

# THE REAL GAZE

FILM THEORY AFTER LACAN



TODD MCGOWAN

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*Film Theory after Lacan*

Todd McGowan

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For Hilary Neroni,  
who embodies nothing for me

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## Preface

FILM THEORY TODAY is almost nonexistent. The universalizing claims about the cinematic experience made by figures such as Sergei Eisenstein, André Bazin, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey have disappeared. Contemporary film scholars are increasingly content to make local, particular claims about film. This focus on particularity—that is, the analysis of isolated phenomena—completely dominates the field of film studies. Amid this contemporary landscape, proffering a universal and totalizing theory of the filmic experience seems outdated and naïve.

The turn away from film theory coincides with a turn away from film itself. Those working in film studies tend to understand film by contextualizing both the filmic text and the experience of spectatorship. Janet Staiger gives expression to this prevailing view when she claims, “I believe that contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives. These contextual factors are social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions.”<sup>1</sup> By focusing so intently on the context of film production and reception, we lose the possibility of being able to see the way in which an aesthetic object like a film might not fit within the context where it appears. Though every film emerges from within a context, not every film completely obeys the restrictions that the context places on it. Films can, in short, challenge their context through their individual mode of aestheticizing it. Or, to put it in Eric Santner’s words, miracles do happen.<sup>2</sup> And even those films that end up recapitulating their context cannot be immediately reduced to it. A layer of mediation exists even in these cases: a completely conformist film must first alienate itself from its context in order to find the form to uphold it.

In what follows, I elaborate a psychoanalytic theory of film that takes film itself as the point of departure. I avoid discussing either the historical context of the films' production or their reception, and when I talk about spectatorship, I am talking about the spectator that the filmic text itself demands, not an empirical spectator. Of course, no film ignores its historical context or those who will watch it, but the context and the spectator do not exist in an external relationship to the filmic text. Each film carries its context with it through its aesthetic development, and each film structures its spectator through its specific mode of address. The wager of this book is that though one cannot ignore the context of a film's production and reception, one must find them inhering within the film itself, not outside of it.

If we locate the production and reception of a film within the film, then film theory once again becomes a possibility. It was the impulse toward contextualization that eliminated the space wherein one might theorize about film. The proper response is not a reactionary assertion of the text against the context, but a grasp of the interweaving of the two, the immanence of the context within the text. Every filmic text bears internally the manifestations of its historical situation, just as it anticipates the conditions of its reception. We find history and the spectator through filmic interpretation, not through archival research and audience surveys.

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# Introduction: From the Imaginary Look to the Real Gaze

## *The Emergence of Lacanian Film Theory*

When film theorists in the 1970s first looked to Jacques Lacan's thought to further their understanding of cinema, their focus was narrow. Since Lacan himself never theorized about film, film theorists looked to an area of his thought that seemed most easily transferable to the cinematic experience. They relied almost exclusively on an essay entitled "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Commonly referred to as the "mirror-stage essay," this brief text from Lacan's early career—Lacan delivered the paper as a talk in 1949, two years prior to the beginning of the seminars where he developed the thought that we now identify with him—offered a way for film theorists to think through the ideological problems inherent in the act of film spectatorship.<sup>1</sup> In this essay Lacan argues that infants acquire their first sense of self-identity (the formation of an ego) through the experience looking in a mirror and relating to their bodies. For Lacan, this experience metaphorically captures a stage in the child's development when the child anticipates a mastery of the body that she/he lacks in reality. The child's fragmented body becomes, thanks to the way that the mirror image is read, a whole. The ideal of the body as a unity over which the child has mastery emerges as the illusion produced through the mirroring experience. Though the mirror simply returns an image of what the child actually does, the mirroring experience deceives insofar as it presents the body through a coherent image. The wholeness of the body is seen in a way that it is not experienced.

By transposing this understanding onto cinematic spectatorship, film theorists were able to link the illusory qualities of film to the process through which subjects enter into ideology and become subjected to the constraints

of the social order. This process, which Louis Althusser calls the ideological interpellation of the subject, involves concrete individuals misrecognizing themselves as subjects by taking up a socially given identity and seeing themselves in this identity. For early Lacanian film theorists, Althusser was a crucial bridge between Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and the cinematic experience because Althusser emphasized the social dimension of the kind of misrecognitions that followed from that of the mirror stage.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Althusser politicized Lacan's theory and offered film theorists an avenue for developing a critical understanding of the cinematic experience that was informed by psychoanalytic thinking.

The initial theoretical impetus in this direction was largely the work of French theorists such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Jean-Louis Comolli, as well as British theorists associated with the journal *Screen* such as Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, Colin MacCabe, and Stephen Heath.<sup>3</sup> These were the first theorists to bring psychoanalytic concepts to bear on the study of cinema in a systematic form. Though their specific approaches varied, they shared a belief in the connection between the psychic effects of the cinema and the workings of ideology, and this is why Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage, politicized by Althusser, proved so valuable.<sup>4</sup>

In the mirror-stage essay, Lacan stresses the illusory nature of the mastery that the child experiences while looking in the mirror, a mastery over her/his own body that the child does not yet have in reality.<sup>5</sup> According to the early Lacanian film theorists, the spectator inhabits the position of the child looking in the mirror. Like this child, the spectator derives a sense of mastery based on the position that the spectator occupies relative to the events on the screen. As Christian Metz puts it in his landmark work *The Imaginary Signifier*, "The spectator is absent from the screen *as perceived*, but also (the two things inevitably go together) present there and even 'all-present' *as perceiver*. At every moment I am in the film by my look's caress."<sup>6</sup> Being absent as perceived and present as perceiver allows the spectator to escape the sense of real absence that characterizes life outside the cinema. For Metz, the cinematic experience allows spectators to overcome temporarily the sense of lack that we endure simply by existing as subjects in the world. This experience provides a wholly imaginary pleasure, repeating that of the mirror stage. Jean-Louis Baudry makes this connection explicit, pointing out that "the arrangement of the different elements—projector, darkened hall, screen—in addition to reproducing in a striking way the *mise-en-scène* of Plato's cave . . . reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the 'mirror stage' discovered by Lacan."<sup>7</sup> By perpetuating this reconstruction, the cinema leads spectators into self-deception. At its most basic level, this theoretical position understands the cinema as a machine for the perpetuation of ideology.

According to early Lacanian film theorists such as Metz and Baudry, cinema, like the mirror stage, is imaginary in Lacan's specific sense of the term. As Lacan conceives it, the imaginary provides an illusion of complete-

ness in both ourselves and in what we perceive. In order to accomplish this, it dupes us into not seeing what is missing in ourselves and our world. For instance, looking out my window, I see a rustic farmhouse on a snowy morning and imagine a tranquil domestic scene inside. When I look in this way and view the farmhouse just on the imaginary level, what I miss is not only the violent quarrel taking place around the breakfast table, but also the violent exclusion that the very structure of a private home effectuates. We design homes, even rustic farmhouses, to shelter ourselves as much from others as from the weather, but this socioeconomic dimension of the farmhouse remains out of sight when one sees it on the imaginary level. Lacan's use of the term "imaginary" thus plays on both meanings we associate with it: it is at once visual and illusory. The imaginary most often works to conceal the functioning of Lacan's other categories that constitute our experience, the symbolic and the real.

Whereas the imaginary is the order of what we see, the symbolic order is the structure supporting and regulating the visible world. As the realm of language, it structures our experience, providing not only the words we use to describe ourselves and our world, but also the very identities we take up as our own. The symbolic identities of American, university professor, parent, and so on provide a way for me to have a sense of who I am without simply creating it for myself. They come ready-made, and as I become a subject, I see myself realized in these identities. Though no symbolic identity fits me perfectly—I never feel, for example, like I completely embody what it means to be a professor—my imaginary sense of a self, an ego, covers over this gap. The imaginary hides both the power of the symbolic order in shaping my identity and its inability to do so completely. That is to say, the imaginary also hides the real, Lacan's third category of experience.

The Lacanian real is the indication of the incompleteness of the symbolic order. It is the point at which signification breaks down, a gap in the social structure. By stressing the importance of the real, Lacan doesn't proclaim an ability to escape language and identify what is really actual; instead, he affirms the limitations of language—language's inability to say it all or speak the whole truth. To affirm the real is to affirm that the work of ideology never comes off without a hitch. Every ideology includes a point within its structure that it can't account for or represent. This is the point, the real, at which ideology opens up to the outside. The real thus allows ideology to include new phenomena, and at the same time, it marks ideology's vulnerability. When we call ideology into question, we do so from this real point within it. But unfortunately the real never appears in the psychoanalytic film theory developed in the 1970s.

For someone like Baudry, the cinematic image acts as an imaginary deception, a lure blinding us to an underlying symbolic structure and to the material cinematic apparatus. While watching a film, we remain unaware of the act of production that created the images for us, and in this way the cinematic

experience dupes us. When we buy into the illusion, we have a sense of control over what we see on the screen. This theoretical approach conceives of the gaze (what would become the pivotal concept in Lacanian film theory) as a function of the imaginary, the key to the imaginary deception that takes place in the cinema. Early Lacanian film theory identifies the gaze with the misguided look of the spectator, even though such a conception has no significant roots in Lacan's thought (beyond the mirror-stage essay). Beginning with this idea, the task of the film theorist becomes one of combating the illusory mastery of the gaze with the elucidation of the underlying symbolic network that this gaze elides. Metz clearly articulates this as the goal of psychoanalytic film theory (though he doesn't employ the term "gaze"): "Reduced to its most fundamental procedures, any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema might be defined in Lacanian terms as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province."<sup>8</sup> This idea seems to follow from the original premises of psychoanalysis—specifically, its attempt to symbolize traumatic images through the "talking cure."

As psychoanalytic film theory developed, it began to examine the particular dynamics of the imaginary gaze in an effort to make clear its symbolic underpinnings. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," undoubtedly the most widely anthologized essay in film theory, Laura Mulvey associates this gaze with male spectatorship and with the ideological operations of patriarchal society.<sup>9</sup> According to Mulvey, classical Hollywood cinema allows the male spectator to identify with the gaze of the camera and the male protagonist, and female characters function solely as objects to be looked at. Thus, the spectator is inevitably gendered male and linked to the experience of imaginary mastery. But the further that Lacanian film theory moved in the direction of specifying spectators in their particularity, the more that it paved the path leading to its own demise.

In the 1980s and 1990s, waves of criticism confronted Lacanian film theory, especially Mulvey's essay.<sup>10</sup> This criticism most often took as its point of departure the theory's failure to account for differences among spectators.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in 1996 a collection of essays appeared that pronounced the death of Lacanian-centered psychoanalytic film theory (which, because of its hegemony over the field of film studies, editors David Bordwell and Noël Carroll simply label "the Theory"). As Bordwell and Carroll put it at the time in their introduction to *Post-Theory*, "Film studies is at a historical juncture which might be described as the waning of Theory."<sup>12</sup> In their view, this "waning of Theory" occurred largely in response to the universalizing pretensions of the film theory associated with psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan.

The primary problem with "the Theory" was its proclivity to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the cinema without regard for empirical evidence that didn't conform to the theory. Carroll claims that "the Theory has been effectively insulated from sustained logical and empirical analysis by a cloak

of political correctness,”<sup>13</sup> and Stephen Prince argues that “film theorists . . . have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken almost no look at real viewers. We are now in the unenviable position of having constructed theories of spectatorship from which spectators are missing.”<sup>14</sup> For these opponents of Lacanian film theory, the theory’s great error lies in its attempt to account for everything on the level of theory alone without empirical verification. In short, traditional Lacanian film theory goes too far in its claims, extrapolates too much from its theoretical presuppositions. This is undoubtedly what led to its demise: film theory as such lost its influence because of its conceptual arrogance.

Rather than opening up cinematic experience, the Lacanian presuppositions have, so the *Post-Theory* critique goes, played a determinative role, producing the very cinematic experience that psychoanalytic film theory then explicates. For instance, the Lacanian film theorist begins with the idea that the spectator identifies with the male hero who drives the filmic narrative, and then the theorist posits this type of identification in the analysis of a specific film. The theory never encounters the particularity of the film itself or envisions how this particularity might challenge the theoretical edifice itself. In this analysis, what makes Lacanian film criticism vulnerable to critique is the very breadth of its claims—its theoretical universality. It is my contention, however, that traditional Lacanian film theory became a target for these attacks not because of its overreliance on purely psychoanalytic concepts, but because of its deviation from these concepts, and that, therefore, the proper response to the demise of Lacanian film theory is not a defense of its previous claims but rather a return to Lacanian concepts themselves in the analysis of the cinema—and with this a renewal of the endeavor to theorize the filmic experience.<sup>15</sup> We should greet the news of the death of Lacanian film theory as the opportunity for its genuine birth.

### ***The Gaze as Object***

Developing psychoanalytic film theory today demands a reassessment of the idea of the gaze. By locating the gaze in the spectator and analyzing cinema in terms of this gaze, early Lacanian film theory invited questions about the particularity of the spectator that perhaps would not have arisen had the theory conceived of the gaze as Lacan himself did. Lacan’s conception of the gaze has been almost completely absent from the world of film theory and film studies. In the mirror-stage essay, Lacan never uses the term (*le regard*) that he would later use for the gaze. In the years after the essay on the mirror stage, Lacan comes to conceive of the gaze as something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze. Lacan’s use of the term reverses our usual way of thinking about the gaze because we typically associate it with an active process.<sup>16</sup> But as an object, the gaze acts to trigger our desire visually, and as

such it is what Lacan calls an *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. As he puts it in *Seminar XI*, “The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.”<sup>17</sup> This special term *objet petit a* indicates that this object is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field. It is not the look of the subject at the object, but the gap within the subject’s seemingly omnipotent look. This gap within our look marks the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see. What is irreducible to our visual field is the way that our desire distorts that field, and this distortion makes itself felt through the gaze as object. The gaze thus involves the spectator in the filmic image, disrupting the spectator’s ability to remain what Metz calls “all-perceiving” and “absent as perceived.”

Though the gaze is an object, it is not just an ordinary object. There is, according to Lacan, a form of the *objet petit a* that corresponds to each of our drives. The gaze is the *objet petit a* of the scopopic drive (the drive that motivates us to look), functioning in a way parallel to the breast in the oral drive, the feces in the anal drive, and the voice in what Lacan calls the “invocatory” drive.<sup>18</sup> The *objet petit a* is in each case a lost object, an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject. It is the loss of the object that inaugurates the process of desiring, and the subject desires on the basis of this loss. The subject is incomplete or lacking because it doesn’t have this object, though the object only exists insofar as it is missing. As such, it acts as a trigger for the subject’s desire, as the object-cause of this desire, not as the desired object. Though the subject may obtain some object of desire, the *objet petit a* lacks any substantial status and thus remains unobtainable.

Lacan invents the term “*objet petit a*” (and insists that it not be translated) in order to suggest this object’s irreducibility to the field of the big Other (*l’Autre*) or signification. In contrast to the social domain of the big Other that houses our symbolic identities, it is a specific type of small other (*petit autre*) that is lost in the process of signification and ideological interpellation. The *objet petit a* doesn’t fit within the world of language or the field of representation. It is what the subject of language gives up in order to enter into language, though it does not exist prior to being lost.

As the *objet petit a* in the visual field, the gaze is the point around which this field organizes itself. If a particular visual field attracts a subject’s desire, the gaze must be present there as a point of an absence of sense. The gaze compels our look because it appears to offer access to the unseen, to the reverse side of the visible. It promises the subject the secret of the Other, but this secret exists only insofar as it remains hidden. The subject cannot uncover the secret of the gaze, and yet it marks the point at which the visual field takes the subject’s desire into account. The only satisfaction available to the subject consists in following the path (which psychoanalysis calls the drive) through which it encircles this privileged object.

Early Lacanian film theory missed the gaze because it conceived of the cinematic experience predominantly in terms of the imaginary and the sym-

bolic order, not in terms of the real.<sup>19</sup> This omission was crucial because the real provides the key for understanding the radical role that the gaze plays within filmic experience.<sup>20</sup> As a manifestation of the real rather than of the imaginary, the gaze marks a disturbance in the functioning of ideology rather than its expression.

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan's example of the gaze is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533). This painting depicts two world travelers and the riches they have accumulated from their travels. But at the bottom of the painting, a distorted, seemingly unrecognizable figure disrupts the portrait. The figure is anamorphic: looking directly at it, one sees nothing discernible, but looking at the figure downward and from the left, one sees a skull. Not only does the skull indicate the hidden, spectral presence of death haunting the two wealthy ambassadors—a *memento mori*—but, even more importantly for Lacan, it also marks the site of the gaze.

The skull is a blank spot in the image, the point at which spectators lose their distance from the picture and becomes involved in what they see, because its very form changes on the basis of the spectator's position. One cannot simply look straight at the picture and see this object: one must move one's body and turn one's head. The gaze exists in the way that the spectator's perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator's involvement in a scene from which the spectator seems excluded. It makes clear the effect of subjective activity on what the subject sees in the picture, revealing that the picture is not simply there to be seen and that seeing is not a neutral activity. The skull says to the spectator, "You think that you are looking at the painting from a safe distance, but the painting sees you—takes into account your presence as a spectator." Hence, the existence of the gaze as a disruption (or a stain) in the picture—an objective gaze—means that spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself.

*The Ambassadors* is a privileged example for Lacan because the form that the gaze takes in this painting—a skull—renders explicit the relationship between the gaze and the subject's complete loss of mastery.<sup>21</sup> The skull indicates the presence of death amid the wealth of the men pictured, but it also reminds viewers of their own death. Death is, as Hegel claims, the absolute master: it deprives the subject of any sense of mastery, and this constitutes much of the horror with which we respond to it. Even when a manifestation of the gaze does not make death evident directly like this, it nonetheless carries the association insofar as the gaze itself marks the point in the image at which the subject is completely subjected to it. The gaze is the point at which the subject loses its subjective privilege and becomes wholly embodied in the object.

By following Lacan and conceiving of the gaze as an *objet petit a* in the visual field, we can better avoid the trap of differences in spectatorship that snared traditional Lacanian film theory. Understood in Lacan's own terms, the gaze is not the spectator's external view of the filmic image, but the mode

in which the spectator is accounted for within the film itself. Through their manipulation of the gaze, films produce the space in which spectators can insert themselves. Of course, not every spectator does so. There is, as the contributors to *Post-Theory* rightly point out, an unlimited number of different possible positions of empirical spectatorship. These empirical spectators have the ability to avoid the place that a film carves out for them, and we might even imagine a film that no actual person watches from the proper position. But this failure does not change the structure of the film itself, nor does it change how the film constitutes spectatorship through its deployment of the gaze. The gaze is a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film. This conception of the gaze entails a different conception of desire than the one that has predominated in early Lacanian film theory. As the indication of the spectator's dissolution, the gaze cannot offer the spectator anything resembling mastery.

### Desiring Elsewhere

Though Lacan does claim that imaginary identification produces the illusion of mastery in his essay on the mirror stage, even at this early point in his thought he does not see desire as such as a desire for mastery. Early Lacanian film theory's conception of desire actually has more in common with Nietzsche and Foucault than it does with Lacan, which is one reason why Joan Copjec claims that "film theory operated a kind of 'Foucauldinization' of Lacanian theory."<sup>22</sup> For both Nietzsche and Foucault, power wholly informs our desire. Nietzsche insists again and again that our fundamental desire isn't the desire to survive but to attain mastery—what he calls the "will to power."<sup>23</sup> Rather than being something enigmatic or uncertain, the goal of our desire is clear: we want mastery over the other or the object; we want to possess the alien object and make it a part of ourselves. And as Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, the gaze, as it is traditionally understood, serves as the perfect vehicle for this mastery—especially a gaze, as in the cinema, in which the subject remains obscured in the dark while the object appears completely exposed on the screen.<sup>24</sup>

This conception of desire as the desire for mastery sees desire as an active rather than a passive process: the desiring subject actively takes possession of the passive object. In this sense, desire is ipso facto male desire—and thus demands the conclusions drawn by Laura Mulvey. As Mulvey points out, "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 phantasy 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*.<sup>25</sup> The cinema, according to this conception of desire, establishes sexual difference through the way that it caters to male desire: male subjects go to the cinema—they desire to see films—because the cinema provides for them an active experience, a way of mastering passive objects. To take perhaps the most obvious example, spectators desire to see a film like Charles Vidor’s *Gilda* (1946) because it allows them, through the gaze, to achieve mastery over the female object on the screen (Rita Hayworth). From the safe distance of their seats in the darkened theater, spectators see Rita Hayworth’s performance of “Put the Blame of Mame” and take possession of her image in their fantasies. The desire to attain control of this image of the female object informs spectatorship not just in *Gilda* but in the majority of classical Hollywood narratives, according to Mulvey. The filmic experience is an experience of power over the object, and when we desire in the cinema, we desire to dominate.

One of the best-known attacks on early Lacanian film theory responds directly to this conflation of desire and power. In “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,” Gaylyn Studlar points out that the desire for mastery is not the most primordial or fundamental human desire. A masochistic, preoedipal desire precedes the oedipal desire for mastery. For Studlar, to conflate desire and mastery, to see desire as only an active process, is to miss a much more radical kind of desire—the desire to submit to the Other. Because the filmic experience involves submitting oneself to images of the Other, Studlar insists that a masochistic, passive conception of desire comes closer to approximating our experience of the cinema than does a mastering, active conception.

This leads Studlar to turn away from psychoanalysis and toward the thought of Gilles Deleuze as a way of understanding the filmic experience.<sup>26</sup> While Studlar claims that she finds Lacanian psychoanalytic theory ill equipped to explain the desire that operates in cinematic experience, what she is actually objecting to is not Lacanian theory itself but the deformation it undergoes as it becomes traditional Lacanian film theory. Studlar rejects the idea that the spectator’s desire is a desire for mastery, which is exactly what Lacan rejects as well.

Studlar’s conception of desire as fundamentally masochistic bears a resemblance to Lacan’s own formulations. In *Seminar V*, Lacan even goes so far as to claim that “what we find at the foundation of the analytic exploration of desire is masochism.”<sup>27</sup> Desire has this masochistic quality because its goal is not finding its object but perpetuating itself. As a result, subjects have the ability to derive enjoyment from the process of desire itself. Though an object triggers desire, the subject actually enjoys not attaining its object rather than attaining it. Desire perpetuates itself not through success (attaining or incorporating the object) but through failure (submitting itself to the object). Here, masochism is not, as Studlar would have it, a feature of preoedipal desire but of desire as such.

Desire involves the desiring subject allowing the object to control it, and through this submission to the object, the subject sustains itself as desiring.

Desire is motivated by the mysterious object that it posits in the Other—what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*—but it relates to this object in a way that sustains the object’s mystery. Hence, the *objet petit a* is an impossible object: to exist, it would have to be simultaneously known and unknown. The subject posits the *objet petit a* as the point of the Other’s secret enjoyment, but it cannot be reduced to anything definitively identifiable in the Other. It is, to paraphrase Lacan, in the Other more than the Other. The enjoyment embodied in this object remains out of reach for the subject because the object exists only insofar as it is out of reach. Lacan describes this process at work in the scopical drive: “What is the subject trying to see? What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence. . . . What he is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus—but precisely its absence.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than seeking power or mastery (the phallus), our desire is drawn to the opposite—the point at which power is entirely lacking, the point of traumatic enjoyment. This enjoyment is traumatic insofar as it deprives us of power but nonetheless compels us.<sup>29</sup> This appeal that enjoyment has for us explains why power fails to provide satisfaction and why a psychoanalytic conception of desire must be absolutely distinguished from the Nietzschean or Foucaultian conception.

No matter how much power one acquires, one always feels oneself missing something—and this something is the *objet petit a*. Even those who are bent on world conquest nonetheless feel the allure of the hidden enjoyment of the Other, and they locate this enjoyment at the point where power seems most absent. This explains the master’s secret envy of the slave. Through the act of mastery, the master hopes to appropriate the slave’s enjoyment, but this appropriation always comes up short. In an experience of absolute mastery, the master imagines that the slave has access to an enjoyment that power cannot provide. Or the upper-class subject imagines unrestrained enjoyment hidden in the activities of the lower-class subject. It is the Other’s seeming enjoyment that acts as an engine for desire, not mastery. The image of an active desire mastering and possessing a passive object obfuscates a much more disturbing alternative: the object drawing the subject toward a traumatic enjoyment—the enjoyment of total submission to an unattainable object.

When the subject enjoys the gaze, it enjoys its submission to this object. Enjoyment or *jouissance*, in Lacan’s sense of the term, is thus far removed from mere pleasure.<sup>30</sup> It marks a disturbance in the ordinary symbolic functioning of the subject, and the subject inevitably suffers its enjoyment. One cannot simply integrate one’s enjoyment into the other aspects of one’s daily life because it always results from the injection of a foreign element—the real—into this life. As Alenka Zupančič notes, “It is not simply the mode of enjoyment of the neighbour, of the other, that is strange to me. The heart of the problem is that I experience my own enjoyment (which emerges along with the enjoyment of the other, and is even indissociable from it) as strange

and hostile.”<sup>31</sup> The subject cannot simply have its enjoyment; it is more correct to say that this enjoyment has the subject.

The enjoyment associated with the gaze acts as a cause for the subject’s desire, but enjoyment is not reducible to desire. Desire thrives on the experience of absence, on what it lacks, whereas enjoyment lacks nothing. The desiring subject pursues what the enjoying subject already experiences.<sup>32</sup> The gaze triggers the subject’s desire because it appears to hold the key not to the subject’s achievement of self-completion or wholeness but to the disappearance of self in the experience of enjoyment.

This is not to say that subjects never act out of—nor go to the cinema because of—a desire for mastery. However, this desire for mastery is not fundamental for the subject; it represents an attempt to short-circuit the path of desire in order to derive satisfaction from the *objet petit a* without experiencing the trauma that accompanies that satisfaction. Mastery aims at regulating enjoyment rather than being overcome by it, but it nonetheless posits the experience of the *objet petit a* as its ultimate end. That is to say, when the subject appears to seek mastery, it is actually trying to find another, less traumatic way of relating to its object. Freud notices this dynamic in his exploration of male fantasizing about mastery. Though some male subjects fantasize about mastery, their desire remains thoroughly erotic. Freud points out that “investigation of a man’s day-dream generally shows that all his heroic exploits are carried out and all his successes achieved only in order to please a woman and to be preferred by her to other men.”<sup>33</sup> In short, the man who dreams of conquering the world wants to do so in order to access his erotic object. Here, the desire for mastery is nothing but the disguised articulation of another desire—the desire occasioned by the impossible object. The desire for mastery is itself never primary but always the displacement of another desire. If we think of desire in terms of mastery, we submit ourselves to the subject’s own self-deception.

In Lacan’s conception of desire, the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision. It is a blank spot in the subject’s look, a blank spot that threatens the subject’s sense of mastery in looking because the subject cannot see it directly or successfully integrate it into the rest of its visual field. This is because, as Lacan points out, the gaze is “what is lacking, is non-specular, is not graspable in the image.”<sup>34</sup> Even when the subject sees a complete image, something remains obscure: the subject cannot see how its own desire distorts what it sees. The gaze of the object includes the subject in what the subject sees, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible.

Despite the resistance of the gaze (and the real as such) to specularization, the cinema offers an arena in which the subject can relate to the gaze in ways that are impossible outside the cinema. Early Lacanian film theory was, in a sense, correct: the attraction of the gaze draws us into the cinema. But as we have seen, this is not the attraction of mastery but rather that of enjoyment.

Film holds out the promise of enjoyment through the way that it deploys the gaze as objet petit a. This object, which cannot be integrated into the visual field (or, consequently, into the filmic image), is the cinematic object par excellence, the object filmic spectators are hoping to glimpse—or take up some kind of relation to—on every trip to the cinema. Thus, though the gaze itself is the antithesis of power, the enjoyment that the gaze as objet petit a promises does have a certain power—the power to excite spectators and bring them into the cinema. It is in the direction of this power that a psychoanalytic analysis of film must turn in order to understand the nature of film’s relationship to the gaze that it deploys.

### **Privileging the Unconscious**

No medium places the subject in a position as close to its position in the dream as does cinema.<sup>35</sup> Like the dream, film lures the subject into accepting the illusion that it offers. In the dream state, our faculties of critical thought disengage, and we accept the experience as it presents itself. Because we experience rather than think critically in the dream, we lack the sense of mastery in the dream that we have during our waking experiences. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan claims, “In the final resort, our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows.”<sup>36</sup> Our inability to see is crucial because when we see things going in the direction of trauma, we necessarily turn away. Consequently, we cannot consciously will ourselves toward an encounter with the real, which is why the filmic spectator’s absence of mastery is significant.

As in the dream, while watching a film the subject follows rather than leads—and thus doesn’t have the opportunity to turn away from the traumatic encounter. In dreams, the subject does not direct the narrative movement but follows where the narrative leads. This lack of conscious agency does not imply that the subject has no role in directing the dream narrative. But the agent of the dream is not consciousness; it is the subject of the unconscious. Films also relate to the unconscious, but in a way that we can recall and can access more readily than the dream.

Notwithstanding this unleashing of the unconscious, dreams would seem to offer, at least for some dreamers, more of an opportunity for conscious agency at the point when the dreamer becomes aware that she or he is dreaming. This awareness appears to allow consciousness to wrest control of the dream from the unconscious: aware that I am dreaming, I can decide actively on the course my dream should take. But Freud quickly deflects this possibility, pointing out that such moments of awareness are ultimately deceptive. He says, “When the thought ‘this is only a dream’ occurs during a dream, . . . it is aimed at reducing the importance of what has just been experienced and at making it possible to tolerate what is to follow. It serves to lull a particular agency to sleep which would have every reason at that moment

to bestir itself and forbid the continuance of the dream."<sup>37</sup> Even at the points in the dream when we become aware that we are dreaming, conscious control continues to elude us. Conscious control is itself nothing but an illusion that the subject of the unconscious uses to bypass the psyche's internal censorship. No experience marginalizes consciousness like the experience of the dream—or film spectatorship.

While this doesn't present a problem in dreams because, in a sense, we are both the director of the dream and the spectator, in the cinematic situation things become more politically charged. The spectator's lack of conscious control renders the spectator extremely vulnerable to ideological manipulation while at the cinema. The pseudo-dreamworld of the cinematic spectator represents the key political problem of the cinema; rather than serving as a tool for making spectators aware of the functioning of ideology, the very form of film itself seems to operate in the opposite political direction—as a crucial ingredient in the propagation of an uncritical subjectivity. Cinema appears to produce uncritical subjects who fail to realize that they are uncritical. The pseudo-dreamworld allows ideology to enact an unconscious process of interpellation.

For years, psychoanalytic film theory documented this ideological effect of mainstream cinema. The fascination of spectators was *the* political problem. This becomes apparent most profoundly in the case of Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey's conception of cinematic politics, the fundamental political problem of the cinema is the extent to which the spectator submits to the fantasmatic dimension of the cinema. Nearly every early Lacanian film theorist shares this position, this belief that a politically progressive cinema is one that destroys rather than produces spectator fascination.

What this position misses is an understanding of the relationship between consciousness and ideology. One does not resist ideology through the act of becoming conscious; instead, consciousness is itself a mode of inserting oneself into ideology and avoiding one's unconscious desire. Ideology operates not only in unconscious ways, but also through the illusions of consciousness itself—namely, the assumption of mastery implicit in consciousness. It is our association of consciousness with vision that allows us not to see the role of the gaze in structuring our vision. Instead, consciousness provides the subject with an image that obscures the distortion of the gaze, that allows no room for what is missing in the field of vision. The very structure of consciousness cannot admit absence because the operations of consciousness are inevitably totalizing. This is where film stands out from our quotidian experience: we can potentially experience the gaze when we submit to the process of fascination and cease to hold ourselves at a distance from what we see, which is what often occurs in the cinema. We can meet the gaze when we follow the logic of the cinematic or dream image and in doing so deprive consciousness of its priority. Rather than advocating suspicion about the cinematic experience (and thereby taking the side of consciousness), psychoanalytic film theory should pave the way to a

more intense submission to the dictates of this experience in order to facilitate an encounter with the gaze.

The cinematic experience can lead us to the encounter with the gaze if it takes up the psychoanalytic session as something of a model for film viewing.<sup>38</sup> The analytic process of free association works only when we as subjects avoid reflection—to the extent that this is possible—and invest ourselves in the dynamic of the session itself, associating without regard for the apparatus (the form of the analytic session) that produces the associations. During the process of associating, the analyst interrupts the subject with an interpretation which, if correct (and correctly timed), hits the subject with the weight of the real. It is only after this encounter with the real that subjects can begin to interpret their relationship to this real.

To return to the ground of the cinema, we can see how the filmic gaze can function in the same way as the analyst's interpretation, provided that we as spectators fully invest ourselves in the filmic experience. While invested in the film, the subject (like the analyst and free associating) is able to encounter the gaze as a disruption within spectatorship. We can—and must—interpret our relationship to this gaze after the fact, after the traumatic experience of it. But we must first have the experience, and this requires that we follow the logic of the film we are watching.

This is what differentiates the film theory I am advocating here from the practice of early Lacanian film theory. For the latter, we must gain critical distance from the scene of cinematic manipulation and view the cinematic experience with an attitude of suspicion from the beginning. For a truly psychoanalytic film theory, on the other hand, critical distance is but another way of avoiding the real of the gaze. No matter how the critic goes down the path of radical doubt, no matter how much one draws attention to the ideological manipulation occurring in the cinema, it never goes far enough as long as the subject consciously controls the direction of thought. Consciousness itself is a barrier to the real. This is the problem with the cinematic politics of figures such as Jean-Louis Comolli (working in the tradition of Metz and Baudry). He argues, "What modern cinema needs is lighted theatres which, unlike the darkness, neither absorb nor annihilate the clarity which comes from the screen, but on the contrary diffuse it, which bring both the film character and the spectator out of the shadows and set them face to face on an equal footing."<sup>39</sup> A well-lit cinema appeals to Comolli because it offers the spectator respite from the darkened dream world and some degree of control over the cinematic experience. In this sense, Comolli attacks psychoanalysis proper along with the darkened cinema.

Comolli's revolt against the darkened cinema exposes the ultimate allegiance of early Lacanian film theory as a whole. For the thinkers in this tradition, psychoanalysis is a tool to be used for political ends rather than a theory that might generate political ends of its own. Psychoanalysis allows them to expose the illusions that inform the typical cinematic experience; they can