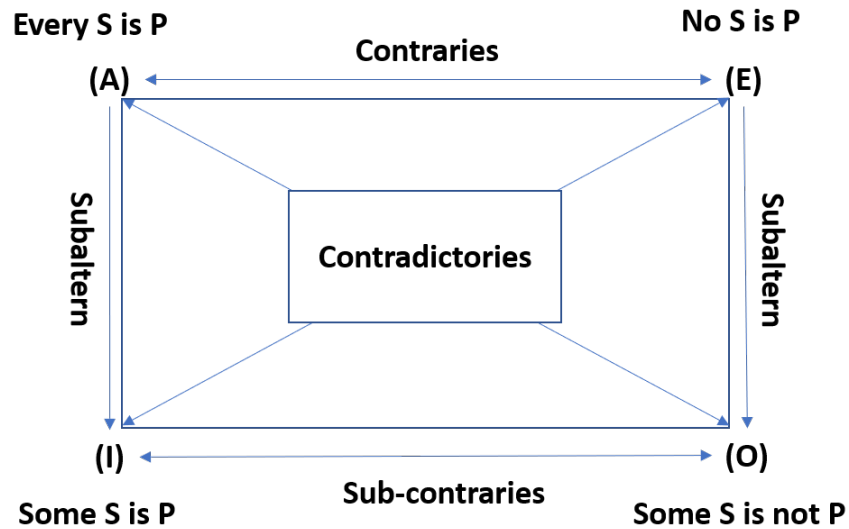
- There exists an x such that x is not subject to the phallic operation.  $(\exists x \neg \varphi x)$
- For all values of x, x is subject to the phallic operation.  $(\forall x \varphi x)$

Similarly, F represents the following two propositions:

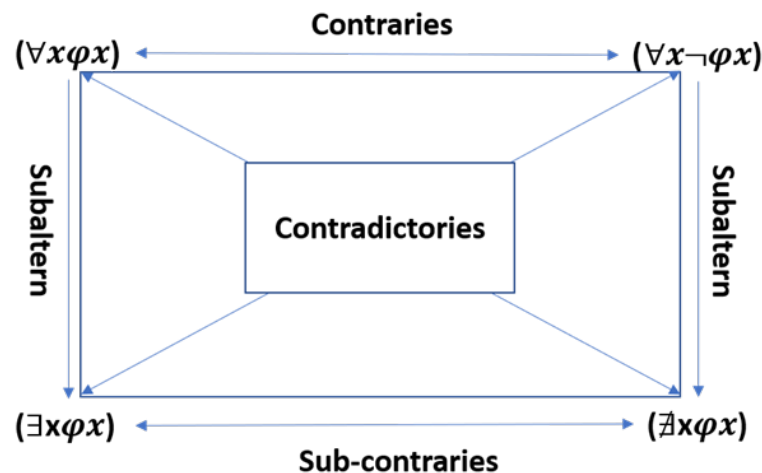
- There does not exist an x (or, there exists no x) such that x is not subject to the phallic operation.  $(\nexists x \neg \varphi x)$
- For not-all of x, x is subject to the phallic operation.  $(\neg \forall x \varphi x)$

The basis of Lacan's logical formulae of sexual difference, or sexuation if you will, is Aristotle's Square of Opposition, which as we know demonstrates the logical relations among four different kinds of propositions, namely—Universal Affirmative (A)—*Every/All S is P*,

Universal Negative (E)—*No S is P*, Particular Affirmative (I)—*Some S is P*, and Particular Negative (O)—*Some S is not P*:



Aristotle was of course working within categorical logic. But his oppositional square can be easily adopted for use with predicate (quantificational) logic through use of logical quantifiers, the consequence being a more comprehensive representation:



As one moves from the Aristotelean/classic to the Lacanian formulations, the meaning of the existential quantifier changes significantly. The existential quantifier has two interpretations, *minimal* and *maximal*<sup>6</sup>. Minimally, the existential quantifier means *at least one but could be all*, whereas in maximal interpretation the quantifier has restricted semantics—*only one*. In Aristotelean logic, the minimal interpretation is incorporated. Lacan incorporates the maximal. As a result, the relational dynamics of the four propositional types undergoes a drastic change. What is immediately at stake is subalternation between universal and existential propositions. In the traditional oppositional grid, an existential statement is subaltern to the corresponding universal statement, which in turn is superaltern to its existential statement. An existential statement (I or O) is subaltern to a universal statement (A or E) if and only if the truth of the universal guarantees the truth of the subaltern, or if the falsity of the subaltern necessitates the falsity of its universal. But what necessitates such subalternation is the minimal interpretation of the existential quantifier. If we substitute minimal for maximal interpretation, subalternation collapses. Instead of subalternation, the relation that obtains between A/E and I/O propositions is one of contrariness. For example, if *all men are stupid* is true, then *only one man is stupid* must be false, but both the statements can simultaneously be false. Similarly, if *no men are stupid* is true, then *only one man is not stupid* must be false, but both the statements can be false at the same time.

*The maximal interpretation of the existential quantifier brings down the square itself*<sup>7</sup>, which can be demonstrated using an example. Consider the following statements:

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<sup>6</sup> *Minimal* and *maximal* are used in a non-technical sense. They are used to mean weaker and stronger respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Read extensionally, the cases of the empty set and the singleton set pose a problem for the claim. However, that precisely is what needs to be avoided if we are to make sense of the

All x is y – (A)

No x is y – (E)

Only-one x is y – (I)

Only-one x is not y – (O)

If we accept the maximal interpretation of the existential quantifier, the following truth-functional relations emerge among A, E, I, and O:

1. If A is true, then I must be false.
2. If A is true, then O must be false.
3. If A is true, then E must be false.
4. A and I can be false together.
5. If E is true, then A must be false.
6. If E is true, then O must be false.
7. If E is true, then I must be false.
8. E and O can be true together.
9. If I is true, then E must be false.
10. From 7 and 9, **E and I are contradictories.**
11. If O is true, then A must be false.
12. From 2 and 11, **A and O are contradictories.**
13. From 1 and 4, **A and I are contraries.**
14. From 6 and 8, **E and O are contraries.**

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maximally interpreted, if I can use the expression, existential quantifier. Extensionality is to be parked aside and intensionality is to be introduced into the Square of Opposition.

15. From 3 and 5, **A and E are contradictories.**

16. From 10 and 15, **A and I must be contradictories.**

17. But from 13, **A and I are contraries.**

18. 16 and 17 – logical absurdity. Similar absurdity is encountered with respect to E and O.

In the list, we have said nothing about the relationship that obtains between I and O. One is tempted to say that they are logically equivalent, but that would hold true if and only if the number 2 is assigned to *All*. That is only in the specific case when the intension of *All* is 2, can we have logical equivalence between I and O. Why? To move from *only one x is y* to *only one x is not y*, it is necessary that there are only two possible values of x. If x has more than 2 possible values, then such movement must come at the price of a logical justification. Even *for all values of x, x is y*, where x has let us say 3 possible values, that *only one x is y* is true renders false that *only one x is not y*. Furthermore, one cannot render true that *only one x is not y* without reducing the leftover x to an excess resisting conceptualization—the 3<sup>rd</sup> x is *neither y nor not y*—thereby compromising the law of the excluded middle. Again, if we look at A and I, they are related to each other through contradiction and through contrariness. But how is that even possible? According to the definitions given to us in classical logic, two propositions are 1) contradictory if they cannot both be true or both be false together 2) contrary if they cannot both be true together but can both be simultaneously false. From 1 and 2, it is clear that two propositions can either be contradictory to each other or contrary to each other, if the sanctity of the classical definitions is to be retained. But the single stroke by means of which the minimal semantics of the existential quantifier is traded for its maximal reading calls into question the fundamentals of traditional, Aristotelean logic. Inter alias, it forces one to suspect if the compound signifier  $A \& \neg A$  is a faithful representation of contradiction (not-identical-with-itself). In fact, even the English language phrase, not identical

*with itself*, is a misnomer because what we lack in this situation is precisely the idea of *self* but the ***bold-and-italicized*** part of the expression presupposes a self (*its self*). The signifier  $A \& \neg A$ , however, is agnostic to the intensionality of this impossibility. The inconclusiveness of the existential quantifier is glossed over in favor of symbolic consistency. But, as we noted earlier, the exclusion is not absolute. For one, it returns to haunt the consistency of standard logic in the form of the paradox of material implication. The impossible object is to be denied only to engender the process of finding it in the symbolic register.

### III.2.a – Masculine Formulae

The Aristotelean Square thus collapses in Lacan—that explains why people have found it difficult to position his formulae of sexuation on a grid. As Lorenzo Chiesa observes in his work *The Not-Two – Logic and God in Lacan*, “Lacan’s formulas advance nothing other than a reelaboration through a formalized writing of his own version of the Oedipus complex and its resolution...” (Chiesa 2016: 105). Let’s look at the formulas for masculinity first (because they are easier to comprehend, of course)— $\exists x \neg \phi x$  and  $\forall x \phi x$ . The universal statement insists that for all of  $x^8$ ,  $x$  is subject to the phallic operation. The phallic operation should be read as referring to the castration complex and its resolution. Now, remember that this phallic operation in effect denies the subject its identity by introducing a split in its experiential interiority. The universal statement thus amounts to saying that there is no subject of the symbolic (or in the symbolic register) that does not experience its own subjectivity as incomplete. Once this conclusion is drawn, it seems to be immediately negated by the corresponding existential statement which reads

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<sup>8</sup> The universal quantifier in Lacan is better read intensionally and therefore I have expanded it as ‘for all of  $x$ ’ instead of ‘for all values of  $x$ ’.

as *there is only one subject that is not subjected to the phallic castration*. The two statements thus make sense in isolation, but the sense performs a vanishing act the moment we consider the statements in relation to each other—they have a confounding effect. The only way out of this confound is to reject the two as a contradiction or regard the contradiction as a pseudo one which can be resolved by transcendentalizing the existential claim. But we need not accept either of them. The two claims need to be read together as the exception that forms the rule, where the existential claim is the exception to the rule that the universal claim is. The universality of a claim can be guaranteed only in and through exclusion. Exclusion is not to be thought of as something primordial, which exists originarily. Rather, it is a retroactive effect of the very process through which structures come to be—in other words, exclusion/exception is the radical alterity of system/structure/rule. In the case of masculine sexuality, the exception is experienced in the symbolic register as the primordial/perfect/complete subject prior to castration. It rises in the symbolic as a semantic finality that is prorogued ad infinitum by virtue of which meaning slips along the metaphorical and metonymical axes of the signifying topology, between and among signifiers—it is always already another signifier away.

### III.2.b – Feminine Formulae

The universal formulation of masculine sexuality ( $\forall x \phi x$ ) and the negative existential formulation of feminine sexuality ( $\nexists x \neg \phi x$ ) seem to be logical equivalent expressions when viewed from within the framework of Aristotelean logic. However, we need to bear in mind that in Lacan it is the maximal interpretation of the existential at work, which rules out its logical equivalence with the universal. So, *for all of  $x$ ,  $x$  is subjected to castration* is not equivalent to *it is not that there is only one  $x$  which is not subjected to castration*. But what the feminine existential does indicate is the lack of the exception that we encounter in the masculine pair (of formulae).

And since there is no exception—the exception itself is absent, it is *lacking*—the universal feminine is thereby structurally barred. What the feminine misses is the constitutive lack itself, whereby the lack is psychically redoubled—and, no, the redoubling does not lead to a double negation that neutralizes itself. The constitutive lack is missing in the feminine because the feminine is itself the lack. While the masculine lack is experiential, the feminine lack is Real, ontological. The feminine universal— $(\neg \forall x \phi x)$ —is not to be read extensionally (for all values of  $x$ ) as Dominiek Hoens argues in his paper ‘The Logic of Lacan’s Not-All’, but is rather to be read intensionally, to the effect—*for not-all of  $x$  or for not-all  $x$* . It must be clarified that this does not amount to saying that the feminine escapes phallic castration. That is not possible. For Lacan, the subject of the symbolic irrespective of whether the subject is masculine or feminine is necessarily a structural effect of this castrative operation. The only exception is the primordial father (the-Name-of-the-Father, the signifier of all signifiers), which is symbolized as masculine existential. But since there is no  $x$  which is not  $\phi x$ , the feminine universal writes/inscribes/marks its own impossibility—it insists that though the feminine subject too is subjected to castration, it is not totally determined by castration, unlike the masculine subject. The feminine subject exists in the symbolic subject as a castrated subject or a subject of castration but in passing from the Real to the Symbolic, a part of it is forever lost or repressed. Furthermore, unlike the masculine subject who has an Other (the masculine existential) in the field of signification because of which it can at the very least hold on to the myth of maternal plenitude, the feminine subject is denied this myth—there is no Other of Other that can ground its being. This is the meaning of Lacan’s allegedly controversial statement, *the woman does not exist* (Lacan 1999: 7) or that *there is no sexual rapport/relationship* (Lacan 2018:4). The woman does not exist because, as already said, she is not determined by the phallic operation that she is subjected to. In the light of this, Lacan



emerges as an anti-essentialist with respect to women. Any relationship presupposes two or more entities (identities). But we only have one, in man. Which is why there can be no sexual relationship either.

## Chapter IV

### The Voice and the Gaze as ‘objet petit a’

In Chapter II, we saw the Real as necessarily repressed in the Symbolic. Put differently, repression of the Real is a function of the coming-into-being of the Symbolic Order. We also saw that that which is repressed resurfaces in the Symbolic, thereby threatening its order. What resurfaces is the non-repressible remainder, an excess that can neither be conceptualized nor can be eliminated. This remainder of the Real is what Lacan refers to as *objet petit a* or simply *objet a*. *Objet* is French for *object*, *petit* is French for *small*, and *a* is the first letter in the French *autre*, meaning other. In casual English translation, therefore, the *objet a* is essentially the small other and the moment the small other is mentioned, one is likely to also start comparing and contrasting it with the big Other. For Lacan, the *objet a* is a signifier of the Real that is lost in the process of symbolic constitution of the subject which resurfaces in the Symbolic Order. Its name is a misnomer in that it is not an object at all. It is rather a non-object because what is originally lost is nothing—recall *the original loss* or *the lost object* is only a retroactive construction. And it is this loss that becomes the cause of desire, precisely because of the fact as a loss/lack it provides the necessary *immaterial* basis for desire—we desire what we have lost or currently lack. In other words, *objet a* is the object-cause of desire. It is equivalent of the *partial object* in Freud. Freud speaks of three partial objects—namely, breasts, faeces, and phallus; in Lacan, we find two more—namely, the voice and the gaze (Salecl and Žižek 1996: 3). In this chapter, we will examine the voice and the gaze as *objet a* in Lacan.

#### IV.1 – The Voice as ‘objet a’

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida demonstrates that traditional metaphysics is a metaphysics of presence and is oblivious of the fact that every presence contains in itself the trace of an

absence, of that which it (the presence) is not. Metaphysical notions rely on and disseminate binaries—presence/absence, male/female, light/dark, interior/exterior, presence/representation, speech/writing, signified/signifier, etc.—such that each pair has a privileged term to which the other term is subordinated, which is defined/understood vis-à-vis the privileged one. Saussure's linguistics inherits the binary, oppositional grid from traditional metaphysics and upholds the primacy of speech over writing. In Saussure, speech enjoys a privileged status as compared to writing because of its structural proximity to *logos*—the thing-in-itself directly corresponds to the image-in-mind, which is represented to the self via voice/speech. Nothing affirms the presence of oneself to one's self as intimately as voice or speech. The affirmation is unmediated. One only needs to hear oneself speak to be certain of one's presence—this certainty is self-ascertained and self-contained, independent of the need for an external frame of reference. Now, in the auto-affection or self-presence precipitated by the act of hearing one's own voice, one can read structural resemblance with what Lacan indicates about the mirror stage in an infant's life. The infant (mis)recognizes itself in an alterity (mirror image, which is located outside the body of the infant and splits the infant at the moment of its egoistic recognition). Similar narcissistic operation is at work in the recognition of one's self in one's voice-image. But once we take that route, voice begins to appear as the very thing that denies the subject its self-presence. How? Such a voice would refer to an alterity in the core of one's being, just as the self-recognition propelled by recognition of oneself in one's mirror image introduces a split in the subject. Subjectivity becomes mediated at once.

It may here be pointed out that though logocentrism and phonocentrism perhaps seem to be closely tied to each other, that is not so and that the historical and metaphysical attitude to voice has been anything but ambivalent (Dolar 1996: 24). While it is true that the history of

metaphysics has upheld the primacy of voice over writing because the former brings one closer to the presence that guarantees all sense, what is equally true is that pure voice—voice independent of textual anchorage and decoupled from signifiers, or wordless voice, if you will—has been viewed as insidious to logos and always threatening to disrupt order. This attitude of ambivalence towards voice has always been there and is not a novelty that Lacan introduced ex nihilo. Even when Saussure assigned a privileged status to sounds and speech and classified the written text as subservient to the spoken language—the written text merely stands in for the spoken language and as such is exterior to language per se—he was aware of the exteriority of the voice:

Saussure himself was torn between two opposing tendencies: the one that prolonged the traditional stance and made him condemn writing as secondary to voice, but threatening to “usurp the principal role” (Saussure 1998, p. 25), and on the other hand his insight that “the essence of a language...has nothing to do with the phonic nature of the linguistic sign” (p. 7). (Dolar 2006: 38)

As a matter of fact, it is Saussure’s phonological enterprise which demonstrates that language is a system of differences in which meaning is produced because of differences among irreducible linguistic units called phonemes, a system in which voice features only as an extraneous remainder. One encounters this residual voice again in Lacan’s graph of desire. This residue is not to be confused with “the accent, the intonation, and the timbre”—the three *modes* in which we experience the voice (Dolar 2006: 20). Assuming that voice is not the essence of signifiers and that its inherently extra-linguistic, why should that make voice a disruptive force that needs to be domesticated and that cannot be left unattended? Because in the absence of signifiers, voice-in-itself becomes equivocal. The voice in itself has no meaning in particular and, by inference, could stand in for both one thing and its contradictory concurrently—the residual

voice disobeys and dismisses the law of contradiction. Once the law of contradiction is relinquished, the symbolic structure which governs intersubjective existence falls apart. The centre can no more hold. Uncertainty, instability, and infirmity become the order of the day. Any and every authority is undermined. Decoupled from the signifying chain, voice could point to both God and the Devil, so to speak: "...does music come from God or from the Devil? For what is beyond the word announces both the supreme elevation and the vilest damnation. What raises our souls to God makes God ambiguous; beyond the Word, we cannot tell God from the Devil." (Dolar 2006: 50). The senseless, the signifier-less, the wordless voice is thus recalcitrant to logos, but then it is recalcitrant to itself too. Its *identity*, if I may use the term, rests on internally constitutive contradictions—God and the Devil, the feminine and the masculine. Music detached from words and thereby inherently ambiguous has been looked upon as feminine, effeminate, and womanly:

In one of the oldest...texts about music, the Chinese emperor Chun (c. 2200 BC) offers the following simple precept: "Let the music follow the sense of the words. Keep it simple and ingenuous. One must condemn pretentious music which is devoid of sense and effeminate"...music, and in particular the voice, should not stray away from words which endow it with sense; as soon as it departs from its textual anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening—all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers. Furthermore, the voice beyond sense is self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the text, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigm opposition on the side of masculinity. (Some four thousand years later, Wagner will write in a famous letter to Liszt: "Die Musik ist ein Weib," music is a woman.) (Dolar 2006: 43)

Having said that, there is a contrary aspect of the voice—it is the voice of God which reinforces logos instead of opposing it. It is the voice of the law which commands obedience and adherence. Mladen Dolar quotes from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to explain the role that the

shofar plays in Jewish rituals. Its prolonged sound unconnected to any linguistic signifiers signify the voice of God. The sound of the shofar epitomizes the voice of the law and its commanding authority. The law in its pure form just commands—it does not command anything in particular. This non-specific law empty of content is what the meaningless sound of the shofar signifies. Therefore, the pure voice can be both masculine and feminine and can reinforce or reject logos. The question that arises here is whether the masculine voice is qualitatively different from the feminine voice. In other words, are these two different kinds of voices? The answer perhaps lies in that this difference, this otherness that separates the two voices is internally constitutive of the voice and is not based on an exteriority. It is structurally similar to the regulative centre of a circle, which is nonexistent but is nonetheless necessary for the circle's form.

The voice is thus extralinguistic—it does not belong to language. It is that which ties language to the body. Then, does it belong to the body? Can the body be assumed as the source of the voice? The only reason why we associate the voice with a body is because the body seems to provide the spatial ground from which the voice seems to emanate. If I were to pinpoint the spatial coordinates for a voice, I would provide the coordinates of the body. However, technological inventions have clearly divorced the voice from the body—think of the voice produced by sound systems and telephonic devices. These devices have exposed the once dominant mythical necessity of spatio-temporal proximity of the voice and the body. I can hear the voice of a person who is located miles away from me and even years after his or her death. Having said that, the modern audio devices only surface what has always been the case but waiting to be realized. Ventriloquism is the art of projecting an external object as the source of the voice—it consists in dislocating and relocating the voice at a site other than the origin.

However, if one probes a little, one realizes that *normal* speaking in itself is an act of ventriloquism—if that were not the case, ventriloquism the way it is understood would be unimaginable. What makes the detachment of the voice from its supposed site of origin in the first place is its inherent detachability from the body. If the voice belonged to the body, then its separation from the body would be impossible. The argument will cease to sound ridiculous as soon as one remembers those occasions on which one, having met a person with whom one had only spoken before on the phone, thought that the voice and the person did not go together, even though it was the same person one has had conversations before. It is only after one has grown accustomed to the person that the veil of familiarity normalizes the connection between the once disjoint body and voice. The similar is the case with audio devices, too—it is our long exposure to telephones, tape recorders, speakers, and all kinds of audio systems that has exorcised the alien-ness of the initial encounter. Following Michel Chion, Mladen Dolar calls such a voice the acousmatic voice (Dolar 2006: 60). By definition, the acousmatic voice refers to the voice whose site of engenderment remains unseen. One only hears the voice but cannot attach it to anything in the visible spectrum. It is spectral voice without a visual anchorage. Such a voice commands authority, and the authority dissolves as soon as one pins the voice down to a set of spatial coordinates in the visible domain. To cite an example from contemporary culture, the voice of the fictional Big Brother on the television reality show of the same name commands obedience precisely of its disembodied-ness, its incorporeality. If embodied, it would turn sightable and would thereby lose its enigmatic, uncanny character—something that is necessary for its commanding position. That we commonly take the body and the appliance as the source of the acousmatic voice is the product of our fetishistic substitution for the invisible and absent origin:

Radio, gramophone, tape-recorder, telephone: with the advent of the new media the acousmatic property of the voice became universal, and hence trivial. They all share their acousmatic nature, and in the early days of their introduction there was no shortage of stories about their uncanny effects, but these gradually waned as they became common, and hence banal. It is true that we cannot see the source of voices there, all we see is some technical appliance from which voices emanate, and in a quid pro quo the gadget then takes the place of the invisible source itself. The invisible absent source is substituted by the gadget which disguises it and starts to act as its unproblematic stand-in. the curious remainder of wonderment is the dog intently inspecting the cylinder of a phonograph.... (Dolar 2006: 63)

That I qualified substitution as fetishistic should project the substitution as necessary. It is necessary because what it covers up is an absent origin, thereby bringing back the troubled memories of the castration threat and of the mother's castrated site. Thus, the substitute has been incorporated as the origin, dissipating all uncanniness and perplexity. The only remainder of the perplexity is the image of the dog examining the phonograph which features in the logo of the recording label, HMV (His Master's Voice). The label comes from the title of the British painter, Francis Barraud's painting, *His Master's Voice*. His inspiration for the painting came from the fact that his late brother's dog, Nipper, would curiously listen to the recorded voice of his late master whenever it played on the phonograph. The voice emanating from the machine had therefore clearly deceived the dog. This deception seems similar to the story of the visually deceiving paintings, which Lacan makes use of: Zeuxis and Parrhasios were two rival painters in Greece, who wanted to ascertain which of them is the better artist. To settle the debate, they decided to participate in a contest in which each of them would privately paint a fresco on separate walls. Until the time the paintings were complete, and until the jury had seen the finished paintings, curtains would remain drawn to conceal the products of their individual labor. On the day of the judgment, Zeuxis first opened the curtain to reveal his masterpiece—a perfect



still study of fruits in a bowl. The extraordinary realism of the picture deceived the bird who tried to peck at the fruit drawn on the wall. The jury and the audience were impressed. It was now Parrhasios' turn to unveil his painting. But when Zeuxis requested him to draw the curtain from his painting, Parrhasios said that that could not be done. Zeuxis, the jury, and the audience took the refusal as an acceptance of defeat. Yet, Zeuxis insisted that the painting be unveiled, without realizing that the veil itself was the painting. No prizes for guessing who won the contest:

In the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, Zeuxis has the advantage of having made grapes that attracted the birds. The stress is placed not on the fact that these grapes were in any way perfect grapes, but on the fact that even the eye of the birds were taken in by them. This is proved by the fact that his friend Parrhasios triumphs over him from having painted on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning toward him, said, *Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it*. By this he showed that what was at issue was certainly deceiving the eye [*tromper l'oeil*]. A triumph of the gaze over the eye. (Lacan 1979: 103)

Both paintings were demonstrations of the artistic technique called *trompe l'oeil*, meaning deception of or deceiving the eye, but there is an important difference between the two. Zeuxis manages to deceive the animal, whereas Parrhasios manages to deceive the human. In the latter case, the deception is a function of the gaze which takes over the eye. The eye sees the veil, but the gaze is intrigued by what is behind the veil. In other words, the veil triggers the human desire to know the reality that is concealed and what it encounters there is desire itself which falls outside the visible realm. Though the nature of this deception seems similar to the deception at work in the case of the dog who is taken in by his master's voice which is reproduced by the phonograph, there is an important difference between the two. You can turn off the gaze by closing your eyes but the same cannot be accomplished with respect to the voice—ears have no lids which could be used to shun out the voice. Besides, hearing voices with one's eyes wide

open at least offers the possibility of locating, however tentatively, the voice in an exteriority. But even this bare minimum bargain is denied to one whose eyes are closed—one is now all the more uncertain whether the voices one hears have their origin within or without. One is always already at a distance, no matter what the magnitude be, from the visible world. With the voice, however, the distance becomes unstable and unsure—it is inherently impossible to pin the voice down to a *here* or a *there*. If one intends to safely distantiate oneself from the voice, one must take recourse to the visible. That is, one must associate the voice to a visible body. Thus, the operative logic of the sight seems to be contrary to the operative logic of hearing vis-à-vis distance. However, the distance that is firmly established by the logic of sight vanishes the moment one draws the Lacanian distinction between the gaze and the look (seeing, in the common\normal sense of the term). In the Lacanian theory of the gaze, the gaze is incorporated in the object from which it emanates, which is in contradistinction to the eye which projects out from the position of the subject. The gaze is that point in the object from which the object looks at the subject (us). Like the *veiled painting\reality* of Parrhasios, the gaze falls outside the scope of what can be seen. It is that excess in the object which is more than the object and forever escapes symbolization. The gaze is that which obliterates the distance between the subject and the object:

...if the logic of vision seems opposed to the logic of audition, if the visible appears to be on the side of distance and stability, then Lacan's theory of the gaze as an object aims precisely at dissipating this spontaneous illusion, at collapsing this distance of the eye from what is seen, this exception of the spectator from the picture. "The scission of the eye and the gaze," as the section dealing with the gaze is called in *Seminar XI*, means precisely that the gaze is the point where the distance crumbles, where the gaze is itself inscribed into the picture, as the point where the image "regards" us, looks back at us (Lacan 1979, pp. 95 f.). (Dolar 2006: 79)

In the light of this, we see that the questions that we earlier asked of the voice can be asked with equal merit of the gaze, and that the problems that the voice poses to any attempt at formulating a totalizing theory of the voice are posed by the gaze, too. The acousmatic voice has authority—it wields a certain power over the listener. It is seductive and influential. The moment one listens to the voice, one is already in a state of obedience and adherence, even if one disagrees with and defies the voice subsequently. As Dolar says, “listening entails obeying” (Dolar 2006: 75) etymologically. To put it differently, listening is always already obeying. Subsequent disobedience does not change this equation at all. On the contrary, it only reinforces the connection, since disobeying implies not listening. But this influence that the voice has over the other is only part of the picture. At the precise moment the voice has a hold over the listener does it also yield to the other. One is exposed at the very moment the voice is produced—by voicing one’s thoughts, one loses semantic control over what was solely one’s own and becomes a mere participant in the intersubjective discourse. The outside which was kept at bay until that point now becomes an interposing force, thereby modifying the interior. What is at stake here is the mutually distinct identities—the interior and the exterior. The interior becomes exteriorized and the exterior interiorized, therefore precipitating a topological paradox. One encounters this precise paradox in the non-seeable field of the gaze as well.

#### **IV.2 – The Gaze as ‘objet a’**

The gaze is one of the most difficult concepts/notions in Lacan. Lacan elaborated his theory of the gaze in Seminar XI, which was published under the title, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. We noted earlier that the voice emerges as an unwanted and unnecessary appendix in linguistics according to which semantics is an effect produced by the differential operation to which language as a system of signification is subject to. The gaze has a

similar status within Lacanian analysis—it is a non-conceptualizable excess. Moreover, while the eyes operate on the side of the *I* of ego, the gaze operates on the side of the *object* (the Other). Of course, this is something that one encounters in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* itself, when Sartre provides a phenomenological description of the annihilating gaze of the other to which one is submitted.

#### IV.3 – The Gaze in Sartre

According to Sartre, the gaze that one encounters in the intersubjective field is experienced as an existential threat. The statement is in need of at least two-fold clarification. We should be able to answer the questions: 1) Is the manner in which another human being is accessible to me (Sartrean *being-for-itself*) in my perception qualitatively different from the manner in which an inanimate object (Sartrean *being-in-itself*) is available to me in my perception? Asked differently, is the other human being a being-in-itself or a being-for-itself? 2) What exactly is meant by *existential threat*? As a being-for-itself, I am the subject of my experience. Which means that anything and everything that is perceptible to me by default constitutes an object of my experience. I am a consciousness. But a consciousness is necessarily of something—there is no such thing as *pure consciousness* which is empty of any content whatsoever. Even if there is one, it cannot be experienced. For a consciousness to experience itself, it must have an other posited to it as its object. This is the intentionality of consciousness. It is always directed at or is about something. Of course, it can turn its focus on itself—for example, it is possible that I reflect on myself performing an act—but even then the reflecting-I and the reflected-I are qualitatively distinct. The reflecting-I is the consciousness that has as its object the reflected-I. In this structural manifestation, we see the subject-object dichotomy. Given this mode in which objects from the world are necessarily available to me, the quality of

what I experience changes when the object of my experience is another human being. Unlike with other (inanimate) objects, I experience the human being as both an object of my consciousness and yet one who is irreducible to the status of an inanimate object. As Sartre observes, the human being that I see, who is given to me as an object of my consciousness, is capable of organizing the world around himself or herself in a way that is structurally analogous to the way in which I, as a consciousness, form the basis of providing a structural organization of things in the world around me. In other words, this animate other is revealed to my consciousness, at the precise moment when I have objectified it by simply becoming interested in him or her, as an alternative basis of organizing the world, thereby delimiting my subjective function and autonomy. In Sartre's words:

This green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green as it appears to the Other. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting. (Sartre 1966: 255)

This other, unlike his/her inanimate counterparts, spontaneously appears to me as a challenge to my authority. As soon as this other appears in my conscious field, I am displaced from the privileged position of being the guiding centre of the world to one amongst its innumerable centres. The possibility subsequently follows that just as this other, which by his/her mere existence in my field of vision (of perception, in general) displaces me from the centre, is revealed to me as an object of my experience, I could in turn be revealed to this other as an object of his/her experience. Thus, not only has my centrality been undermined, but I am also

reduced to a mere object—subjected to the process of objectification, if you will—that the other could experience, thereby further undermining my subject-position in the process. I therefore realize that I too am reducible to an object. But what kind of object? Is this the inanimate being-in-itself? The answer is perhaps no. That is because just as the appearance of a being-for-itself on the horizon of my experience has an undermining effect on my authority, I must have a similar decentering effect on this other being-for-itself. This reciprocity obtains only between and amongst *beings-for-themselves*. So, what is it that differentiates me (or, any other being-for-itself for that matter) as an object of another's experience and an inanimate object? I earlier said that the gaze of the other annihilates me. To annihilate is to reduce to nothing, literally. Therein lies the existential threat. This threat is not to be read as a physical threat—the phenomenon is much deeper than that. And this Sartre explains with an example. Suppose you are taking a stroll in a park. You look around and see different kinds of objects—a children's swing, the blue sky, the green grass, a bench, etc. On the bench is an emaciated old man reading a book. His poor physical condition, along with your distance from him, completely neutralize any physical threat that he might pose to you. Further suppose that, for some unknown reason, you find his figure against the background interesting and you fix your look on him. Then, all of a sudden, the old man, who until now was engrossed in his reading, looks up from his book and glances back at you. At the very moment when your glances exchange, something terrible awakens inside you. You feel unsettled. As a result, you cannot return the glance for long and look away. In this exchange of glances, what you encounter is the other's gaze and you experience yourself as a nothingness. One encounters a similar notion of the gaze in Levinas' "Face of the Other", as Rudolph Bernet observes in his essay 'The Phenomenon of the Gaze in Merleau-Ponty and Lacan'. According to Bernet, this commanding and nullifying gaze of the other is not because of

any ontological or physical superiority attributable to the other but rather because of the fact that what I see in the other is a reflection of my own nothingness. The other commands not through power but through lack of it. It must be noted that the gaze of the other is not to be confused with the eyes—the eyes belong to the realm of the visible but the gaze by its nature belongs to the realm of the invisible. The eyes/*I* carry out an operation of covering up the gaze—they constitute the veneer overlying nothing. The veneer comes off, exposing the nullity underneath, in the function of the gaze. In Bernet's words:

The gaze of the Other thus truly accomplishes a phenomenological reduction of vision since it leads the perception of worldly objects back to the invisible gaze which dwells in the Other and perhaps even in things. (Bernet 1999: 109)

#### **IV.4 – The Gaze in Merleau-Ponty**

In Sartre (and in Levinas), we thus see a chiasmic structure at work as regards the gaze, which crudely speaking is manifested in the following fashion—I see the other, and the other returns the gaze. *Chiasm*, whose adjectival derivative is *chiasmic*, comes from the literary technique *chiasmus*, which incorporates a sort of reversibility. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty holds that the seeable and the non-seeable are chiasmically linked to each other. In other words, the visible flows into the invisible and vice versa. He provides the topological analogy of a glove in which the inside-outside of a finger parallels how what can be seen and what cannot be seen are interlaced with each other. Though the invisible cannot be seen (which explains why it is invisible), that does not reduce existence to the visible domain—one can be sure of the invisible as the other side of the visible without ever seeing it (the invisible) just as one can be certain of the other side of a glove's finger by looking at just one side. Merleau-Ponty defines the chiasm/reversibility as:

...the chiasm, reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception (Kant's real opposition), is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception form itself *in the things themselves*)—*Activity=passivity*. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 264ff)

This is similar to Kantian antinomies, which teach us that the nature of existence is essentially antinomial and that it does not make sense to ask, for example, whether we inhabit a deterministic world or a world in which free will asserts itself. Kant's resolution to this antinomy is that the world is not only simultaneously deterministic and free, but also that it is deterministic because free and free because deterministic. In other words, determinism is a function of free will just as free will a function of determinism. One does not exist without the other and rather provides the support required to the other, and vice versa. To better grasp what Merleau-Ponty says about the reversible circularity of seeing and being-seen, let us shift our focus temporarily to the tactile perception. What happens when I touch an exteriority, be it animate or inanimate? I feel the tangible dimension of the world through my touch—of course, I may get a similar feeling if I touch any part of my body but let us consider the case of the inanimate object for the moment to encounter the raw absurdity of the claim in order only to dissolve it. It is true that I, as a human agent endowed with the tactile sensory organ, am capable of bringing myself in physical contact with an object in the world around me and the contact enables me to thereby develop a tactile idea of what the object has to offer in terms of texture and shape. But in the precise moment when I touch the object, am I not in turn touched by the object and furthermore do I not become aware (yet again) of my own corporeality, of my own existence as a tangible amongst countless other tangibles? Now, in the specific case of touching one's own self, is there a qualitative difference between it and touching an exteriority? To rephrase the question, is not



my tactile access to my own body also available to me in the same fashion? In such an act, is not my own body offered to me as an exteriority? Which extends from my own body into the infinite space beyond, incorporating into its field objective continuity and connectivity, a continuity that is constituted through objects? To lend the question the rawness that it deserves, do I ever touch myself other than as an exteriority, or isn't my inside always outside my touch/reach? This inside of the touch is the untouchable that is necessarily presupposed by all things tactile. The untouchable dimension of my existence provides the (im)materiality necessary to support my being along the touchable dimension. As a result, the picture of the world emerges as one in which the outside and the inside begin to appear as the illusory correlates of a Moebius strip-like surface. One can of course read it in terms of the (Lacanian) subject's insurmountable enterprise to find itself through re-discovering the lost plenitude in things acquired after the loss—the only way backward is the way forward, which manifests itself in repetitive patterns, where the repetition is precipitated by the disappointment inherent in the enterprise. One is always already decentered and located at an alien point, as a consequence of which whatever efforts one makes at resituating oneself at the centre—reclaiming the centre—only displaces one further from one's source. But though meaning may have been irreparably lost, one does not give up on it altogether; rather one doggedly pursues it, in peace and in commotion, in one's symbolic-ridden organization. For Merleau-Ponty, this tactile continuity-in-circularity is mirrored in the case of the vision and beyond. The seeing and the being-seen are two inseparable modes of experience in the visual dimension, both of which are supported by the dimension of the invisible.

Furthermore, there is a certain necessary interdependency of the visual and the tactile in him—what has extension (what's touchable) is visible and what is visible has extension (therefore, touchable). Thus, one is given in the other, and the other in one. But how tenable is this

proposition? Visual illusions are a case in (counter)point. Holograms are visible and are extended in space, but we cannot touch them. To answer this, we need to bear in mind that in Merleau-Ponty the visual and the tactile are not merely interdependent—they seem to bear in themselves a quality that renders them inherently transgressive. In other words, the two senses, visual and touch, distinct in themselves and in the objects that they are directed at (*intentionality*), seem to incorporate the possibility of a mutual crossover, disregarding their territorial boundaries. Otherwise, how do we account for the use of tactile metaphors (*the texture* of what is offered to the vision) in describing what seems to pertain exclusively to the visual? It is almost as if the visual sense-perception *touches* (Merleau-Ponty uses the expression, *palpates*, which means to examine through touch) its object. The phenomenologist is of course aware of the conceptual difficulties or inconvenience caused as one moves from grasping the unity of the touching and the touched to that of the seeing and the seen:

The look...envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not desultory—I do not look at a chaos, but at things—so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command. What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis? We would perhaps find the answer in the tactile palpation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which, after all, the palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133)

But he insists that we need to sensitize ourselves to and train ourselves in a transgressional way of thinking and experience the world of vision and of touch, and what we need to unlearn in the process is that the two sensory domains are excluded from each other through their territorial circumscriptions. Two significant implications that arise as a result of one's acceptance of this

sensory transgression are that just as one is a part in the world of things accessible to touch and by playing one's part one ensures its tactile continuity so is one a visible amongst the countless visible things that collectively lend visual continuity to the world and that just as to touch is to be at the same touched, to see simultaneously is to be seen. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that in the light of the intertwining of the visual and the tangible as well as the individual and the world what emerges is a picture of fundamental narcissism in which one not only sees itself in the outside but is also seen by the outside. But to what are attributable the visibility, the tangibility, and the visibility-in-tangibility of the world? Is it a property of the sum of things that make up the world, visually and tangibly? In his final analysis, Merleau-Ponty cites the non-empirical, phenomenological "flesh of the world" as the causal basis underlying the world of things in which one finds himself or herself. In Lacan's words:

For him [Merleau-Ponty], it is a question of restoring...the way by which, not from the body, but from something he calls the flesh of the world, the original point of vision was able to emerge. (Lacan 1979: 81ff)

#### **IV.5 – The Gaze in Lacan**

In 'A Pound of Flesh – Lacan's Reading of *The Visible and the Invisible*', Charles Shepherdson reads in this phenomenological foundation of vision a symbolic foundation of the gaze and therein lies the point at which Lacan seems to depart from Merleau-Ponty, for Lacan does not regard the gaze as a function of the symbolic. For him, the gaze is rather a manifestation of the Real within the visual field in the symbolic register. Shepherdson argues that when a subject is submitted to the gaze of the other, it recovers the lost maternal closure, precisely through identification with the object-lack, thereby losing desire, even if temporarily. But, according to Lacan, a subject exists in the symbolic register only as a desiring subject. So, in the

moment of temporary identification, the subject loses its subjectivity (by trading its constitutive lack for closure). However, we have not yet gone over all the necessary premises that warrant such a conclusion. Instead of rushing to adopt this conclusion, let us spend a little more time in narrowing down our grasp on the distinction between the eye and the gaze in Lacan, and once we have traversed this route the foretold conclusion should begin to emerge as the logical effect of our laborious investment. In particular, we must invest ourselves in making sense of what Lacan means when he speaks of picture as a function “in which the subject has to map himself as such” (Lacan 1979: 100). He also asserts that “in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture” (Lacan 1979: 106), that “what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside” (Lacan 1979: 106), and that “the gaze is the instrument” through which “I am photo-graphed” (Lacan 1979: 106). It might seem that Lacan is talking about the metaphysical distinction between being and representation here, but he is aware of such a (mis)reading and immediately distances himself from it—“What is at issue here is not the philosophical problem of representation” (Lacan 1979: 106). What Lacan is proposing on the contrary is a chasm within the being itself, which is the precondition of intersubjectivity. The function of the chasm, the absolute nothingness at the core of the being, is to isolate being and non-being within being itself, such that the non-being is the masquerade that forms the basis of an interpersonal, intersubjective exchange between human beings. What disambiguates the human from the animal is that while the animal is completely taken in by this masquerade, the human though held captive by it is nonetheless aware of an excess that lies beyond it. Revisiting the example of the two painters—Zeuxis and Parrhasios—should illuminate the point. The bird which flies straight into the painting on the wall, taking the fruits painted for actual fruits, the veil painted on the wall succeeds in deceiving the human eye, the deception thus bearing

evidence to the fact that the human is never completely taken in by the image and is always intrigued by a beyond of the veil—the gaze. Until the human mind is intrigued by this beyond of the veil, the gaze is operant which ceases to operate, much in the manner of the *Arago phenomenon*<sup>9</sup>, as soon as the eyes notice that veiled artifice.

In *The Origin of Perspective*, Hubert Damisch describes a demonstration of one-point perspective that creates an illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, as conducted by one of the pioneering figures of Italian Renaissance, Filippo Brunelleschi, in the early years of the fifteenth century. The demonstration included a panel painting, which Brunelleschi had himself made and which is now inextant, of the baptistry and the piazza of the Cathedral of Florence as seen from a point on the door of the cathedral. The demonstration consisted of the following: Brunelleschi had made a hole in the wooden panel of the painting such that the hole corresponded to the pinhole on the door of the baptistry; the painting was placed facing the scene painted in it at that point in space from which it was made; the viewer was required to peep through the hole made in the wooden panel and as he/she peeped through the hole, he/she was to hold a mirror in front of the painting (and between the painting and the actual scene) in order to see the painting proportionately reflected (with some effort, undoubtably) on to the surface of the mirror. When the mirror reflection coincided with the painting, it produced the illusion that the content reflected in the mirror extended out from its boundaries, suturing the chasm within being between being and representation, as it were. This is

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<sup>9</sup> According to resources on the Internet, the Arago phenomenon alludes to the paradoxical effect of things appearing clearer to the peripheral vision than to the central vision. The effect was first observed by the French astronomer and physicist Dominique Francois Jean Arago. The phenomenon is named after him.

so because precisely when the painting is respectively reflected on the mirror that the reflection achieves perspectival harmony with the actual scene behind it. It is important to repeat the question that Thomas Brockelman asks in connection with this demonstration in his article ‘Missing the Point – Reading the Lacanian Subject through Perspective’—if the purpose of the demonstration was only to show how a pictorial representation whose creation is geometrically aligned to the rules of one-point perspectival optics, when appropriately placed, seems to extend out from and merge into the scene that it is to represent, then the same effect could have been accomplished by strategically superposing the painting over the scene represented in it and all the more easily so because the second case would not require the setting up of the apparatus that positioned (and through such a positioning transformed) the viewer as a voyeur. Then, what is gained in the demonstration as it took place as opposed to its strategic and easy alternative? Or, should one ask—is anything at all gained because of the sophistication involved? As Brockelman puts it, “why not look *at* the painting instead of *through* it?” (Brockelman 2008: 19). Damisch and by way of him Brockelman respond to the question with an affirmation. Apart from the magic that the one-point perspective can conjure up, what the experiment demonstrates is the interdependency between the subject position and an object (represented or presented) in space. The key here is the effort that needs to be made by the viewer for him or her to see the pictorial representation properly reflected on the mirror. The viewer is not a passive recipient in the demonstration. How well (or not) he or she positions the mirror in front of the painting determines how well (or not) the painting is reflected in it, anamorphically conjoining the subject of representation and the representation in a single act of seeing-and-being-seen, as it were. The representation thus becomes exclusive to his or her vantage point. In Brockelman’s words, “...it

is a representation *for* a viewer, and to the extent of a viewer. You picture ‘your’ self in picturing where you are in relationship to the painted scene” (Brockelman 2008: 20).

Brunelleschi’s demonstration, therefore, establishes the chiasmic structuration of seeing and being-seen. By re-producing (through reflection) the vanishing point behind the hole on the panel behind the reflecting surface of the mirror on a line that runs perpendicularly between the holes (on the panel and reflected), the experiment also relegates the gaze to the outside of the visual/visible field. The anamorphic link between subjectivity and representation is clearly underlined by Lacan in his theorization of the gaze using the painting, *The Ambassadors*, to illustrate his point. The painting is the dual portrait of two royal ambassadors against a background that reeks of their affluence. It is an almost perfect depiction but for an anamorphic object—a visual distortion—at the bottom of its frame. The distortion moves from nonsense to sense as the viewer situates and re-situates himself or herself (much like the “jockeying” with the mirror in the demonstration) until the visual distortion starts looking like a skull painted for viewing from a skewed angle, wherein the viewer is incorporated into the painting. Moreover, the near-perfect painting with a glaring distortion at its centre may also be read as the return of the Real in the Symbolic, whereby its consistency is threatened. In other words, or in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this distortion-in-perfection is the object returning the gaze of the spectator, of the human subject.

In a final comment, let us consider the thought experiment that Etienne Bonnot de Condillac conducts (textually, by way of tracing down the experiment to its logical extremes) in his work, *Traite des sensations* (English translation, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*), in which he attempts to provide an account of the origin of the gaze. At the centre of his experiment is a statue which is like the human figure in all aspects, except for the fact that the

status has no senses at its moment of birth, so to speak, and to which senses are endowed subsequently, one after another. At first, the statue is given the olfactory sense. Then, if a rose is introduced to it, it smells it. From the point of view of a human subject, the statue at this point would be one that smells the flower. But considered in itself, independent of any external frame of reference, the statue at the moment of sensing the fragrance of rose is constitutionally nothing other than the fragrance itself. This is because the statue is still in a pre-ego state and it is yet to acquire a sense of ego. Then, each of the remaining four senses is sequentially inaugurated in the statue such that the sense of touch is induced at the very last. That means, at a certain subsequent point, the statue can smell fragrances, see what can be seen, hear sounds, and taste food. But even at this point it cannot be said that the statue now has an ego. In other words, the statue is still an unseparated and indistinct part of an amorphous continuity in matter. To state things clearly, the statue is what it smells, hears, sees, and tastes. The division between interiority and exteriority has not yet set in (and this more plausibly explains why the voice cannot be situated at any point in space; the moment space enters the scene, one can be sure that the senses have been adulterated), and which can be set in only through the induction of the tactile sense. To speak particularly of vision, before it acquires the sense of touch, seeing and looking/gazing are coincident with each other in the statue, and the two operations are divorced with the institution of touch. Touch is the sense-perception that establishes the dimension of space, as a result of which distance is established between the statue and the objects sensed by it, thereby founding the ego-object dichotomy and engendering subjectivity in the statue. As a result of this divorcive function of touch, the coincidence between seeing and looking ceases to exist and the two visual operations are relegated to the two opposite poles of the dichotomy:



Now the touch has to teach it how to look, that is, to make it conceive the consciousness of what it sees as a consciousness of something other than itself, of something which is “exterior,” which “is seen” outside. The statue, being at first nothing but a part of a net composed of rays and sparkling colors, now emerges as an eye, as the *organ* of sense. The organ replaces and “expels” the gaze, and this “minimal operation” makes the statue see as we do: from now on the statue, as all the other mortals, *has eyes in order not to see*. (Zupancic 1996: 43)

The thought experiment, thus, proves handy in accounting for the origins of the gaze, as it were. However, in every effort to uncover origins, one must see at work, following Lacan, the repetition mechanism that is obsessed in re-finding the lost object and the correlative impossibility of such an undertaking because any story about the origins is always already manifold removed from the point it purports to aim at.

## Chapter V

### Three Women Theorists—Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Mary Ann Doane

In this chapter, we will examine a few attempts made by various thinkers to provide alternative, non-fetishistic representations of women in theoretical and fictional works. But before we do that, it is necessary to make a few points clarifying why I choose to focus on female representations in theoretical (by which, I mean non-fictional) works, or what precisely I have in mind when I mention representations of women in theoretical works. The latter is easier to answer, so let me begin with that. Here, we shall closely yet briefly examine some specific theoretical works in which writers have critically engaged with the problem of representation of women in literary or cinematic arts. We will look at Judith Butler's *Antigone*, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and Mary Ann Doane's 'The Desire to Desire'. As regards why focus on non-fiction, the answer ought to be sought in asking the question—'Wherein lies the difference between artists and theorists?'—and then responding to it. So, how are theorists different from artists? Asked differently, what is the difference between art and theory? This is no easy question to answer. In the essay 'Why Write?' in the book *What is Literature?*, Sartre tells us that a dialectical relationship obtains between the writer and the reader—each informs the other and vice-versa. One can extrapolate Sartre's suggestion and may underline here that the dialectics that exists between the writer and the reader can be as easily sought within the writer herself. Just as readers infuse the work of a writer or an artist for that matter with semantic multiplicity, so much so that, more often than not, contrary and even antithetical meanings emerge from the selfsame material basis, so does the artist discover overtones inherent in her work, which she was unaware of, or at least did not consciously build into the text while creating it, until her subsequent consumptive engagement with it. The unintended exteriority (meaning)

which comes to inform the identity of the work, with its intended interiority, thereby makes art intrinsically unstable. Art is unstable because of its inherent semantic promiscuity. Analogically speaking, art is a signifier without any definite signifieds or a signifier which cannot be necessarily coupled with a particular signified or set of signifieds. In fact, originally art is just a signifier without any signifieds whatsoever. It is a presence that comes into being only through its representations—its originary production is dependent upon its consumption. In other words, art is a journey from immanence to expression and then back to immanence, and the last leg of the journey retroactively determines an art's origins—art is a determination (effect) of the event (cause) that paradoxically follows it. Coming back to the issue of the difference between art and theory, theory minimally speaking is a framework that enables one to interpret a work of art. It provides the conceptual and cognitive apparatus required for one to make sense of art. By nature, theory is post factum and yet determines the identity of the event (art) that it comes after. The point that I am trying to make I guess is that my decision to examine female representations in theoretical works, instead of directly engaging with works of art, is because we are dealing with the act of re-presentation here. It is only through such an act that the object, which in this case would be the portrayal of women, that is being re-presented comes into being. To explicitly outline the equation between art and theory in the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, one may dare say that art pertains to the Lacanian Real whereas theory pertains to the Lacanian Symbolic. Works of art have an unspeakable logic of their own which overdetermines their coming into being. Artistic expression is by definition uninhibited—it is subservient to no prohibitive tendencies. There are of course various agencies, institutional and individual, who would like to prescribe ethical and political strictures upon artistic expression (thereby foreclose the Real itself, as it were—if the originary expression itself becomes subservient to an externally imposed

logic, ethical, political, or otherwise, then the distinction between art and theory would itself disappear; this is particularly true of artists whose works seem to be implementations, at least superficially, of their political and ethical positions which they adopt and endorse in their theoretical works—for an immediate example, we need to look no further than Mulvey herself). Theories arise after the fact (works of art) and impose a symbolic economy on an artwork, be it sculpture, painting, poem, drama, film, or music, thereby cloaking the incommunicable with a semblance of communicability. But the cloaking act amounts to an act of repressing the Real, a repression which always runs the risk of being overturned such that the Real seeps through, bringing down the established order. A well-formulated theory anticipates these artistic antagonisms and works hard to foreclose them. However, as already mentioned, no theory is and can be completely immune to the ravages of the Real. No matter how comprehensive an interpretative framework is, it can always be overturned by other theorists operating within or across a critical paradigm. Therefore, what seemed like a premeditated decision on my part, turns out to be nothing but a necessary route. Even if one chose to have an unmediated, immediate engagement with works of art themselves, one would necessarily be required to engage from either of the available theoretical vantage points. With that set, now let us first look at the issues of female representation that Judith Butler raises in her theoretical engagement with *Antigone*.

### **V.1 – Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim***

One of the reasons why Judith Butler picks up the character of *Antigone* for critical treatment in *Antigone’s Claim* is because she thinks that what *Antigone’s* life has become emblematic of over centuries provides an intriguing counterpoint to the ongoing feminist efforts aimed at female empowerment. Thinkers, activists, and reformists working towards securing an equitable future for women by and large seek constructive interventions on the part of the state in

furthering the cause of the women. They call upon the state to recognize the need for creating an equitable space for the female gender and endorse feminist demands, thereby lending legitimacy to the feminist cause, which seems only fair at least on pragmatic grounds. It is difficult to imagine how the feminist project might persist if the state were hostile or indifferent to it. It is against this contemporary backdrop of collaborative states and feminists that the figure of Antigone stands out as a counterpoint. In mythology and in fiction, Antigone is decreed to be buried alive when she disregards King Creon's interdiction prohibiting anyone to bury Polyneices' cadaver, thereby turning into a symbol of (feminine??) rebelliousness against the authority of the state:

It seemed to...that Antigone might work as a counterfigure to the trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims. The legacy of Antigone's defiance appeared to be lost in the contemporary efforts to recast political opposition as legal plaint and to seek the legitimacy of the state in the espousal of feminist claims. Indeed, one finds Antigone defended and championed, for instance, by Luce Irigaray as a principle of feminine defiance of statism and an example of anti-authoritarianism. (Butler 2000: 1)

It will be interesting to inquire into the nature of her rebelliousness but, before we do that, we must first ask ourselves the question, following Judith Butler, "which Antigone are we after?":

But who is this "Antigone" that I sought to use as an example of a certain feminist impulse? There is, of course, the "Antigone" of Sophocles' play by that name, and that Antigone is, after all, a fiction, one that does not easily allow itself to be made into an example one might follow without running the risk of slipping into irreality oneself. Not that this has stopped many people from making her into a representative of sorts. Hegel [for example] has her stand for the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal rule, but also for the principle of kinship. (Butler 2000: 1)

Which Antigone are we interested in—the character in Greek mythology, the one in Sophocles’ play, or the one that figures in the theoretical works of Hegel, Irigaray, Lacan, and, in our case, Judith Butler herself? One may also beg the question that that different people have explored the figure of Antigone, artistically and critically, at different points in history, does that mean that each exploration has resulted in an exclusive understanding of the character, which is impervious to the gains made by others, or that each subsequent exploration has added to the results of the previous one? One may further ask whether, despite multiple character studies, there is an immutable, originary Antigone that has remained unchanged. Simply put, who is the real Antigone, or is there a real, originary Antigone? From a Lacanian point of view, these questions can be explained away by saying that the only way to approach the originary Antigone is through creative interpretations of the character—that is, the only way backward (the dorsal turn in Lacan) is by marching forward (the prosthetic in Lacan). Interpretations of an object subsequent to the object’s coming into being, as it were, change the object’s inner constitution irreparably, so much so that it is impossible to arrive at a cognitively virgin view of the object, a view that is unadulterated by how the object has come to be perceived over time. Once an object comes to be in time, how it is read and perceived by others infiltrates the object’s identity, and there is no looking back. This is precisely what I hinted at when I took upon myself the task of answering why I chose to focus on feminine representations in theoretical works instead of dealing directly with ‘unadulterated’ character studies which one is expected to find in works of fiction.

Be that as it may, a study of Antigone’s character in a work which purports to subject the subject of the male gaze, and how it determines representations of women to a critical gaze, by making use of Lacanian psychoanalysis is anything but relevant. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, whose structural contribution to and import in psychoanalytic theory can never be

adequately described. It would not be far-fetched at all to claim that psychoanalysis as a theory would not have had even half the purchase it has had had it not been for the Oedipal narrative that makes a precautionary example out of a man who commits both patricide and maternal incest and then bears the consequences of his acts. What makes things more striking is the possibility that the tale perhaps acquires a precautionary dimension only when psychoanalytic theory emerged centuries after Sophocles had penned down the story of Oedipus—some sort of reverse or inverted temporality seems to be operational here where the effect that *dire consequences will follow* seems to predate the cause that *paternal edicts are disobeyed* (for example, a son or a daughter has develops sexual relations with his or her mother or father) or, worse still, *the paternal position is overthrown* (a child killing his or her father). To lay bare the absurdity, that which is anticipated by another begins to anticipate the other. Cutting to the chase, Oedipus kills King Laius, his biological father, and then marries the dowager Queen Jocasta, his biological mother. With Jocasta, Oedipus has two sons—Eteocles and Polyneices—and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. At one point in his story, Oedipus unknowingly curses himself that those responsible for the killing of King Laius would be banished from Thebes:

I speak as a stranger to the story and commission of this crime, with no idea where to hunt for clues and signs. But now I am one of you, a citizen of Thebes—and announce to all.../that whoever knows the name of the killer...I command it to reveal it to me. Even if he must confess the crime/himself, he has nothing to fear but banishment. Unharmd he may depart this land.” (Sophocles. *Oedipus The King*. 219-229)

Eventually, when it is discovered that the murder is Oedipus himself, Creon, Jocasta’s brother, imposes the banishment. Then, as Oedipus reaches out to his sons Eteocles and Polyneices for help, they refuse to aid him with annulment of his exile. Before Oedipus leaves Thebes, he curses his sons for their ingratitude. After his departure, the two sons strike a pact according to

which they will rule Thebes alternately—each brother will rule the kingdom for a year and then hand over the control to the other. At the end of the first year, Eteocles refuses to honor the pact and imposes exile on Polyneices. In return, Polyneices wages war against his brother and the two are killed in the battle, subsequent to which Creon takes over the reins. Whatever be the equation between the two brothers, since Polyneices' attack is against the reigning king and, therefore, amounts to an act of treason, Creon forbids a proper burial for his corpse and orders that his dead body be left out in the open to be ravaged by scavenging animals. This is the interdiction against which Antigone rises. Not only does she disregard the decree by burying her dead brother's corpse but also refuses to disown her deed when she is later interrogated about it by Creon: "I admit it—I do not deny anything" (Sophocles. *Antigone*. 443). What may seem like a bold yet ordinary act of defiance against authoritarianism of the state—the act of burying the body against the state's diktat, and the act of claiming in words ownership of the act of burying the body—reveals itself to be fraught with multifarious complexity when one begins to dig deeper, as Judith Butler systematically establishes in the book. I say *ordinary* not to take anything away from Antigone's accomplishment but to point to the fact that performing an action and then describing the performance of the action in words is not something that should strike one as striking or out of the ordinary—such a thing is something that we, as players functioning in an intersubjective network, are accustomed to perform and witness with fair degree of regularity. What then is not so ordinary, or out of the ordinary if you will, in the particular case of Antigone? For Antigone, the mere act of actually burying her dead brother is not enough, she must claim agency of the act in language for the act to achieve any sense of performative closure. If she does not own up to her actions in speech, there would be nothing to tie her to the act of burial. It is as if, in the absence of a linguistic link, the deed would remain confined to the realm of the Lacanian Real,



without any representation in the Symbolic—the physical act would go unregistered, as it were. And in the absence of a representation in the Symbolic, the act would have no existence in reality. Lacking a set of signifiers (claiming ownership in language) associating her with the signified (the act of burial), Antigone would be deprived of individuation—as if the act never really happened and even if it did, she was not the agent who carried it out.

If burying the dead brother is a manifestation of desire for Antigone, the only way in which the manifestation can have a logical conclusion is by making itself present in language. An expression that goes unacknowledged by the other stays incognito and therefore is rendered no expression at all. Etymologically, to express is to project, to represent. If there were no need to seek recognition in another presence, one would not feel the need to express. It is an intrinsic need of the human subject to keep looking for existential legitimacy; and expression is the means the subject resorts to in the process. But the flipside of expression is the split in subjectivity that it necessarily brings about. Structurally speaking, it is the prosthesis one must adopt in order to be one with one's originary self. The closer you are to yourself, the farther you are from yourself; and vice versa. What I am trying to underline is the fact that the moment Antigone reinforces her deed by re-performing it in language, the deed ceases to be her exclusive prerogative and enters into the intersubjective domain. So, the irony is that the very act of self-assertion makes the performance less self-assertive. Think of the work of an artist—the artist loses semantic control over her art as soon as her art enters the Symbolic register—recall the portion from Sartre's 'Why write?' But does Antigone's linguistic reproduction of her defiance in action guarantee her a space in the Symbolic? No. But to give credit where it is due, Antigone does not seem to have such expectations either. The agency that she claims for herself through her linguistic rebelliousness not only finds itself pitted against the authority of the state, but the

claim to agency is made in the language of authority, which is supposed to be the sole prerogative of the state—an expression of the self counterintuitively leads to its *otherization*. *Otherization* may be understood as a self-induced exclusion of the self from the self, so to speak, which by the way is the crux of the problem of feminine representations. The issue of female representation does not mean that women are mute, that they are not informed enough to speak for themselves or articulate their desires in language, which would be a pretty naïve view of the subject. The issue is a lot more serious than that—even when women speak for themselves and eloquently articulate their desires, what they want, and what they do not want, the linguistic totality that they use in the process is one that is produced by and reinstates patriarchy. As a matter of fact, Creon seems quite conscious of this and voices it in unequivocal terms when he says that, if Antigone’s allowed to get off scot-free, it would come at the cost of him swapping gender roles with her: “She will be the man, not I, if she can go victorious and unpunished” (Sophocles. *Antigone*. 484-485). The implication, therefore, is that the conflict between Antigone and Creon, which arises as a result of the former’s disobedient sovereignty, plays out on at least two levels—the state and the individual, and the male and the female genders. It thus follows that, in one respect, the otherization takes place in terms of gender. In her defiance, Antigone transitions away from the feminine Real to the masculine Symbolic. But the enterprise is doomed—her entry into the Symbolic is met with hostility and is immediately vanquished.

The dramatic action, therefore, hits an impasse. The sovereign power (in this case, Creon) primarily acts in and through language. It rewards, punishes, fights, celebrates, pardons, strategizes, consults, seeks consultation, protects, expands the economy, wins battles, loses battles, etc. in and through language. Actual implementations of these tasks do not count among the performative responsibilities of the sovereign; physical actions that correspond to each of

these tasks are carried out by others under the sway of the sovereign elocution. The king decrees in language; the subjects execute the orders in reality. The king is the source of signifiers; the subjects provide the appropriate signifieds through physical actions. As such, there cannot be a greater threat to a king's sovereignty than disobeying his orders, whereby the force of his pronouncements is completely nullified. Antigone not only challenges this sovereignty by burying her dead brother against Creon's prohibition but also refuses to disown her defiance when questioned by him and stays unapologetic about it till the very end. As pointed out by Judith Butler (and by Hegel, Lacan, and Irigaray before her), she appropriates the language of sovereignty as she challenges sovereignty and, therefore, is sent away to be buried alive, a punishment which she readily embraces.

Let us take a moment to review how Antigone rationalizes her disobedience:

Believe me—not even if my own children or husband lay dead and rotting would I have done this thing and defied the city. What law do I invoke by speaking thus? If my husband died, I could find another. Another man could give me another child. But with my mother and father buried in Hades no brother could ever come into being from them. This is the law I obey, honoring you above anything else, though Creon believed I was wrong to dare that terrible act, dear brother. And now he leads me away, his cruel grasp depriving me of my rightful future—a marriage bed and the rearing of children. Thus I am cursed, deserted by my friends, and must go, alive, to the deep-dug house of the dead.” (Sophocles. *Antigone*. 905-920)

On the face of it, Antigone seems to have found herself in the dilemma of choosing between family and state, which she resolves in the favor of her family. But is that really so? To put things in perspective, we must recall the *original* sin that engenders the family line that Antigone appears to have prioritized over everything else. She, along with her two brothers and her sister, is born to Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta. Thus, the founding block of her familial ties is an

incestuous relationship between a mother and her son. By definition, all incest is prohibited in a family. Said differently, prohibition of incest is a necessary condition for kinship. And when a family is born out of incest, kinship relations lose coherence. To explicitly spell out the incoherence, Oedipus's mother is also his wife; Jocasta's son is also her husband; her children are simultaneously her grandchildren vis-à-vis her son; Oedipus' children are also his siblings vis-à-vis his mother; Antigone's father is also her brother; her brothers are also her nephews, and her sister also her niece. Thus, an incestuous beginning results in an absurd fungibility of roles within kinship ties, which must be sacrificed in favor of a coherent symbolic constitution, at the individual as well as at the intersubjective level. This fungibility must be blocked at the level of kinship only to be enjoyed at the level of the Symbolic without compromising constitutional coherence. For Antigone, every other relation in the family is reproducible except her relationship with her brother, which she cites as the sole reason for her defiance and assures us that she would not have taken the risk for her husband or children, relations which she claims could be reproduced. What also comes through in the lines cited is that she seems to be mired in some sort of ambivalent identification with her brother (Polyneices)—is *brother* as a relation interchangeable for her? Antigone would like us to believe that that is indeed the case, otherwise why would she talk about the impossibility of having another brother since her parents are dead? But if *brother* is interchangeable and therefore symbolic, should not she be able to fraternize anyone outside the family? But her speech clearly indicates that that is not a possibility that she either considers or is aware of. This explains why *the brother* resists symbolic substitution with respect to Antigone. A resistance to substitution means an exclusion from the symbolic register. The *brother* is a relation which seems to define the limits of her symbolic constitution. In some sense, it is the traumatic core that does not yield to the laws of displacement and substitution,

processes which must be endlessly undergone, and which cannot be elided in the Lacanian symbolic. In Lacan's words:

Antigone invokes no other right than that one, a right that emerges in the language of the ineffaceable character of what is – ineffaceable, that is, from the moment when the emergent signifier freezes it like a fixed object in spite of the flood of possible transformations. What is, is, and it is to this, to this surface, that the unshakeable, unyielding position of Antigone is fixed. (Lacan 1992: 279)

It points to the un-symbolizable remainder which Antigone is unwilling to give up and chooses to die instead. If the suggestion about an un-symbolizable thing at the core of one's constitution seems unintelligible, one only needs to make sense of its analogical equivalent found in natural languages. We are told that natural languages are inter-translatable. That is, an idea expressed in one language can be, and indeed is, communicated using equivalent expressions in another language with near perfection, without enduring any considerable loss in the process of translation. Having said that, it is not necessary that for all values of  $x$ , if  $x$  is an expression in a language  $L_1$ , then  $x$  has a semantic equivalent  $x^1$  in another language  $L_2$ . Languages have signifiers which resist translation into other languages. In Antigone's case, the refusal to be incorporated into the linguistic play of substitution results in her death and, through her death, the end of the oedipal bloodline, thereby fulfilling the oracle immanent in her name, Antigone—one who is anti-generation.

## **V.2 – Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman***

Now, let us turn to a work that seems to set itself the objective of exploring the possibility of and, in the process, develop a niche language with which to represent female desires—*Speculum of the Other Woman* by Luce Irigaray. Though this work in its entirety (which may be broadly understood as referring to the entire Irigarayan corpus) deserves to be examined in

detail, we will have to make do with a reading of a few immediately relevant extracts from the text. Before we do that, it may be worth our while to make sense of the work's title first—*Speculum of the Other Woman*. There is a direct reference to optical operations in the title, *speculum*. A speculum is, as we know, a contraption used in the field of medical practice that enables direct visual inspection of certain orifices in the body. As such, specula make possible certain investigations which cannot be carried out with a mirror, for example. The example of the mirror is not an innocuous or fortuitous citation—it is intended to instantly bring to mind all that the mind has learned about the Lacanian imaginary and the mirror stage. So, what is it that the mirror cannot help us see, but the speculum can? It cannot reflect what is not there to be seen—a lack. Just to eliminate any semantic uncertainty over it, in a thesis which examines questions such as male gaze, feminine (mis)representation, and the phallocentrism biases of psychoanalysis, this lack needs to be *seen* in its non-abstract, feminine specificity—it is the feminine lack (or, lack as femininity??) that we are talking about here. One may object to the proposition that the mirror does not enable the *seeing* of this lack and may counterclaim that *lack* too is accessible to the visual sensory organ. And one would not be without theoretical backing in doing so—after all, in the Indian philosophical school of Nyaya, the visual apparatus directly *sees* absence; and even in Sartre, the absence of a thing is directly perceivable and not something that needs to be inferred based on data that other senses make available to us. But that does not solve the problem—even if we concede that the mirror reflects the *lack* (by negatively reflecting it, perhaps?), in our concession we end up reinforcing the patriarchal prejudices. The lack that mirror reflects is vis-à-vis the penile *plenitude* of the man. Seen this way the mirror ceases to be a neutral space for plotting the configurational or constitutional components of the male and the female genders—it begins to be revealed as pertaining to a metric system that intrinsically favors

the male gender and, as such, its deployment reeks of conspiracy within sexual politics. Hence, if one intends to explore the possibility of a neutral account of female sexuality and cathexis, it is imperative that such an undertaking overthrows the male-centric metric system in favor of one that is more suitable for carving out the female libidinal economy. This should partially explain why the transition from one optical apparatus to another. There is one more aspect though which needs to be underlined about this transition. The mirror response pertains to the dimension of the visible. The speculum involves two distinct dimensions—the visual and the tactile. An object does not have to be in direct contact with the mirror for the mirror to reflect it. But the speculum, as it relays images of the inside of a body orifice, is in direct contact with the walls of the orifice, thereby involving its object through the sense of touch as well. The tactile figures preeminently in the exploration of female sexuality in Irigaray, which perhaps is anticipated by the tactile undertone in the title of her work. The rest of the title is equally significant—*of the Other Woman*—and therefore a few lines need to be said here to bring forth its import and how it integrally contributes to the title in prefiguring what follows in the book. This expression answers to the question, whose speculum are we talking about? The speculum is *of the other woman*, it belongs to *the other woman*. Who is this *other woman*? Is there more than one type of women out there? If not, then why qualify *woman* with *other*? If yes, which is the first type of women from whom the *other woman* seeks to distinguish herself? The first type of women are women as we know them in and through a system of intersubjectivity that is structured and overdetermined by a deep-rooted male unconscious. As hinted at earlier, it is a system that is always already favorable to men and therefore leaves no space for a true understanding and representation, so to speak, of women. As opposed to this, the other woman would be one whose possibility and existence needs to be explored in and through a language which, minimally, is

free of male biases and, maximally, tilts the balance on the side of women. Thus, the other woman is an alterity of women as we know them. Further note that if the woman in *the other woman* is read intensionally, and not extensionally, then what we may be looking at is an undertaking to examine the possibility of what woman would *essentially*—the essence of the other woman—be in a language which offers opportunity for a truer female representation.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray engages with the works of different thinkers and philosophers across history—such as Freud, Kant, Hegel, Aristotle, Plato, and Descartes—with a view to undermine their analytical and philosophical oeuvres by critically exposing their works as spoken from and endorsing, consciously or otherwise, the masculine vantage point. She insists that such a reading is an important first step in developing a feminine alternative, one in which the woman can feel at home. Here, we will go over her analysis of Freud's predisposed exposition of the female sexuality, particularly to acquire a better understanding of the all-pervasive issue of phallocentrism highlighted by Mulvey in her 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (and the "new language of desire" that she seeks). Phallocentrism points to the cardinal role that the phallic organ plays in structuring the psyche at subjective and intersubjective levels. This centrality of the phallus is manifest in a number of oppositional terms/concepts—agent of action/receptacle, fullness/lack, desire for an (m)-otherly object/desire to be the object of desire, desire for a phallus/desire to be the phallus, symbolizable/non-symbolizable, active/passive, distinct-precise-clear/fuzzy-imprecise-vague, sadism/masochism, aggressive/docile, voyeurism/exhibitionism, look/being looked upon, etc.—in which the historically privileged term pertains to masculinity and the underprivileged one belongs to the domain of femininity. According to Freud, until a certain phase in the development of a child (which he calls the pre-oedipal, phallic stage in psychosexual development), sexuality is manifested almost identically in



both the boy and the girl child. For example, the boy has the penis and the girl has the penis-like clitoris that they use to fulfill their auto-erotic needs. Sexual difference tends to emerge when each child encounters castration, which is potential in the case of the boy and actual in the case of the girl. As mentioned earlier, they respond to this realisation differently—the boy gives up masturbation and sexual feelings for the mother only to recover them in a mother-substitute (love interest/girlfriend/wife) in adulthood; the resolution takes a slightly complicated route in the case of the girl child—she realizes that her penis-like clitoris is grossly *deficient* in comparison to the boy's penis and experiences a shift in her erogenous zone from clitoris to vagina: "...with the change to femininity, the clitoris must give up to the vagina its sensitivity..." (Freud 1993: 161). She develops hatred towards the mother for the *deficiency* she was born with, and has to reinvest her libido in the opposite sex, if she has to grow into a *normal* woman. Since the girl is biologically incapacitated to have the phallus, she desires to be the phallus to be found desirable by members of the opposite sex. Her life's narrative is, thus, constituted and (over?)determined by the lack that she is. In Freud's own words, the "male sexual cell is active and mobile; it seeks out the female one, while the latter, the ovum, is stationary, and waits passively" (Freud 1993: 156), the "repression of their [women's] aggressiveness, which is imposed upon women by their constitutions and by society, favours the development of strong masochistic impulses..." (Freud 1993: 158), "Masochism is then, as they say, truly feminine" (Freud 1993: 158), masochism in men is a result of the presence of "obvious feminine traits of character" (Freud 1993: 158), "women develop out of children with their bi-sexual disposition" (Freud 1993: 158), "the little girl is as a rule less aggressive, less defiant, and less self-sufficient" (Freud 1993: 159ff), and so on and so forth. Until the point when femininity emerges, the little girl experiences the same (almost) sexuality as that of the little boy. In the post-oedipal phase, however, the boy child's

sexuality continues to hold on to both his erotogenic zone and his primitive libidinal object (mother/woman), the only thing that is different is that pleasure is delayed to a future point in time. But the girl child endures another set of castration and has to give up both the primitive zone as well as the primitive object of pleasure, which only work towards accentuating the *lack* that she is born with. The child was already one in the phallic (pre-oedipal) phase by virtue of the phallus but when the one undergoes division post oedipal resolution, what it gives rise to is the one (the male child) that remains unchanged and an alterity (the girl child) that is less than one. Thus, one divides but the result of this divisive operation does not yield two—in other words, there is no more just one and that there is more than one but not two yet. In Irigaray's words, this woman is *the sex which is not one*, which happens to be the title of her different work. Here on, the woman will serve as the infrastructure required to support the man's libidinal economy. She *exists* only in so far as she is useful in the man telling his story. As regards her story, it cannot be told or the only story that she can tell is the story of playing this supporting role. Thus, as Irigaray says, the woman dissolves at the precise moment of her origin—"...in the beginning was the end of her story." (Irigaray 1987: 43)

### **V.3 – Mary Ann Doane's 'The Desire to Desire'**

This lack of a symbolic representation of women can be demonstrated by taking recourse to an issue which we encountered in Mulvey's essays in the introductory chapter—that of spectatorship. In Mulvey's analyses of mainstream Hollywood cinema, we saw that the point from which the spectator, male or female, views and engages with the film is necessarily masculinized. In the case of female spectators, the identifications tend to be transvestite in nature, as a result of which women viewers are structurally disposed to shuttle constantly between aggressive masculinity and passive femininity as they witness narrative drama unfold on

the screen. These processes of masculinization or transvestisation/trans-sexualization of the female spectator are at work in mainstream cinema in which the narrative action is driven by a male protagonist or by a female protagonist who vacillates between aggressivity and passivity. But what happens to the nature of spectatorship for the subgenre of films known to be meant for a specifically female viewership—*women's cinema*? This is a question which Mary Anne Doane takes up in her essay 'The Desire to Desire'. What kinds of identificatory mechanisms work in and are worked by films that claim to be meant primarily for women by virtue of their thematic concerns? The subject of women's films tends to focus on, more often than not, childbirth and child rearing, marital difficulties, single motherhood, surrogacy, sexual promiscuity, motherhood, domestic violence, etc. Mary Anne chooses women's films (Hollywood) of the 1940s for her analysis but her observations can be, more or less readily, adopted and applied, without incurring much loss or causing much interpretive misappropriation, to our understanding of contemporary women-centric films produced at and by cultural sites other than, and not necessarily, Hollywood. A crucial question to ask in this respect, which the author voices at the very outset of the paper, is—what is the need for a separate genre of women's films? There is no separate film genre for men called *men's films*. Is there? And that is of course so because films, by default, speak from and present a patriarchal point of reference, as we have already described—male subjectivity is auto-inscribed in and through films, so to speak. It is only when the agencies and processes involved in the production and distribution of films grew conscious of the complete absence of women-specific experiences and voices in films that they deem the necessity for the development of a genre which focuses on representing a characteristically feminine experience. There can certainly be historical reasons for such a development, which happens to be the case with respect to the cinematic sample set that Mary Anne zeroes in on—

World War II and with it the enlistment of a large number of men in the army necessitated a survival strategy to draw women folks to cinema theatres, which explains why the author focuses on Hollywood films of 1940s. But the irony of it all is that the very *noble* act of giving voice to the sex that is marginalized in and through social systems seems to reinforce and repeat the original act of marginalization. The very gesture of reserving a distinct space to capture and voice women's experiences therefore turns out to be an act which underpins the plight women find themselves in to begin with. When cinematic processes conform to norms of heteronormativity, the position from which the spectator relates to a film is that of the third-person, asexualized indexical (man, mankind, he, and his), which is inclusive of both the sexes. Exclusion is meted out to women in the guise of exclusivity—their experiences can never acquire an all-inclusive character, even illusorily.

Before proceeding further, it may be useful to emphasize that the issue of spectatorship is closely related to, if not precisely identical with, the issue of subjectivity. The film speaks, but it cannot or does not speak from a point of reference of its own, and that is so because it does not have a single point of reference as such, rather has a plethora of such subjective reference points. There are way too many minds involved in the filmmaking process (or a set of processes, if you will)—conception and conceptualization of a story, fleshing out the concept into a screenplay, incorporating *other* views into the screenplay thereby revising or rewriting it, and its visualization at several subsequent stages and by several agencies including, but not limited to, actors, casting directors, director, producer, set designers, cinematographers, music composers, sound engineers, editors, marketing personnel, distributors, etc. The film, or simply film, is the product of such a polyphony of voices, competing with and against each other, which is ventriloquized and thereby structurally unified through the viewer. In other words, the film is a

set of signifying structures set in motion, whose meaning-producing locus is situated in an extra-cinematic entity—its spectators. Spoken in this way, subjectivity appears as asexualized and, therefore, masculinized. What we are interested in and inquiring into now is the specificity of the feminine subjectivity, foregrounding of which is the ostensive goal of women's films. As Doane makes explicit, subjectivity is not to be confused with notions of selfhood or *agency*—what she, and we, are interested in is what is encountered in psychoanalysis that is based on linguistics. Thanks to Saussure, we know that language is a system of differences in which meaning is an effect produced by differential operations between and among signifiers that constitute the set that is language. Crucial to the differential operation is the lack—the absence—which is necessary to set things in motion such that meaning slides continuously from one signifier to another in an endless chain of signification. In other words, the *lack* acts as a lubricant required for the symbolic machinery to run and function smoothly. As we have seen previously, the woman is a signifier of this lack in relation to the man. From the very outset, this differential positioning thus reduces the woman to stand in for that which she does not have so that the man can have a system of representations in which he can pursue his libidinal interests, a system in which the woman can only aspire and take measures to be the object of such interests. As a matter of fact, the woman has been structurally rendered deficient so much so that the signifier itself—the woman—is a misnomer since it suggests an entity, and thereby an identity, which is an ontological privilege reserved exclusively for the man. She does not have an identity because she is less than what is required of an identity—she is man with no phallus and, therefore, less than man and less than one. Given her less-than-one condition of existence, how can one even begin to theorize her subjectivity? That is the question that Doane seems to concern herself with. But did we not, moments ago, claim distinction between psycho-linguistic subjectivity and

notions of selfhood and agency? Yes, but it now seems necessary to qualify the claim to more precisely mark the boundaries of our exclusion so that our claims at least have a semblance of coherence and do not appear mutually exclusive. Though the two forms of subjectivity are different, the sense of agency and selfhood is not unconditionally compromised in psychoanalytic subjectivity. The ego, however illusory, is maintained by and in the psychoanalytic subject—the ego is a necessary illusion, necessary to retain the sanctity of the subject, the absence of which would entail absolute incoherence. But even this illusion is denied to women. In Doane’s words, it “is this *illusion* of a coherent and controlling identity which becomes most important at the level of social subjectivity. And the woman does not even possess the same access to the *fiction* as the man” (Doane 1987: 11).

Furthermore, the psychoanalytic subject is a desiring subject. But even the economy of desires operates differently in the feminine case. One desires that which one does not already have. Psychoanalytically speaking, the originary loss is a necessary condition for one to exist as a desiring subject. The originary loss is a retroactive construction (has always already occurred) and by definition presumes a certain distance. The subject adopts a variety of prosthetic tools, including language, during one’s lifetime only to re-find the lost object. But since the object is never to be found (because it was never there to begin with and is only retroactively constructed), one keeps investing and reinvesting one’s libido in different objects that one encounters in the symbolic. For example, the masculine subject copes up with the loss of the (maternal) object by taking interest in another woman. As regards the feminine subject, the loss is both original and permanent. As seen earlier, her oedipal resolution necessitates that she switches her libido from the same sex (mother) to the opposite sex (father) and since she cannot have the phallus, her only choice is to desire to transform herself into one and thereby become

the object of desire. While desire manifests as the desire to sustain oneself as a desiring subject in the case of the masculine subject and therefore have a desire for an object, desire manifests itself as the desire to sustain oneself as a desired object (or, an object of desire) in the case of the feminine subject. As a result, the subject-object dichotomy dissolves in the case of the woman. The distance that makes desire possible for men disappears and gives way to *intimacy* and *proximity* for women. Though the gain in proximity seems to neutralize the loss in distance, the equivalence of the equation disappears immediately as we realize that the increased proximity entails a relinquishing of subjectivity and incorporating oneself as and into an object—the subject-object dichotomy dissolves not in favor of subjectivity but on the side of objecthood. The man is subjectivized, and the woman objectivized. The man can continue to act upon the object that is woman, and the woman can only continue to offer herself as an object to be acted upon. The man can continue to look (voyeurism), while the woman can continue to be looked upon (exhibitionism). In terms of identificatory structures that determine or oversee the consumption of cinema, this sexual difference means that spectatorship is necessarily masculinized. If any feminine identification takes place at all, it must come at the cost of spectatorial subjectivity and would unavoidably involve relegating oneself to the level of the on-screen object-images and submitting oneself to the gaze of the voyeur. The woman identifies herself as an exhibit, and not as someone examining the exhibit. In the case of mainstream cinema, this exhibit is highly eroticized. But recall that we are examining the question of feminine spectatorship of films made and meant for women, which means that these invariably abstain from showing the female skin. In other words, women's films tend to de-eroticize the female body. One only needs to think of the criticism that was doled out to the film, *Blue is the warmest color*, which purportedly was an exploration into lesbian relationship, for its excessive eroticization of the bodies of the characters

and, through them, of the two actors—Léa Seydoux and Adèle Exarchopoulos—if one has any suspicions whether any relation whatsoever obtains between de-eroticization of the female body and women-centric films. If mainstream cinema promotes the male gaze and its sexualization of the female body, women's films denies the gaze its pleasure precisely by refusing to give into the demands of a market structured and controlled by the masculine libido; and, as Doane iterates, a desexualized woman ceases to exist in a society formed and informed by patriarchy.

#### **V.4 – Concluding Remarks**

Towards the end of the just concluded section, it seemed that the male gaze and sexual objectification of the female body are correlated with each other, and that to deny the male gaze is to desexualize the female body. To put it formally, each seems to imply the other. But the gaze can operate on an object if and only if it is distant from the object. In different words, there must exist a dichotomy (spatial or psychical) between the performer of the gaze and its recipient. We earlier saw that such a distance is maintained only in the case of a masculine subject (male or female), and that the feminine subject foregoes this distance. Does this mean that male gaze or masculinized gaze amounts to a redundancy in terms? Or, *is the gaze necessarily male*<sup>10</sup>?

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<sup>10</sup> E. Ann Kaplan asks this question in her book, *Women and Film – Both Sides of the Camera*.



## Chapter VI

### Feminine Desire as Overbearing

#### VI.1 – Split Feminine Subjectivity in David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*

In a scene in David Lynch’s film *Wild at Heart*, Lula, who is on the run with her lover, Sailor, a murder convict out on parole, is sexually assaulted by a gangster, while she is alone in her motel room. Peru, the assaulter, brutalizes Lula, commanding her to plead with him to have sexual intercourse with her. From the moment the gangster shows up at the door, the scene acquires an uncanny atmosphere. You sense that something bad is going to happen to the beautiful Lula and that is nearly how the scene unfolds before your eyes—Peru grabs hold of Lula and violently forces her to beseech him to *fuck* her—Say “*Fuck me!*” Lula’s expected resistance soon gives way to resignation—she gives in to her oppressor’s injunction and whispers, *Fuck me!* Contrary to the narrative flow, her submission leads to an anti-climactic ending in which Peru puts on a seemingly friendly façade, refuses the offer, which he so brutally forced out of her only moments ago, and leaves: *Someday honey, I will. But I gotta get goin’!*

In his analysis of the scene, Žižek (2006: 69-70) uncovers its multi-layered signification. He points out, among other things, that 1) what transpires before our eyes is Symbolic (in the Lacanian sense) rape and humiliation of Lula, instead of actual, physical rape—“What we have here is rape in fantasy which refuses its realization in reality, and thus further humiliates its victim....” (Žižek 2006: 69); 2) Lula is shockingly awakened to her *split subjectivity*: Nobody wants to be sexually assaulted and raped; but she discovers, to her shock, a part of herself that is autonomous of her conscious control—she did not want to have sexual intercourse with her assaulter, but the manner in which the offer subsequently emits from her indicates that she was

aroused nonetheless. The graphic dynamics of her body that the camera focuses on during the assault, as well as her panting, register a visual proof and betray her enjoyment—“just prior to her ‘Fuck me!’, the camera focuses on her right hand, which she slowly spreads out—the sign of her acquiescence, the proof that he has stirred her fantasy” (Zizek 2006: 69). To put it crudely, she did not want to be raped, *but she desired it*. Her whisper—*Fuck me!*—is a signifier of the split that is constitutive of her subjectivity, which she was blind to until then. In that moment, what Lula seems to experience is her *jouissance*<sup>11</sup>, which intrinsically runs counter to one’s historically developed ideas of oneself. More than the assault, it is the revelation that unsettles and humiliates her (*Did I enjoy my torture!*). Considered this way, Peru acts as the rude analyst who initially makes her confront her kernel, and when the confrontation breaks her down, he consoles her (*Sing! Don’t cry*). 3) Lula experiences her subjective split as an antagonism between what she wants and what she desires. This, of course, is in line with a Lacanian understanding of desire—“...desire is mostly experienced as that which I do not want” (Zizek: 69). When you utter the words—*How are you?*—to greet out of politeness a person you have just met, you are performing what Zizek calls an “empty gesture”. Such a gesture is empty because you already expect a certain kind of response that will reciprocate the politeness of your gesture and lend finality to it—*I’m okay. Thanks for asking! How about you?* You do not expect the person to relate to you, for instance, all her troubles. That would be impolite, though your interlocutor would not be technically wrong to respond in that way. (You want to know how the person is, but you do not desire it.)

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<sup>11</sup> The dictionary meaning of ‘jouissance’ suggests enjoyment or pleasure of the highest form, but in Lacan it means pleasure that is closely associated with pain.

Should one be baffled by the extravaganza of a body part autonomizing itself, one only has to think of the involuntary erections that men and adolescent boys experience, and the extravagant notion will at once look commonplace. The scene is replete with multifarious perversity, laying bare which will perhaps expose my own reading as perverse. At one level, what unfolds before our eyes is a non-literal, figurative rape that is symbolic (in the common sense of the term) of an actual, physical rape, as if the filmmaker wanted to avoid further troubling the viewers with a graphic depiction of the horrific act. At another level, we are made to witness an act of sexual perversion—what gratifies Peru is not the actual sexual act but the idea that someone as beautiful as Lula desires him, which explains why he stops short of raping her. What matters to him is her imploration, which he compels out of her by repeatedly threatening her with the brutal act itself as an outcome of her non-compliance—*Say “Fuck me”. Then I’ll leave...Say “Fuck me”. Then I’ll go.* As far as the assaulter is concerned, he has already fulfilled his rape-wish, as it were. Moreover, even at this perverse level, the imbalanced gendered dynamics that we are familiar with is discernible here—the female desire is forcibly aroused and then left unconsummated. And at yet another level, the scene is a retelling of the counterintuitive mythical narrative—freedom lies in accepting what is necessary anyway. The counterintuitive-ness of the aphorism stems from the incongruity of the two juxtaposed notions, *freedom* and *inevitability/necessity*. Like the paradoxical object whose constitution rests upon an externality, that is, what is external to the object (in other words, this paradoxical object dissolves the notion of identity that assumes an unequivocal subject-object divide by dissolving the divide), fate is the inevitability that one cannot cut loose from, especially because one’s defiance is always already incorporated in it and ties one all the more closely to it. Think of the actions taken by Oedipus’ father to defy the oracle—that the to-be-born will kill his own father and marry his own mother—which only precipitate the oracle. What might constitute

freedom in such an overly deterministic framework? What might one surprise fate with and escape its determinations? The answer lies in acceptance, no matter how unpalatable the object of your acceptance be—and not in rejection and rebellion, which are only already determined. In Žižek's words:

The question of freedom is, at its most radical, the question of how this closed circle of fate can be broken. The answer, of course, is that it can be broken not because “it is not truly closed,” because there are cracks in its texture, but, on the contrary, because it is overclosed, that is, because the subject's very endeavor to break out of it is included in it in advance. That is to say: since our attempts to assert our freedom and escape fate are themselves instruments of fate, the only real way to escape fate is to *renounce* these attempts, to accept fate as inexorable. (Oedipus' fate—killing his father, marrying his mother—was realized through his parents' very attempt to avoid it: without this attempt to avoid fate, fate cannot realize itself.) (Žižek 2006: 207)

One may perversely argue that Lula's whisper is an acceptance of the looming menace and that it is this acceptance that neutralizes the danger. More importantly, the scene problematizes the ethics of cinematic viewership. The scene confronts not just Lula with her traumatic core, it also confronts the viewership with the unbearable obscenity of Lula's choices—she *must* offer her consent to sex or *get* raped—thereby precipitating a deadlock that can be resolved only through heroic or directorial intervention (perhaps offering sexual consent to your assaulter is more hideous and more unimaginable of the two—or, is it?). An intervention is in the offing because it is unthinkable of her to act in the face of such depravity. She *cannot* act because she *should not*, because she *must* already be stupefied by the obscenity of her choices—the situation demands that she foregoes her privilege and relinquishes her agency (if the viewers, who are insulated from the on-screen dangers due to their off-screen position, find the choices obscene, it must be impossible to conjecture the degree of deplorability of the choices for Lula!). But we see no intervention—

neither heroic nor divine. Nor do we see her renouncement. On the contrary, she exercises her choice in which her desire comes to the fore, and in so doing materializes a possibility that was unthinkable to the viewer (and to Lula herself). Peru is not the real assaulter—it is the viewer who finds Lula's *Fuck me!* an aberration—her act is a deviance that makes her a non-conformist. She complies with Peru only to non-comply with the patriarchal expectations. The woman acts in a way of which neither she nor we knew she was capable. Her whispered consent is transgressive of her representation—it defies how she is represented in society, to herself and to others (us).

I earlier said that the scene acquires an uncanny dimension the moment Peru appears in the motel room. I say uncanny and not threatening, which the scene certainly is (the looming rape threat that one is immediately aware of), because there is more to it than the physical threat. As recipients of cinematic content, what choices do we have when we sense the danger? Foreclose the story by turning off the monitor? Since our extra-narrative position has incapacitated us in advance? Since that seems to be the only option to prevent the rape from actualizing? Even if the rape actually took place inside the narrative, one way to resist its actualization would be to disengage from it at this point. This suggests a way to make sense of the proverbial saying, *to be is to be perceived*; phrased more appropriately, it would read, *to be is to be re-presented*. The distinction between being—*to be*—and representation is not to be taken as the opposition between potentiality and actuality. In Lacan, existence is ex-sistence, which is intricately correlated to the Other. As Jacques-Alain Miller clarifies<sup>12</sup>, it (ex-sistence)

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<sup>12</sup> “To grasp what ex-sistence is about, one must again ask oneself what it means to exit, the exit. We can remain at the level of the expression and make a phenomenological analysis of it, why not. This suffices to realize that to exit means that we are no longer there, that one crosses a limit, a threshold, and that, consequently, one passes into another space, *n’espace*, possibly into

incorporates both spaces, *the projecting* and *the projected onto*. Ex-sistence necessarily involves this passage from one to the other. The scene with its potential final brutality only *ex-sists*, waiting to be viewed, to be re-presented. Only when it is viewed can it start existing as a representation within the Symbolic Order. In other words, the progressive disclosure of a narrative is at the mercy of the viewer whose spectatorial disengagement can deny the film its development. We are incapable of making any potent intervention in the narrative, which manifests itself in terms of the heroic and directorial absences. We are apprehensive of the imminent obscenity and yet we stay cathected in its unfoldment (and may one dare add that one feels thwarted on being denied the obscene climax at its most compelling moment, by the same empty gesture that stirs Lula's desire and then leaves her reeling). We are frightened for Lula and yet we continue to watch. Does it reek of a secret libidinal enjoyment—sadistic or masochistic (or, maybe both), depending upon one's identificatory proclivities—of and in her haplessness? Perhaps one feels betrayed at having been denied the violence of the images, which would have further inflated one's repertoire of pornographic exposure for future auto-erotic indulgence.

One may argue against the perversity of this logic—that the possibility of the threat not materializing could not be denied and, since the threat does indeed not materialize, one may feel vindicated. But even this feeble defense vanishes in Gasper Noe's *Irreversible*, in which the same (perverse?) logic is at work in the ruthlessly lengthy ordeal of Alex, who is sexually and physically brutalized. The film, told achronologically, starts with a series of blood-curdling images (with each

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another dimension. But to exit also means, in the "bye-bye" that it is involved, that one must go through it in order to finally exit from it.

This already suffices to say that ex-sistence is always correlative to an exit out of." (Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Ex-sistence')

successive image being more horrific, assuming the possibility of such gradation, than the previous one in the series)—1) Marcus and Pierre are frantically looking for a person who goes by the name, The Tapeworm. Their search leads them to a gay club (called The Rectum) where Marcus assaults a man (presumably the person they have been looking for), who in turn breaks Marcus' arm and attempts to rape him. 2) The attempt fails when Pierre comes to Marcus' rescue and beats the man to pulp with a fire extinguisher. 3) Next, we see the horrific images of the tortured body of the barely alive Alex, which explains the violence that precedes (or, must one say succeeds?). Yet, one continues to watch. 4) And then we are in the underpass. We immediately recognize this as the site of Alex's torture. But we do not stop (we would stop only when what happens in the story triggered an encounter with our traumatic real—Lacanian *Real*—and this therefore already anticipates those viewers who indeed stop viewing at this, at a prior, or at a later point). We also recognize the man in the underpass from the scene at the gay club—he is The Tapeworm they were looking for but had misrecognized him. Immediately follows the realization that Marcus and Pierre assaulted the wrong guy. And, before we know it, Alex is being raped on screen. It runs on for several minutes, during which the camera is left motionless on the ground, as if the unbearable brutality of it led the crew to temporarily abandon the recording apparatus. At this point, we too could abandon the film. Again, we do not. We do not turn away from the scene. We are transfixed. We are glued to our monitor. We relinquish our agency and drop dead—we become part of the atmosphere under whose gaze the horrific incident transpires. We keep watching, because that is precisely what a film is meant for—its consummation relies on its visual consumption. Cinematic exhibitionism and spectatorial scopophilia (the pleasure from looking) feed off each other—the viewer will perform his or her watchful duty, regardless of the nature and degree of savagery that is depicted on screen, be it torture and brutalization of women (and men), ruthless murder,

bestiality, cannibalism, or child pornography. Could we have moved? Should we have moved? Should we have turned away from or turned off the screen? Alex's hand reaches out to the camera and, through the camera, to us, perhaps for help. Maybe she was trying to end her ordeal by turning off the recording? Maybe she wanted us to end her misery by abandoning the film? Maybe. But we do not. Unlike the scene in *Wild at Heart*, this one does not withhold the climax that was promised in the beginning. In some sense, the responsibility of what happens to Alex (and of what could have happened to Lula) is shifted to us, the viewers—it is important to register the structural resemblance between this ethical conundrum and the choice that we, as consuming participants in contemporary capitalism, have of temporarily deferring our guilt by acquiescing to pay a marginal extra on our commodity purchases for the education of marginalized children, for instance (which comes across as a modern, irreligious reprise of the Roman Catholic Church's age-old practice of the sale of indulgences). As regards cinematic viewing, we are rather tragically situated by virtue of our disjunctive position with respect to cinema. It matters not which disjunct we choose—to watch or not to watch. Each disjunct-choice is always already ridden with guilt. Christian Metz's words illuminating this uncanny relationship between cinema and its spectatorship, in which the exhibitionist and the voyeur seem to be involved in a double exchange of roles, deserve to be quoted exhaustively here:

The spectator is absent from the screen: contrary to the child in the mirror, he cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects which are there without him. In this sense the screen is not a mirror. The perceived, this time, is entirely on the side of the object, and there is no longer any equivalent of the own image, of that unique mix of perceived and subject (of other and I) which was precisely the figure necessary to disengage the one from the other. At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am all-perceiving. All-perceiving as one says all-powerful (this is the famous gift of 'ubiquity')



the film makes its spectator); all-perceiving, too, because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it, the instance, in other words, which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film). (Metz 1983: 48)

I'm at the cinema. I am present at the screening of the film. *I am present*. Like the midwife attending a birth who, simply by her presence, assists the woman in labour, I am present for the film in a double capacity (though they are really one and the same) as witness and as assistant: I watch, and I help. By watching the film I help it to be born, I help it to live, since only in me will it live, and since it is made for that purpose: to be watched, in other words to be brought into being by nothing other than the look. The film is exhibitionist, as was the classical nineteenth century novel with its plot and characters, which the cinema is now copying (semiologically), continuing (historically), and replacing (sociologically, since the written text has now moved in other directions).... The exhibited partner knows that he is being looked at, wants this to happen, and identifies with the voyeur whose object he is (but who also constitutes him as subject).... The film is not exhibitionist. I watch it, but it doesn't watch me watching it. Nevertheless, it knows that I am watching it. But it doesn't want to know.... The film knows that it is being watched, and yet does not know. Here we must be a little more precise. Because, in fact, the one who knows and the one who doesn't know are not completely indistinguishable (all disavowals, by their very nature, are also split into two). The one who knows is the cinema, the institution (and its presence in every film, in the shape of the discourse which is behind the fiction); the one who doesn't want to know is the film, the text (in its final version): the story. During the screening of the film, the audience is present, and aware of the actor, but the actor is absent, and unaware of the audience; and during the shooting, when the actor was present, it was the audience which was absent. In this way the cinema manages to be both exhibitionist and secretive. The exchange of seeing and being-seen will be fractured in its centre, and its two disjointed halves allocated to different moments in time: another split. (Metz 1983: 93-95)

Coming back to *Wild at Heart*, we now have a clue as to what the title may refer to: the referent is the savagery that is constitutive of the kernel of one's being of which one can become aware only retroactively. Let me conclude my interpretative exploration—should one say interpretative (mis)appropriation?—of the scene by making one final comment about the scene's anticlimactic denouement. The denouement is anticlimactic because it is contrary to the narrative flow (the stage is all set for its logical closure—rape), which makes it experientially frustrating for the anticipative viewer who, as I have indicated, is already fragmented between *his* concern for the other (Lula) and *his* concern (erotic) for *himself* (the use of the gendered third-person pronoun is intentional, the aim being to identify the viewer as masculinized), the frustration being an outcome of the absence of an erotic closure, which itself is caused by the narrative denial of the promised object of the male gaze. The erotic closure is not blatantly denied; it is rather tantalized—first evoked (there is otherwise no reason for the camera to follow Bobby Peru's arm as it squeezes and inappropriately touches Lula) and then abandoned in an empty gesture, thus leaving the viewer embarrassed and exposed (embarrassed *because* exposed—the scene does to us what Peru does to Lula). It matters not whether the initial evocation and the subsequent abandonment (along with its suggested *impact* on the viewer) are *intended* or not. It matters not because such an indeterminacy, in addition to pointing to the absence of a controlling au(teu)thor-ity charting out a meaningful trajectory which opens the cinematic space up to subjective engagement (which we as viewers are supposed to be joyous about), inheres in our poststructural experience of and in language and as such informs us of the detachability of the two terms, intention (*signifier*) and impact (*signified*), thereby subverting their longstanding concomitance, so that we can no longer deduce each from the other. This detachability of the signifier and the signified (which, *inter alia*, has stayed with us through the space-time of this endeavor), also gives rise to a semantic plurality, such that the

constituent components of the plurality are often mutually inconsistent and sometimes entirely incoherent—think of the differing readings[signified] of the scene[signifier] that we have discovered here, readings that may not cohere with each other but nonetheless have emerged from the same source.

## VI.2 – The Four Lacanian Discourses

In his seventeenth seminar titled *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan provides a theory of discourses according to which all human discourses can be classified into four types, namely, the Master's Discourse, the University's Discourse, the Hysteric's Discourse, and the Analyst's Discourse. These four discourses are formalized as follows:

| Master's Discourse                                                                        | University's Discourse                                                                    | Hysteric's Discourse                                                                      | Analyst's Discourse                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| $\begin{array}{ccc} S_1 & \longrightarrow & S_2 \\ \hline \mathfrak{S} & & a \end{array}$ | $\begin{array}{ccc} S_2 & \longrightarrow & a \\ \hline S_1 & & \mathfrak{S} \end{array}$ | $\begin{array}{ccc} \mathfrak{S} & \longrightarrow & S_1 \\ \hline a & & S_2 \end{array}$ | $\begin{array}{ccc} a & \longrightarrow & \mathfrak{S} \\ \hline S_2 & & S_1 \end{array}$ |

Here,  $S_1$  = master/phallic signifier,  $S_2$  = the battery of signifiers/the signifying chain,  $\mathfrak{S}$  = the barred/split subject, and  $a$  = object petit a (or, simply object a). As we can see, the four mathemes/formulas are variations of each other that are obtained when each Lacanian symbol ( $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $\mathfrak{S}$ , and  $a$ ) in the formula exchanges its place with its immediate prior in the counter-clockwise direction. The positions that the symbols occupy in each formula, by virtue of which each symbol acquires specific signification in relation to the remaining three symbols, are that of the agent, the Other, product/loss, and truth, as follows:

|       |   |              |
|-------|---|--------------|
| agent | → | Other        |
| <hr/> |   | <hr/>        |
| truth |   | product/loss |

This positional interrelationship among the agent, the Other, truth, and product/loss is the structuration that overdetermines intersubjective communication.

In the **master's discourse** (or discourse of the master, if you will), if we set aside *a* temporarily, what we are left with is a symbolic representation of Lacan's definition of subjectivity, namely "a signifier represents a subject for another signifier":

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \longrightarrow S_2$$

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains: "Now, what is a signifier?... A signifier is that which represents a subject. For whom?—not for another subject, but for another signifier. Suppose that in the desert you find a stone covered with hieroglyphs. You do not doubt for a moment that, behind them, there was a subject who wrote them" (Lacan 1979: 198ff). So, from the hieroglyphs-on-a-stone (a signifier), it is inferred that there must be a subject who has authored the message. No sooner is the inference made than does one become aware of one's own existence as an object in the (other) subject's perceptual field, thus turning into a signifier oneself. As T. R. Johnson elaborates in *The Other Side of Pedagogy: Lacan's Four Discourses and the Development of the Student Writer*, in addition to that such an awareness is closely associated with a sense of vulnerability and shame, what is also involved in this dyadic relation between subjects qua signifiers (or, subjects as signifiers) is a primordial contestation for recognition and for survival, a contestation in which one fights until victory or death while the other chooses bare physical survival through surrender to or acceptance of one's superiority. In other words, one puts premium on honor; the other puts premium on living. The one becomes the master ( $S_1$ ), the other the slave ( $S_2$ ). Thereon, the slave works in the service of the master and the product of its labor (represented by *a* under  $S_2$  in the matheme for the master's

discourse) is appropriated by the master, which in turn reinforces the master's position. But this mastery is achieved at the price of disavowing the material truths/facts about oneself—that one is susceptible to the very dangers of human subjectivity, that one is just as vulnerable as the other. This repression of one's facticity is represented by the split subject (\$) under the bar. The irony of the master-slave position is that it is based on a superficial notion of victors and losers, which is exposed when one realizes that the notion of victory is contingent upon the recognition of the master as victorious by slaves, who by definition are sub-human. In other words, the master's mastery is derived from the recognition of those whose recognition should not even count to begin with. This positional faux pas of the master is underscored by Lacan through the split subject placed under it. The universality of the master's position is thus dependent upon the exception of split subjectivity, exclusion of which is essential to gaining *mastery*.

In the **university's discourse** (or, the discourse of the university), S<sub>2</sub> becomes the agency, S<sub>1</sub> the repressed truth, *a* the addressee/audience, and \$ the effect produced through the reconfigured interrelations. One way to make sense of this discourse would be to think of this positional shift between the S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub> in which the latter comes to usurp the place previously occupied by the former as a transition from autocracy to democracy. The advantage of having S<sub>2</sub> in the position of the agency is that it institutes a system that seems to be governed by objective principles and rationality instead of absolutism, which loosely speaking is the deal we seem to have gained by moving away from autocratic forms of government. In other words, S<sub>2</sub> in the speaking position indicates a smooth functioning of the different social systems (symbolic order) that we inhabit. These systems speak directly to the object-cause of desire (*a*)—for example, you want to become an engineer, a social worker, an actor, a doctor, a business person, etc., you want to own properties, you have your love interests—whereby the desire is instantiated in terms of

various objects at different points in one's life such that the effect that is produced in the process is the Lacanian subject confused and fragmented by the choices available to him or her. But if one analyses a particular system with any vigor, one realizes its sham of objectivity and ratiocination. In other words, if one questions the system long enough, its ultimate foundations (the truth of the master) are exposed.

In the **discourse of hysteria**, what one witnesses is the split/barred subject ( $S$ ) directly addressing/attacking the master signifier ( $S_1$ ). The barred subject does not want to be part of the signifying game anymore and thereby represses the element that is crucial for the game to continue (desire manifestations of the object  $a$ ). And when the master is in the line of fire, what is compromised is the entire signifying system itself ( $S_2$ )—the system breaks down. This can be understood with the help of a simple example. Mathematical systems are based on axioms, which serves as systemic building blocks. These building blocks are primitive but anything and everything that is built using these blocks must be proved—that is, shown to be derivable from these blocks. But if these blocks themselves are challenged, the entire system collapses. That precisely seems to be the project of the hysteric.

In the **discourse of the analyst**, finally, it is object  $a$  itself which assumes authorship and addresses the split subject directly by making him or her aware of the incoherence that constitutes his or her subjectivity to begin with. The subject's constitution rests upon a prohibiting mark, which constitutes his or her traumatic core that refuses to offer itself to the processes of substitution and displacement. In some sense, the analyst's discourse is the discourse of the singular subject, which thereby demands that objectivity and ratiocination ( $S_2$ ) be set aside. What the analysts enables the barred subject to do is to overcome the traumatic core

by assimilating it into the signifying chain, in the process producing a new core ( $S_1$ ), which is at least temporarily hidden away from site until a future point in time.

A lengthier examination of these four types or modes of discourses is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a couple of points are to be made. Firstly, recall the Lacanian distinction between the subject of statement and the subject of enunciation that we introduced in our discussion about the Lacanian Real. As stated earlier, closely associated with this distinction is the one between empty and full speech. Empty speech is essentially when a subject speaks keeping in line with his or her idealized image of his or her self. In other words, empty speech pertains to the imaginary dimension in Lacan. This is where the subject has given in to the identification with the indexical *I*. In contrast, full speech is that which distorts, disrupts, destabilizes, and displaces the subject's idealized projections and narrativizations of his or her self. This is where the subject is spoken of through language. In other words, full speech occurs when the subject speaks beyond his or her self, which may not agree with her or his idealized self image. This is precisely what happens in the analyst's discourse. This is useful in better situating the semantics of the traumatic encounter of Lula—*fuck me* is the occasioning of her full speech facilitated by the gangster Peru who seems to be occupying the position of the analyst-as-agent in the analyst's discourse. Furthermore, how do we see Mulvey's analysis in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in the light of these four discourses? Mainstream Hollywood cinema is structured and overdetermined by a deep-seated patriarchal unconscious—that is the crux of her claim in the essay. Thus, mainstream Hollywood cinema, which objectifies the heroine through the operations of a controlling and reifying male gaze, begins to appear as  $S_2$  as agent in the discourse of the university, which is founded on the hidden master (the patriarchal unconscious). But what does this discovery make of Mulvey's own engagement? The critique

that she produces of the university discourse manifest in mainstream cinema, which of the four discourses does the critique belong to? One might be tempted to identify her critique as a discourse of the hysteric but would it be too far-fetched to read in her critique the selfsame knowledge-producing discourse that she is critical of—that is the discourse of the university which in this case seems founded on psychoanalysis as the master? Finally, we may note that the four discourses along with their specific peculiarities are different constellations of the symbolic system. That each and every intersubjective interaction falls into one of the four discourses points to a closed loop of sorts and it is perhaps no accident that the position of truth in each of these discourse modes is one of repressed, wherein precisely is engendered the force that sets the ball rolling. It is as if truth must be barred for the system of signification can start off such that that which is barred (truth) can then be sought in the signifying chain. It should be borne in mind that these discourses operate simultaneously at any given point in time, at both intersubjective and individual levels and therefore should not be thought of as processes that run sequentially (or subsequentially) to each other. Therefore, as long as there is a system, anything or everything that can exist is always already part of it, either by way of mastery, subjugation, fierce opposition, or strategic assimilation. The system assumes all. And exclusion is both a structural necessity for and effect of the system. In other words, there can be no exclusion without a system, and there can be no system without an exclusion. Incorporating that which was formerly cast aside cannot create an all-inclusive system. Such all-inclusiveness is structurally impossible, as we witnessed earlier in our examination of Lacan's formulae of sexuation. In addition, inclusion of that which was earlier excluded does two things—1) de-otherizes the exclusion through strategic incorporating into the system, thereby inflating the system and 2) replaces the previous outcast with a new one. The only way to put an end to the exclusion is to annihilate the



system itself and not replace one in favor of another, as Lee Edelman argues in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, in which he exposes a commonality between conservative and liberal politics. The conservatives and the liberals, Edelman explains, are in constant conflict over how the future should be like, but there is no contention over whether or not there is, or should be, a future. The image that is frequently resorted to, in both conservative and liberal discourses, as emblematic of the promised future is that of the *Child*. Just as the present can be fulfilled only at a future (no)point in time, so too the arrival of the social future (represented by the Child-image) is forever deferred. The deferment is necessary for the continuation of the social symbolic—the signified will always (but never) arrive. Whatever runs contrary to the Child-image is antagonistic to the social symbolic and must be excluded. Since queer sexuality is inherently anti-Child—conservatives repress it by exclusion and liberals by inclusion (that queer sexuality is just as normal, naturalizes queer sexuality so that it ceases to be queer)—queerness becomes a site of political resistance to the paternal symbolic order.

### **VI. 3 – Truth is Better Deferred**

From Freud, we know that castration complex pertains to the imagined possibility of a punishment (castration) that might be meted out to one should one not abide by the rules laid out by the paternal figure. Castration complex is also known as Oedipus complex. But why? In Oedipus' story, we see what dire consequences await a man who commits patricide and maternal incest, both of which are socially forbidden acts. But, in Oedipus' defense, it must be pointed out that he was not aware of the fact that the man that he was going to kill was his biological father and the woman that he was marrying was his biological mother. So, the defiance that is supposed to beget the punishment of castration was not even real in the case of Oedipus—he had not wittingly violated the rules that *thou shalt not kill thy father* and *thou shalt not marry thy mother*.

One therefore would not be way off the mark in wondering whether something is erroneous in interchanging *castration complex* with *Oedipus complex*, unless Freud intends his readers, and the readers of Sophocles' play, to consider the possibility that Oedipus was not unknowing of the fuller import of his actions after all. It is only when awareness is conceded to Oedipus does he emerge as a tragic figure and does the expression *Oedipus complex* begins to feel like a justifiable semantic equivalent of *castration complex*. In 'Turning a Blind Eye: The Cover Up for Oedipus', John Steiner explores this precise possibility. Following Phillip Vellacott, Steiner reconstructs, for instance, Oedipus' mental attitude surrounding the events that attend his assassination of King Laius:

As he walked the streets [of Thebes] he must have heard everyone talking about the death of Laius. He had just killed a man together with his servants, and it is hard to imagine that he did not ask where King Laius had been killed, how he was attended, whether there was a herald, whether the king rode in a carriage, what age he was, and what he looked like. If he received answers to these questions, could there have been any doubt in his mind? When he hears these details seventeen years later he can only say, 'Alas, now everything is clear'. (Steiner 1985: 93)

The point is that it seems quite implausible that a man as intelligent as Oedipus, who manages to defeat the Sphinx, fails to connect the dots for such a long period. Steiner argues that the narrative proceeds not because of a lack of foresight on the part of the main character but on the basis of the choice that he makes—that of turning a blind eye to the circumstances in which he finds himself (and, on the basis of this reading, we would be guilty of turning a blind eye ourselves if we choose not to see the otherwise incoherence of the narrative). As the quotation, with which Steiner's article starts, says:

My dear, I am sorry to say this, but no one has understood before now that 'Oedipus' is not about the revelation of truth but about the cover up of truth. Everybody knows who

Oedipus is from the start and everybody is covering up. Just like Watergate. Just like all through history – the lie is what societies are based upon. And it has nothing to do with the Oedipus Complex because Oedipus never had a complex. (Steiner 1985: 86)

The search for truth presumes that truth is not immediately accessible and that it needs to be sought and chased down. But what if truth is immediately accessible? That would do no one no good. Immediate access to truth is ominous for storytelling, for narrative processes, or for any life process for that matter as each such process is a field summoned into action (by desire) for desire to stage and play itself out. Immediate truth is apocalyptic for desire, for it would signal the utter failure of the libidinal economy. For desire to operate and stay operant, the immediacy of truth must be denied and deferred (denied because deferred and deferred because denied) and be rather sought for in the symbolic economy. The Lacanian subject is a subject of desire and what this subject desires is not specific forms of gratification but only to continue to exist as a desiring subject (as a matter of fact, the subject in this sense is averse to total gratification). For such a subject, truth would mean libidinal closure—a *happy coincidence* between the object-cause of desire and the object of desire. But the irony is that the subject would cease to be when such a coincidence materializes—he or she would no longer remain a desiring subject because the desire would already be perfectly fulfilled. How often have we wondered, on seeing a film for example, that the story should have had its logical closure at a much earlier narrative point? That a film proceeds beyond a certain point only because the protagonist (or, any other character for that matter) chose to ignore a crucial piece of information, for example? Had the detail been seriously considered and acted upon, the story could have gone beyond a certain limit. And such lapses In Anurag Kashyap's film *Raman Raghav 2.0*, for instance, the serial murderer on the loose goes to the cops and confesses to be the person behind the recent murders that have taken place in the city. At this point, the viewers know fully well the significance of the confession, but

the cops choose to dismiss him as a raving lunatic and let him go. It is the human penchant for turning a blind eye to what is right in front of us and almost necessarily look for it elsewhere only can account for such a blunder on the part of the cops (this is precisely what is operant in Edgar Alan Poe's short story, 'The Purloined Letter'). As a result, the murderer goes on to commit several other murders as the film's narrative progresses. The encounter with truth must always either be missed or brief. The paradoxical constitution of our subjectivity demands that closure is always longed for, but its attainment be delayed. That closure is secondary to libidinal interests becomes increasingly clear when one reflects about *Irreversible* in which although closure is offered at the very outset, but one continues to watch the film anyway. As mentioned earlier, the film starts with what seems to be its chronological endpoint—a brutalized Alex being taken away to the hospital. The narrative logic of *Irreversible* thus presents an intriguing counterpoint to the common perception that one watches films until the very end because one is interested in knowing about the fate of the characters in it. To take another generic example from films, the thrill offered by murder mysteries seemed to be derived from the processes put in place to figure out and chase down the murderer, until the emergence of films that offered an altered narrative. In the latter films, the identity of the murderer is disclosed to us (and to the cops) in the initial few scenes and yet we continue to watch. The structure of our relationship to truth is perhaps best demonstrated by the Jewish joke: *Don't lie to me by saying that you are going to Krakow when you are actually going to Krakow*. Even if interpretation and intention coincide, one would still be unhappy because such coincidence indicates the exhaustion of all possibilities. By being truthful, one denies the other his or her quest, which is precisely what the other is cathected in.

#### **VI.4 – Concluding Remarks**

We have thus seen that the issue of women's representation is one of finding or forging a language in which women can represent themselves, a language which can appropriately capture what it is to be feminine. But following Lacan, it may not be irrelevant to ask if this dissatisfaction with the current system of representation is not something that is not only always already incorporated in the system but also is precisely what the system needs for its survival and continued expansion. It is like a monster that derives its strength from and feeds on the very opposition that it faces. Feminists howsoever different they may be in their approaches agree about the need for a new language in which the feminine can feel at home, independently of the masculine axis. As Edelman seems to insist in *No Future*, the solution does not seem to be in trading one system for another or even in building an alternative economy of representation in which the feminine can finally feel at home so to speak. Because as long as there is a system, there must be an exception to it. System formation and exclusion are two inseparable sides of the same thing, as it were. So, the only way to deny the system its fulfillment is to deny the future itself, and not long for a *new*. Such a longing is part of the system which overdetermines it. In the film *Matrix*, Matrix is a simulation of reality, which is developed to keep the human race from finding out that it has been enslaved by machines. But in order to be a perfect simulation of reality, which it must be if it has to prevent the humans from seeing through its deception, it must incorporate some of the imperfections that infest reality and which it does by incorporating resistance to itself in the form of Neo, the Chosen One. Neo is the exception to the universality of Matrix that is structurally necessary for the Matrix to persist. That feminists believe in the possibility of a *just* language presupposes the possibility of meaning, and by so doing they precipitate the very structural exception (the existential quantifier) that forms the universal

quantifier. In so doing, they seem to slide to the masculine side of the Lacanian formulae of sexuation, thereby marking their end in their very beginning.

## Chapter VII

### Summary

To summarize, the aim of this thesis was to examine the subject of women's representation. As indicated at the very outset of this work, the question of women's representation is a multi-layered subject which is readily open to problematization. We wanted to inquire into the subject from a Lacanian standpoint. To be precise, the question that I was after would, in Lacanian terms, read as follows—What is it that we mean when we say that women don't have a voice? When we say that women cannot express themselves? What are the formal/structural conditions, if any, that make the representation of women impossible, so to speak?

In Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', we saw how the male gaze, which is a signifier of the male desire, by and large overdetermines how films are made and received. More often than not, women's role in these films is pretty straightforward—be desirable for men viewers. And the eroticized images of women are made available through two distinct operations—scopophilia and narcissism. These operations then split the woman-image into two—the slut and the mother. The woman-as-slut is publicly available through spectatorial voyeurism while the woman-as-mother is reserved for more privatized consumption through identification with the male protagonists. But doesn't this reading betray a necessarily masculinized spectator? What about the (biological) women spectators? How does Mulvey account for them? Is Mulvey ignorant of them or does she consciously avoid taking them into consideration in her analysis of the inherent patriarchy that grounds mainstream cinematic productions and receptions? This is the question that Mulvey takes up in her follow-up essay. Her answer of course is that the structures that underly cinema are apathetic to gender

specificities—they operate primarily through a masculinization of the spectator. In other words, for such cinema to come across as ‘inclusive’ of women, women must allow themselves to undergo a trans-sex identification proves, so that she can see herself represented in the life-drama of the male hero on screen. As Mulvey’s analysis of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Duel in the Sun* shows, what seems to guarantee a place for women in the symbolic order is not the capability to identify herself with the highs and lows of the male hero but also an acceptance of her symbolic role (passivity).

Our direct exploration of Lacanian psychoanalytic framework (in Chapters 2, 3, and 4) made clear the structural, formal reason behind the lopsided place that woman occupies in the symbolic order. We closely looked at the three registers (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real), the notion of subjectivity, the formulae for masculine and feminine sexuation, and the voice and the gaze as objet petit a. Lacan’s formulae of sexuation make explicit the intrinsic sexual asymmetry. While all subjects exist as desiring (phallic) subjects, this applies only to masculinity all too well. It is only the masculine subjects that are totally overdetermined by the phallic operation. As regards feminine subjects, though they too are subjected to the phallic operation, they are not overdetermined by it, there is an excess in which escapes the phallic operation and as a result of which they fail to be adequately represented in the symbolic order. It is worthwhile reiterating here that masculinity and femininity do not strictly correspond to the biological male and female gender categories. Thus, while the whole of masculinity is symbolizable, femininity does not yield to such symbolic overdetermination. Therefore, Lacan seems essentialist with respect to masculinity but anti-essentialist with respect to femininity.

An undesirable consequence of this anti-essentialism is the absence of a language in which the feminine desire can be represented. We saw the desire for a feminine language of



desire in Mulvey in Chapter 1 and we found a similar echoed in the works of Judith Butler in *Antigone's Claim*, in Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and in Mary Ann Doane in 'Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator' in Chapter 5.

Following Zizek, in Chapter 6 we chanced upon a cinematic incidence of the desire of a woman, Lula, in Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. But the incidence proved traumatic, both for Lula and for the masculinized spectator as their symbolic consistency felt temporarily threatened at the precise moment when Lula's desire foregrounds itself. Particularly, as regards masculinized spectators, the scene exposes our long-accustomed patriarchal notions of femininity which we have projected onto the woman (in this case, Lula). We, then, briefly touched upon the four discourses of Lacan which collectively overdetermine all forms of intersubjective interactions. Such overdetermination is disappointing, to say the least. It echoes that which was hinted at somewhere at the beginning of Chapter 6, namely, all forms of resistance and opposition is not only incorporated into the symbolic but also provides the necessary basis for its sustenance and growth. The only choices that seem to be available at one's disposal are acceptance or rejection, both of which only further the symbolic cause. From the standpoint of Lacanian theory, the symbolic comes across as a trap from which there is no escape.

Therefore, it may not be reasonable for us to renounce theory at this juncture particularly since it cannot help us envisage a future in which femininity can feel at home. Instead, let's listen to an artist's creative experience of what the female gaze might be like. The artist in question is Jill Soloway, an American Television creator, showrunner, director, and writer according to the Wikipedia entry on her. In her hard-hitting keynote address at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2016, she speaks of the female gaze as a trope which stands in for narratives that provide experiences other than the dominant versions formed and informed by the male gaze

so as to bring about a de-centerisation of the dominant narrative forms and promote non-normative experiences in storytelling. The female gaze is not to be thought of as an opposite of the male gaze. For example, an erotic magazine *Playgirl* that sexualizes the male body or an action movie with a gun-blazing Angelina Jolie as the female hero would still be the work of the male gaze. The female gaze, for Jill Soloway, is rather an umbrella term which may be used interchangeably with the feminist gaze, the feminine gaze, the queer gaze, the trans gaze, etc. It refers to all those experiences that have been marginalized and excluded. The female gaze encourages the viewer to develop empathy for the characters on screen, instead of looking at them as objects to further one's own ends. It involves sharing how being seen as an object of someone else's desire feels like. And in a third stroke the female gaze is also about returning the gaze, calling out the dominant, normative forms of narrative that serve patriarchal interests. The female gaze is all of these three elements and so much more. It calls for the need to have more and more counternarratives so that the male-centric ones are reduced to as one form of narrative amongst a plurality of other forms. Jill Soloway talks about prioritizing the body, her body as a filmmaker, over equipment, money, time, etc. as crucial to the female gaze. In her own words, the female gaze is about "*reclaiming the body*". *Reclaiming the body* from what? We may add that from language itself. The female gaze is about the need to create this ecosystem, in which traditional gender roles are overthrown and newer roles are envisaged and adopted. This is beautifully in the web series *Transparent*, whose pilot is directed by Jill Soloway herself. In the pilot episode, we meet a family of five. The parents are in their 60s, divorced. The mother now takes care of an ailing person. The father wants to come out before *her* children. The eldest daughter is married to a cis-male and has two kids with him. She seems to be well settled in her conventional life until we see her run into a girl friend from the past with whom she starts

making out towards the end of the episode. The younger daughter wants to be muscular. This is a family where all the traditional roles seem to have swapped their fixed gender positions, where the signifier seems to have come loose from the signified. Hence the name of the series is *transparent*. The series foregrounds the trans experiences and by doing precisely that counters traditional, male-dominant narratives. This is perhaps what Jill Soloway means when she alludes to the need for building an alternative ecosystem. It is perhaps appropriate to conclude this thesis with an excerpt from her keynote address:

The female gaze inspires a collective roar...we filled with power as we corroborate one another, we collaborate, we blatantly ask the obvious questions about the divided feminine. We call out from our muted and blindfolded, objectized humanity. We take our blindfolds off and we say what we see—how your cis-male narratives obscure reality like your news stories, like the way you tell your news stories...so it says right here in the newspaper that this guy called up his friend to come over and fuck his passed-out girlfriend...and we never stop and ask this other question which is he called up his friend? A guy who wants to have sex with his friend in the room is probably gay, right? .... What's gang-rape? Gang-rape is men wanting to have sex in the same room using this degraded half of the divided feminine so that they don't have to name their own desire for each other, projecting that onto her, the slut, the drunken girl. We are being used, we are being used, so they don't have to name they're divided...she's an invitation to call your friends. We're not supposed to say what we see, we're supposed to stay divided, we're supposed to stay weak in our dividedness. I'm supposed to be keeping busy with the half of me that is arching towards approval, that diamond, that diamond, that light filled life preserver that will confer privilege on me but I don't have privilege. I've been reaching

for that life preserver since I was a little girl, to be that wonderful tonight girl. The female gaze is political protagonism and it is not afraid to ask, "What is toxic masculinity and when are we going to be done with it?" The female gaze is more than a camera or a shooting style. It is an empathy generator that says I was there in that room. Female gaze says I was there and this is my shame and this is my life and this is my humor. I will take all of it and put it in my protagonist and I will light it and I will have music and we will side with her.... *The female gaze is a baby, she's blind and one day old. The female gaze got so mad that Toronto believed me when I said my topic was the female gaze. There really is no such thing yet. The female gaze seeks out and gathers evidence, buried gems. We find a movie, one movie, one person, one poem, and we say, 'o yeah, that's it!' The female gaze is the green stuff in the brain of a lobster. It is the organ meat and the liver and the pancreas or that row inside. It's the chains of red eggs knit together. When you open up your lobster and everybody goes 'Ewww!' because it has a million generations of lobster in it and so it's so scary. It is bonobos who protect each other, even the ones they aren't related to. It is also the female gays, g a y s, I have found from personal experience, thank you. Female gaze is an absurdist, a bedbug, a ladybug, a speck against five thousand years and one hundred years. My female gaze was terrified to speak today. She wakes up in the middle of the night and she says, 'you're too much!' and at the same instant she's also saying "it's not enough." Simultaneously, the voice of the patriarchy borrows her voice so she can yell at me saying "stop, stop, stop making things!" The female gaze seeks to destroy all gazes. She is the other gaze, queer gaze, trans gaze, intersectional gaze. She is the non-gaze, emanating from the centre of not a triangle but a circle, undivided. The feel with me gaze, the being seen gaze, I see you gaze, truth gaze,*

*she is the Internet because now we can all talk to each other all at once, collaborate, corroborate. And so we'll take the invention of the new technology and we'll call it problematic for the patriarchy. The female gaze is an invitation to the intersectionally aligned. It says, "Please leave my body whole. Do not divide me. If I'm only this we can align. Maybe the revolution can still happen. Maybe it can happen in our lifetimes. Thank you."* (Jill Goloway)

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