The Failure of Spectatorship

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Much of the lingering ambiguity surrounding Christian Metz's influential, though now largely out of fashion, later work revolves around his counterintuitive juxtaposition of the terms 'imaginary' and 'signifier'. For both the linguist of the structuralist persuasion and the psychoanalyst of the Lacanian tradition will insist upon the properly semiotic meaning of the latter: If the signifier is defined as a conventional symbol ('acoustic image' or 'sound pattern', more properly) positioned in a network along with other signifiers and partaking thereby of a process of differential signification, then this signifier would seem to bear little relation to the question of the image and the associated notion of the imaginary. Now on the condition that we set aside the quality of arbitrariness intrinsic to the concept as defined by Saussure[1], the Metzian film theorist might respond that the classical structuralist definition need not rule out the cinema: What is a film-text, in other words, if not a network of signifying elements—shots, let's say—which compose a meaning-making system by virtue of their various interrelations?

We can of course grant this counterpoint, though clearly it fails to resolve the ambiguity. For the linguist, not to mention many a semiotician and semiologist, will distinguish the functioning of the linguistic sign properly speaking from that of other signs, such as the image or icon, for example, as defined in semiotic schools, Peirce's being the foremost example, which, unlike the Saussurean tradition's acoustic image, explicitly include nonverbal signs within semiotic terrain.[2] And the Lacanian might similarly aver that the main function of the signifier concept is to differentiate its objective role in the representation of unconscious desire from the misleading and narcissistic seductions of an imaginary corporeal ego, indeed from the lure of the image

as such. We are therefore forced to ask in what precise sense the cinematic signifier—aural (both linguistic and nonlinguistic, at least from the beginning of the sound era) and visual, or rather almost always both at once—can be qualified as imaginary?

Now the term 'imaginary' periodically surfaces in Metz's work in reference to the fictionality of conventional narrative cinema and its far from necessary dominance over alternative cinematic forms. This is of course the meaning that usually surfaces in ordinary conversation. More consequentially, however, Metz also explicitly connects the imaginary to Lacan's teaching, and more specifically to the latter's early notion of the mirror stage and its role in the formation of the ego. Here many will recall that Metz's project to bring cinema theory into dialogue with Freudian psychoanalysis generated copious commentary in the 1970s and early 80s in France, Britain and beyond. Indeed, for a brief moment psychoanalytically-inflected analyses of the apparatus and spectatorship, albeit of varying degrees of rigor and interest, dominated theoretical work in cinema studies. Unhelpfully, however, the weakest work in this tradition lapsed into undernuanced ideological or symptomatic readings that jettisoned the dialectical compexity of Metz's elaborations in favor of a vulgar Althusserianism. This current presented the cinematic spectator as an unconflicted recipient of subjectivity-effects (or 'positions') emanating unilaterially from the cinema-text. In this view, the spectator is conceived as a mere receptacle into which the ideological messages of the film are directed. What results is a simplistic and univocal picture of both the cinema and its reception: The road from film to viewer is decidedly a one-way street.

It has become clear in retrospect that this familiar formulation of the spectator as a virtual reflection off the 'mirror' of the movie screen[3] regrettably stood as the straw

figure against which the reaction against psychoanalytic film theory, surely as or more symptomatic of a general backlash against politicized theoretical initiatives coming out of French structuralism as it was specifically against psychoanalysis or Lacan, could strike what proved to be devastating blows.[4] No doubt little is to be gained by revisiting in detail the reception of Metz in the English-speaking world in the view of specifying how it went wrong.[5] In my view, however, Metz's psychosemiology of the apparatus—the primary text, as it were—still offers tremendously fertile ground for work in cinema theory. Indeed, I will contend that the complexities and ambiguities inherent in his portrait of cinematic spectatorship suggest avenues of investigation which have yet to be adequately charted. For this reason I believe that today a return to Metz is in order.

The first task will be to remind ourselves of precisely what Metz set out to do in *The Imaginary Signifier*. His main thesis concerning the specificity of the cinema's powers of subjectivation is that the levels of identification solicited by the apparatus are at one remove from what Freud envisaged when he wrote about primary and secondary narcissism. The finer details, somewhat technical, to be sure, of this important argument deserve to be revisited for at least two reasons. First, Metz reminds us of the properly *dialectical* character of what I will insist on calling authentic psychoanalytic cinema theory. By this I mean that the relation between the cinema-text and the spectatorial function is minimally bidirectional, conflictual, and dynamic; as Metz put it, the spectator is at once point of origin and recipient of the cinematic text. These qualities ensure that the text-viewer relation is subject to a complex brand of ideological articulation which cannot be summarily rendered in a formula generically applicable to the medium as such, and which therefore varies in tandem with specific techniques of montage and subjective

suture: the means by which the apparatus establishes point of view. Second, Metz's discernment of the element of cinematic subjectivity that is *not of the level of experience* helpfully uncovers the inadequacies of the properly phenomenological approach to film viewing, an approach which, long after Bazin, has not only attracted a number of prominent proponents over the last two decades, but which has also been offered up as a corrective to perceived deficiencies—ahistoricism, intellectualism, decorporealization, for example—within the Metzian psychosemiological approach.[6]

As I will go on to argue, my own view is that the full significance of Metz's anti-phenomenology only becomes clear if we go beyond the mirror stage analogy to consider in more detail the role of unconscious desire in spectatorship, in particular the ruin or failure of spectatorial narcissism in the form of what Metz (1982) himself calls filmic *unpleasure* (p. 111). It is this phenomenon that most clearly distinguishes cinematic spectatorship from perversion in the strong, diagnostic or clinical sense; the analogy between film-viewing and voyeurism is in this precise sense overstated. As a rule, in other words, filmic pleasure is essentially perverse only in the sense that human desire itself is generically perverse.[7] At a later point I will want to discuss the agency of desire as well as its link to what Metz calls the identification with the camera through an analysis of Chantal Akerman's provocative allegorization of spectatorship in her Proust adaptation *The Captive* (2000). But it will first be necessary to return to Metz's argument to consider it in finer detail. I suggest that we begin by interrogating Metz's differentiation of cinematic identification properly speaking from the generic psychical variety that caught Freud's attention as he sought to put his finger on the cause of his patients' resistance to the cure.

We recall that Freudian metapsychology distinguishes between a primary and a secondary narcissism, each of which can be associated with a specific mode of identification. "One part of self-regard is primary—the residue of infantile narcissism," Freud writes, while "another part arises out of the omnipotence which is corroborated by experience (the fulfillment of the ego ideal)." Freud links the former to the formation of the ideal ego (*Idealich*) as opposed to the ego ideal (*Ichideal*). There is also a "third part" of the dynamic of self-regard which "proceeds from the satisfaction of object-libido," but we will leave that aside for now.[8] Lacan sought to clarify Freud's undertheorized distinction by qualifying the ideal ego of primary narcissism as a function of the *imaginary* register and the secondary identification with the ego ideal as a function of the *symbolic*.[9] In spite of this important conceptual distinction, however, the two levels of identification, for Lacan as for Freud, are intricately intertwined, even at the level of infantile experience. The dynamic of primary narcissism informs the ego's originary or primordial formation: the process by which the subject constructs for itself a notion of its own body as a discrete entity in space, albeit in the space of the Other. This is the construction that enables perception to isolate material objects from the surrounding environment.

Indeed, the body-image that the subject fabricates through this process becomes the prototype for the perception of all possible objects of experience, as Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* also elucidates in compelling detail, without of course properly acknowledging either the symbolic or real dimensions of the dynamic of narcissism. As is well known, Lacan for his part emphasizes the virtual and erroneous qualities of this primary identification: That the subject can situate its ego 'outside' the

three extended dimensions of classical geometrical space and therefore quite literally sees itself where it is not does not prevent this misrecognition from functioning as a condition of possibility for perception as such. It already becomes apparent here that primary narcissism and cinematic spectatorship share an investment in a properly virtual spatial extension, in a kind of *trompe-l'œil*. As far as Metz is concerned, spectatorship is indelibly marked by this primary identification in so far as the so-called impression of reality intrinsic to the apparatus depends upon the screen's functioning as a kind of window which opens up onto the virtuality of diegetic space: the fictitious story-world of the cinema, in other words, at least in its narrative forms.

Crucially, however, Metz insists that what he calls primary *cinematic* identification is of a different order; the infant's relation to its mirror image, in consequence, does not partake of the same relation that exists between spectator and projection screen. Any identification developed by the spectator with respect to the image of an actor's body, for example, can only ever be vicarious, derivative. This is so for the obvious reason that, unlike the Lacanian infant before the mirror, the spectator does not see an image of its own body on the screen.[10] Metz's reference to the early Lacan on this point is admirably nuanced, for he underlines how identification at the level of the mirror stage is already, however embryonically, traversed by the symbolic function due to the fact that the infant must be taught to recognize itself in its mirror image. The infant's virtual self-recognition, in other words, is neither necessary nor natural. The discourse of a second party (mother, nursemaid, caregiver, etc.) indexes—the medium here, to be perfectly explicit, is language—the identity of the virtual body image. In this way the

infant's primary identification must be propped up by its inscription within a network of relations symbolically articulated.

Metz's point underscores how there is no zero degree of primary identification for Lacan. Yet even if for psychoanalysis primary identification depends upon a simultaneous introjection of a symbolic relation, Metz suggests that the cinematic equivalent of this identification is secondarized to a further degree: The spectator's body is missing from the cinematic image, with the consequence that the viewing function is split (minimally, as we will shortly see) between two modalities. This split occurs between the diegetic stand-ins through whom the spectator includes itself in the diegesis but *at a (spatial) remove from the screen*, and a logically prior identificatory function. This latter modality is an abstract, indeed disembodied, properly transcendental instance which, very precisely, is *not* equivalent to the sum total of the spectator's secondary or 'vicarious' identifications.

What becomes apparent here is that there is an underlying disjunction between the two levels of identification theorized respectively by Freud/Lacan and Metz. More precisely, primary cinematic identification correlates to secondary narcissism in Freud, in other words the identification with the ego ideal. This identification fully admits of the subject's dependence on a network of signifiers in order to insert itself, however problematically and partially, within that network. The seldom remarked-upon corollary of this disjunction, however, is that secondary cinematic identification for Metz must be medium-specific: It does not exist among the forms of subjectivity that occur independently of the mediation the cinematic apparatus performs. To anticipate, I will suggest when I get to my reading of *The Captive* that the disjunction between, first, the

suturing that undergirds the vicarious, experiential dimension of spectatorship, and second, spectatorship's contrasting and more fundamental nonphenomenal or transcendental register makes it possible for filmmakers to intervene technically on a level corresponding to the cinema's *enunciative*, and consequently broadly *political*, potentialities.[11] Put differently, the cinema allows for a kind of fantasy-framing—a foregrounding of fantasy's function—which is not strictly speaking possible outside the apparatus' conditions. Further, this framing function calls into question the pleasurable, ego-propping effects of the cinematic image and, risking the failure of spectatorship as such, potentially lays bare the properly symptomatic dimension of the cinema industry, including most importantly its complicity with the profit-making motive of capital. Before expanding on these contentions, however, it will first be necessary to examine more carefully how Metz presents spectatorship's nonphenomenal element through his crucial notion of *le sujet tout-percevant*, the all-perceiving subject.

Through reference to the cinematically primary identification with the camera, Metz depicts a spectatorial function unbounded by the experiential constraints of space and time. This level of cinematic subjectivity, Metz argues, is the condition of possibility for spectatorship as such. In its absence, the spectator would prove incapable of establishing the various logical connections between the shots and sequences comprising the narrative, which would remain in consequence unintelligible. Nor would the spectator unconsciously internalize what we might call the cinematic contract: that tacit agreement—neither necessary nor socioculturally universal, mind you—thanks to which the viewer can sit back, immobile, and remain intellectually unperturbed and kinetically

unstimulated by the contradiction between its own lack of bodily movement and the

spatiotemporal fluctuations within the vistas offered up by moving cinema-images.

Metz further elucidates this underlying condition of cinematic identification by

spelling out what it is not, namely what we might call the perspectival interface between

spectator and diegesis. The explanation begins with a disarmingly simple assertion: "In a

fiction film the characters look at one another," Metz writes.[12] Now the spectator of

course looks at these characters who look at one another, and one immediately sees the

difference between these two levels of the 'look'. Crucially, however, what Metz calls the

"subjective image"—his term for a point of view shot—depends on the creation of a

third, intermediary perspective through the agency of editing or montage. Indeed, Metz

argues that the viewer will not attribute an image with subjectivity—not its own, but that

of a character, or rather more precisely a fusion of the two—in the absence of a reference

to off-screen space. Classically, of course, we see the character looking in the first shot

and what the character sees in the second. Metz's observation here is that this edit

establishes a virtual-imaginary point in front of the screen where the spectator's and the

character's respective looks meet; this point is of course the mechanism that sutures the

spectator to a character's visual, and in this sense subjective, perspective. This virtual

space must be in front of the screen simply because the spectator must see the character

looking in order to get a sense of the diegetic directionality of the character's look.

Though Metz does not make this point explicit, one should remark here that this

virtualization of space in front of the image further distinguishes the cinematic screen

from the mirror, which of course can only create imaginary space 'behind' itself.

In technical terms, the hybridization of spectatorial and diegetic functions in this modality of cinematic identification occurs through the association of the angle of the subjectivized character's perspective within a shot's composition with the angle presented in the ensuing shot. It follows that the character whose point of view is being represented must necessarily be absent from this second shot in order not to violate the spatial logic being established. Numerous consequences follow from this basic point. First, there is no inherent limit to the number of diegetical points of view which can be established by means of this off-screen "obligatory intermediary," as Metz refers to this function.[13] Second, the power of montage to attribute subjectivity to individual shots in the cinema-text manifests the first level—there is another, as we shall see—of spectatorial *splitting*. The spectator witnesses the diegesis from a series of 'objective' (diegetically nonsubjectivized, more technically) perspectives while at the same time seeing the film 'vicariously' through the eyes of a theoretically limitless number of character-intermediaries. "As we see through him," Metz writes of his self-effacing off-screen intermediary, "we see ourselves not seeing him."[14]

The point to be sure is paradoxical: The cinema-text becomes subjectivized when the character concerned is missing from the image, thereby ceasing to be an object of the viewer's immediate visual awareness. And equally paradoxically, this subjectivation, in spite of its vicariousness, lays bare *our own* agency as spectator, engages us more intensely in the experience of viewing the film. The subjective image pulls us in precisely at the moment when our own perspective is fused with that of the character to whom we are sutured, a character who must disappear from view. Thus this fusion retains the traces of the contradiction it never fully resolves: We are and yet we are not the subjectivity

concretized in the sutured image. As cinema-subjects, we cannot place ourselves within the diegesis without the mediation of this identificatory mechanism. Indeed, we do not need to be conscious of our virtual intermediary to sense that what we are seeing does and does not 'belong to us'.

This is the dimension of spectatorship—let's call it the secondary dimension— that has had the most conspicuous afterlife in film theory discourse. Feminist film theory, for example, became concerned with the ways in which sexual difference is inscribed within cinematic subjectivation, arguing that dominant cinemas set up a dynamic of viewing pleasure which facilitates the expression of male heterosexual desire.[15] That this secondary level of spectatorial splitting is the more empirically and therefore intuitively evident of the two is surely not unrelated to its relative theoretical success. The aspect of Metz's theory that will prove of greater significance to my own argument, however, relates rather to the other level. This more primary level of splitting manifests itself underneath, if I can put it this way, the other, properly diegetic level. More precisely, this primary splitting pertains to the disjunction between the first level of splitting just discussed—the suture performed through Metz's virtual off-screen intermediary—and the underlying perceptual synthesis responsible in the first instance not for point of view, but rather for the cinema's basic impression of reality: the underlying means by which the apparatus as such perpetuates its optical illusion. Parenthetically, if we were to choose to acknowledge only the secondary mode of identification that I have just discussed, it would prove impossible to account for our capacity as spectators to become interested in the forms of cinema that do not represent images of human actors, since these films are

by definition (following Metz's assumptions) incapable of creating the properly subjective effect of suture on which this mode depends.

Thus Metz's framework does indeed imply that the subjective shot structure is not the only form of identification in the cinema. The oft-misunderstood identification with the camera, the one that produces an all-perceiving subject unshackled from spatio-temporal constraints, cannot therefore be reduced to the sequence of objective and subjective images the editorial combination of which gives rise to point of view. Primary cinematic identification, in other words, cannot rigorously be said to operate on the level of the alternation of shots in the cinema-text, and therefore does not partake of the differential logic generically inherent in the semiotic approach. Put simply, the suggestion here is that the apparatus must assemble the sequence of shots comprising the film into a totality. Further, this assemblage requires an identificatory function that we must situate somewhere other than the level of perception properly speaking, in a 'place' associated with the conditions of possibility of the apparatus as such. My argument here will be that though Metz does indeed name this mechanism, *The Imaginary Signifier* falls short of a full spelling out of its consequences. We can now look more carefully at Metz's criticism of the phenomenological approach to cinema to discern the finer points of this difficulty and to suggest how a further reference to Lacan might clarify his argument.

Metz openly admits that the onus is on him to identify with precision the blind spot within phenomenological film discourse that psychoanalysis is capable of bringing to light. Exemplified for Metz by the work of André Bazin[16], cinematic phenomenology succumbs to the seductive pull of the image through the exclusive emphasis it places on

the *experience* of spectatorship. In consequence, it devolves into an enthusiastic and uncritical celebration of the cinema's subjectivity-effects. This is the "love of the cinema," as Metz aptly puts it, that still today so evidently fuels the commercial film industry's formidable profit machine. More consequentially, however, the phenomenological framework proves incapable of coming to grips with the functioning of the apparatus: how the cinema grafts itself, more precisely, onto the human perceptual faculty by reconstituting its structure through technological means. Indeed, phenomenology's main drawback is that it leaves unaddressed what for Metz remains the cinema's underlying mystery: How do we explain the cinema's seductive pull? Why does its technological apparatus work so effectively? In asking these questions, Metz implicitly returns to the Platonic origin of the perception-projection apparatus idea. We recall that in an allegorical representation of the powers of human intellection liberated from the shackles of sense-perception, Plato in his *Republic* famously described cave-dwelling prisoners bound to chairs whose only reality is a band of shadows cast on the wall before them. Translated into Platonic terms, the Metzian questions appear as follows: Of what compelling essence are the prisoners' chains made up? If a decisive exit from the cave is finally possible, as Plato himself insisted on believing, can we envision an analogous 'exit' from the cinematic apparatus?

The properly analytical work of cinematic psychosemiology depends for Metz on the prior diagnosis of the properly symptomatic element of the cinema. Metz here discerns that the pleasures delivered by film-viewing feed off the same misrecognition upon which the human ego is constructed. The ego and the cinema are both engaged in forms of hallucinated virtual satisfaction. The cinema strives to indulge the human desire

for an idealized, narcissistically gratifying mastery denied to a speaking subject who is castrated: separated from a (perceived) part of itself through its problematic insertion into language. But symbolic castration also features a properly visual-perceptual consequence: The subject is haunted by the troubling dissymmetry between the unfailing constancy of desire's demand and the suspect or ambiguous reality of what is presented by way of objects in the visual field, whether they appear through the intervention of a technology of projection or more simply 'in reality' *tout court*. In short, the cinema holds forth to the subject the promise an illusory and fragile perceptual omniscience which elsewhere it seeks in vain.

Surely among the most innovative and seldom-observed aspects of Metz's cinematic psychoanalysis is that it foregrounds the material, properly socioeconomic implications of this last observation, implications which most often today are mistakenly considered even by those within the Freudian and post-Freudian traditions to lie outside the boundaries of a properly psychoanalytic mode of inquiry. The film-making industry effectively exploits the same imaginary anticipation of perfection that mediates the infant's representation of space during the Lacanian mirror stage. Indeed, cinematic viewership's promise of spatiotemporal omniscience further adds to the seductive appeal of the image it offers for consumption. For Metz, this is the imaginary plane on which cinematic phenomenology remains trapped. More precisely, its emphasis on the experience of spectatorship remains blind to the abstract or transcendental perceptual synthesis that conditions the apparatus' effectiveness, its very capacity to create a more or less convincingly 'real' image-world by involving us in what goes on on the screen. The identification of this nonempirical synthesis is for Metz what makes possible the

apparatus' conceptualization: It provides the 'impossible', nonspatiotemporal perspective from which the phenomenon of spectatorship may be conceived as if from outside itself. If spectatorship were entirely subsumed by the cinematic experience properly speaking, in other words, it is not clear how we could capture our captation by the apparatus *in thought*. Thus Metz's Cartesian wager is that we *can* indeed think the function of the apparatus precisely because the synthesis that is its condition is not part of the cinematic experience properly speaking.

Here it will be wise to consider Metz's own evocation of this unexperienced element of cinematic subjectivity and to extrapolate upon its relation to unconscious fantasy. In order for the apparatus to function, Metz argues, the spectator must "withdraw into himself as a pure instance of perception."[17] This same spectator "identifies with himself as look," Metz writes, and "can do no other than identify with the camera."[18] Metz's terminology conveys the analogy between the apparatus' underlying synthesis and Kant's notion of transcendental apperception, the synthesis that allows the subject to unify the information it receives through the senses into a single continuous experience which it can view as its own.[19] Indeed, Metz's identification with the camera notion performs the same totalizing function, and it may do so only from an abstract point outside or beyond the diegesis, beyond even the virtual point in front of the screen that serves as the axis for suture.

The underlying argument here is that a function outside experience must be presupposed in order to take account of the fact that for me, as a subject of experience, this experience becomes intelligible as a unity, as a totality of interrelated impressions belonging to my personal sense faculties. This is the function that is effectively taken

over by the cinematic apparatus, which similarly needs to *identify with itself* in order to become a technology of subjectivation. Metz compares this empty, self-relating operation to the viewing subject of Renaissance perspective, who projects himself into the picture at the perspectival vanishing point. This point is included in the image-space only virtually, as the impossible meeting point of (subjectively) parallel lines located beyond the limits of two-dimensional pictorial space. Similarly, cinema's primary identification operates at a virtual point of pure self-relating consciousness associated in the spectator's imaginary with the camera or projector behind it. It is therefore subtracted from the spectator's field of vision, unavailable not only to presentation as an object of experience, but also, while things are working smoothly, to consciousness as such. Indeed, it is invested with frustrated attention only when the cinematic image, due to mechanical failure or a power outage perhaps, unexpectedly fails.

It now becomes clear why this underlying subjective instance cannot be accounted for when we view spectatorship purely as passive empirical sense-perception. The viewer must abstract himself from the body, its concrete placement in space and time, in order to follow the story-world unfurling before it, a world which knows none of the limitations which circumscribe experience unmediated by image technology. The apparatus puts to work a disembodied instance of perception which must remain unperceived in order for the viewer, cyborg-like, to internalize the apparatus, allowing it to become a kind of sensory-perceptual prosthetic. To experience the film as an adequate approximation of 'reality' with a unified spatiotemporal diegesis, one aspect of the spectatorial function must separate itself from that diegesis, essentially providing the perspective, itself outside of space and time, from which the cinema's image-movement

and time-movement can be perceived as if all at once. In this way the apparatus requires the transcendental identificatory synthesis that Metz wishes to theorize, the one that causes the spectator in the screening room to locate the projector in unconscious fantasy 'at the back of his head'.

I now want to suggest that this last point—Metz's intimation that the abstract synthetical apperception at the most fundamental level of spectatorship features a properly fantasmatic instance—is the one that can most helpfully be strengthened with a further reference to Lacan. For it was after all Lacan who rigorously formalized the subjective function as the correlation between an absence of signifying material—a gap or failure in the signifying chain, but also an associated wavering or failure of form or image—and an immaterial object of fantasy by means of which this gap can potentially be filled. This, then, will be my suggestion: The visual pleasure that has been associated with spectatorship occurs in consequence of the gratification that we receive through the apparatus when it successfully frames, by means of the cinematic image, the void underlying subjectivity. In other words, *unconscious fantasy is the condition of Metzian primary cinematic identification*, of the means by which the empty virtuality of spectatorial desire is fleshed out by a promise which lures—causes—desire. By means of this fantasy the apparatus tries to construct a narcissistic or self-sufficient closed libidinal circuit whereby we see a projected manifestation of desire reflected back to us by the cinematic image.

Our susceptibility to being interpellated in this way—the Althusserian term is indeed appropriate here—enables the apparatus to work as an image-machine for the materialization of desire. There is no lack of evidence showing that this machine spews

forth in large measure an endless series of sterile anti-social fantasies which only serve further to subjugate its spectator-cogs to the cultural and political status quo. Yet it is also clear that this economy is not a stable one: The apparatus—I use the term here in the broadest sense, including its socio-economic dimensions—expends a tremendous amount of energy and capital trying to forestall an entropic collapse of its libidinal system. Surely the increasing antirealist virtuality, hyperactive editing and camera movement, and accelerated perspectival fragmentation characterizing the contemporary commercial cinema industry are tell-tale signs that the film economy is responding, much in the mode of a Freudian obsessional, to fears of an impending failure in the apparatus' capacity to seduce. Indeed, this is doubtless one of the more intelligent ways of interpreting the 'death of cinema' discourse of the last decade.

But the main idea here is that what I have called the primary level of spectatorial splitting can effectively frame cinematic unpleasure in a way which potentially has the power to produce not Althusserian *interpellation*, but rather an authentic *subjectivation*. By means of an initially unpleasurable failure of the image's seductive power, this subjectivation encourages the less passive and more critically hystericized brand of spectatorship that the commercial cinema works to forestall at all costs. Cinematic subjectivation occurs as we become aware of the fundamental disequilibrium between the limitless demands of desire and the finite quantity of visual pleasure that the apparatus is capable of offering. At these moments the closed libidinal system of narrative and visual pleasure short-circuits and the Metzian projector at the back of our brains breaks down. Returning to my earlier discussion of Freud's concept of narcissism, we can say that it is here where the third agency of "self-regard" enters onto spectatorship's scene, an agency

which in fact destroys the pleasurable egoic synergy by means of which the spectator sees itself as it wishes to be seen through the functioning of the apparatus. Indeed, I would suggest that the unpleasure occasioned by the failure of interpellation is revealed to be a condition of possibility for what Freud calls 'the satisfaction of object-libido'. This latter notion provides an intimation of a different modality of (un)pleasure the agency of which within cinematic spectatorship remains undertheorized. In so doing it gestures beyond the kind of spectatorship endemic to masculine bourgeois cinema, precisely the kind that Akerman seeks to unravel in her film.

We are now ready to turn to *The Captive* to explore in more concrete terms—we have remained up to this point very abstract—the apparatus' inherent economic tension through Akerman's laying bare of the ultimate falseness of its narcissistic promise. The film is a faithful but loose adaptation of the fifth volume of Proust's mammoth modernist classic *In Search of Lost Time*. Indeed, it could be argued that the film is as intertextually entwined with other texts—Mozart's comic opera *Così fan tutte* and especially Hitchcock's *Vertigo*—as it is with Proust. *The Captive* exlores with painstaking analytical rigor the obsessive love of Simon (a stand-in for the novel's narrator Marcel, played by Stanislas Merhar) for Ariane (a double of Proust's Albertine, played by Sylvie Testud). It covers the novelistic territory corresponding to the moment when the narrator has successfully wrenched his paramour from her pack of *jeunes filles en fleur* and confined her to the claustrophobic darkness of his staidly bourgeois Parisian apartment. My contention will be that by means of a subtle framing technique the film presents the dynamic of Simon's voyeuristic epistemophilia as an allegory of the very cinematic apparatus by means of which it is represented.

With the help, more technically, of Akerman's trademark clinical style—minimal editing and camera movement; attention-trying extended takes; stylized, absurdist, ambiguously comic dialogue—the film draws attention to the neurotic foundations of our desire for knowledge and the voyeuristic underpinnings of the scopic drive that determines spectatorship's dynamic. Akerman's technique trains our perception to become cognizant of its dependence on an object of unconscious fantasy which not only renders impossible the prospect of perfectly knowing another being, in particular at the level of that being's fascinating yet forbidding jouissance, but which also lays bare the fundamental inadequacy of the cinematic image with respect to desire. By consistently and courageously frustrating the demands that we place as spectators on the image, Akerman forces her hystericized viewer to come to terms with the tragic pathos of Simon's obsession. In so doing Akerman leads us to the conclusion that the dynamic of this obsession is a diegetical rendering of the truth of our delirious complicity with the apparatus, precisely what Metz disparagingly calls our love of the cinema.

Akerman provides a deliberate echo of her conceptual and thematic framing of the apparatus within her framing of the film itself; I therefore wish to examine in some detail the opening and final sequences of *The Captive*. As the opening credits disappear from the screen against a backdrop of moonlit ocean waves, waves which conspicuously reappear in the tragic final sequence, there is a cut to faded film footage—we know it is footage from the flickering of the image, a subtle slow-motion effect, and the sound of an off-screen projector—of a group of young, attractive women frolicking on a beach. Proust readers immediately recognize the exuberant feminine collective that the narrator encounters at Balbec. In both novel and film the women serve as a figure for a particular

masculine fantasy-perception of femininity's unrepresentable indistinctness, precisely the fantasy that sets off and sustains Simon/Marcel's all-consuming envious desire. The film-within-a-film singles out the woman we will come to know as Ariane, as well as another woman, Andrée, who, apparently a bad swimmer, has run into difficulty in the sea and is being helped ashore by Ariane. As we are treated to a partially obscured close-up of Ariane, a cut away from the footage intervenes to reveal the young man we will later recognize as Simon.

Lit in vaguely ominous chiaroscuro fashion, he is standing beside a film projector, replaying a segment of the footage while slowly muttering the words '*je… vous… aime… bien*' ('I love you very much'). The film then repeatedly cuts between the footage — specifically a medium shot of Ariane with Andrée in which we barely discern Ariane uttering some phrase—and the shot of Simon at the projector who, as we begin to piece together, is trying to make his own declaration of love coincide with the movement of Ariane's lips on the screen. It is as if Simon were trying to establish an impossible symbolic exchange between himself and the cinematic image, vainly attempting to create a seamless correspondence between the invocation of his desire and its imaginary-virtual materialization.

Returned to the beach footage, we next see the blackened silhouette of Simon's head appear on the bottom left-hand corner of the screen-within-a-screen, the one now seamlessly superimposed upon the other. Apparently satisfied, Simon has sat down to enjoy the film. In this final shot of the sequence, we observe Simon, in yet another foreshadowing of Ariane's tragic end, watching an image of her body as it recedes towards the horizon into the sea. In this subtle but crucial opening sequence Akerman

lays bare the two different levels of identification in the cinema: We will experience the rest of the film simultaneously from Simon's perspective *as well as*, less consciously of course, from the abstract and disembodied 'perspective' of the apparatus itself. As spectators we are now aware of the Metzian projector at the back of our heads because we have just seen its representation on the screen. By consistently drawing our attention to this duality throughout the film, Akerman subtly underscores the obsessional quality of not only Simon's creepy stalker behavior, but of cinematic spectatorship as such.

Importantly, the film on the diegetic level tells us nothing about the origin of the beach footage. Is it Simon's? Was it shot by a member of the *bande*? To whom is Ariane really declaring her love? Yet the sequence in question is also asking a more fundamental question about the relation between the dynamic of a neurotic masculine fantasy and the apparatus' incorporation of the spectator. The film's key opening is both diegetically and generically allegorical. First, Simon's effort to ascertain via filmic projection that he is indeed the addressee of Ariane's message of love is a metonym for the story's central conflict: Simon's effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to reassure himself that he is the exclusive object of Ariane's love; or more precisely, that Ariane is not wilfully withholding evidence of secret lesbian liaisons. Second and more fundamentally, however, Akerman's decision to introduce her film through a representation of spectatorship foregrounds the medium's capacity to objectify the limits of the cinematic image with respect to both knowledge and desire. Indeed, this initial sequence institutes what we might wish to call a *meta-suture*: It frames, redoubles, the way the film visually grafts itself onto Simon's desire; how it lays bare the obsessional logic by means of which this desire attempts a futile fashioning of the visual field in its own image.

The cut that brings us from the opening framing sequence to the film's diegesis properly speaking—we are taken from the unreality of Simon's screening room to the not-so-different unreality of the ultra-chichi Place Vendôme—therefore corresponds to the cut that separates what I have referred to as the two levels of spectatorial splitting. Narratively, the sequence foregrounds the dependence—logical, diegetical, aesthetic—of the film on Simon's all-consuming desire to gain perfect knowledge of Ariane. Generically, however, the sequence forces the spectator to come to grips with the subjective void underlying the unconscious fantasy that structures not simply this film, but also the very apparatus on which it depends. In this way *The Captive* literalizes the intimate relation between fantasy and 'reality': It is not enough to say that the film is effectively Simon's personal movie of his jealous paranoia; our relation to the world outside the cinema, it should be added, is similarly conditioned by the fantasy projections of desire. It is not at all clear, in other words, that the movie ends when we leave the screening room. *The Captive*'s basic argument is therefore not unlike the one we can ascribe retrospectively to Plato's cave allegory: The cinematic apparatus simply reduplicates and externalizes through technological means the psycho-optical mechanisms of human perception and its 'distortion' by desire. It is in this sense that we can say that our relation to the visual field is always already virtualized—deformed, reshaped by a ghostly entity which our desire projects onto the world of appearance, but which the images constituting this world of appearance simply refuse to unveil even when supplemented by technological mediation.

Now a reference to the very last sequence of *The Captive* will convey the kind of spectatorial hystericization to which Akerman's framing technique gives rise. My

contention here will be that this hystericization leads us as spectators onto the threshold

of the apparatus' collapse. Whereas the function of the opening sequence is to objectify

in the image the mechanism of primary cinematic identification, the concluding sequence

works to make present the underlying subjective void around which the apparatus pivots.

The movement of Ariane's silhouette out towards the sea in the film footage shown in the

first sequence arguably holds forth the promise of desire fulfilled. The motion away from

the spectator towards the shot's vanishing point, combined with Ariane's shrinking and

fading body, hint at a virtual beyond of the image-space which positively invites desire's

cathexis. Diegetically, this sequence presents us with the beautiful, self-reflecting object

to which Simon's desire wishes to address itself. In contrast, an opposite movement back

from the sea in the concluding sequence poignantly conveys what Lacan calls the

subjective destitution of the analysand who has finally traversed the fantasy. Narratively,

this sequence unveils the death-bearing truth of Simon's desire, in other words his failure

to come to terms with the irreducible disjunction between what Ariane represents for his

desire and what she is capable of offering him on the level of drive satisfaction.[20]

Immediately prior to the sequence in question, Simon and Ariane drive to a

beautiful seaside hotel to resume their relations after a protracted, absurdly comic

conversation during which they briefly decide to break up. As Simon awaits the arrival of

their late-night dinner, Ariane announces that she will go out for a swim. But something

would appear to be amiss: Ariane is sullen and distracted (she wants her eggs both

poached and scrambled), a strong wind has arisen, and the night is deep and black. When,

after their food has been delivered, Simon walks out to the elegant balcony to see what

has become of Ariane, he scans the water and panics, desperately running onto the beach,

stripping, and diving into the ocean. Now out amongst waves only dimly lit by moonlight, we are shown what appears to be Simon and Ariane struggling in the water. But the weakness of the light and the uncharacteristic brevity of the sequence prevent us from drawing any reliable conclusions as to what is going on. Is Ariane resisting her rescue? Did she herself not rescue Andrée in the footage sequence? Is one of them trying to drown the other? A cut then brings us to the film's final shot: We are back on the shoreline at daybreak, looking out to sea at a small fishing vessel making its way with aching slowness to port. As we listen to the ominous crescendoes of Rachmaninov's *Island of the Dead*, a musical leitmotiv associated throughout the film with the unsettling desperation of Simon's pursuit, Akerman forces us to wait two torturous minutes before we can discern with certainty who is in the boat. Did Simon rescue Ariane? Did he kill her? Did Ariane kill Simon? Then, when we recognize that it is Simon, apparently alone, in the boat, we wonder: Where is Ariane? Is her body lying in the hull? Is she unconscious? Dead?

The scene is patented Akerman. The sheer duration of the shot, the virtual immobility of the camera, and the lack of editing—her refusal to condense time or parcel up space—lend an excruciating quality to the suspense. There is no visual pleasure to be had anywhere in the image, and we suspect that the resolution we desire, like Simon's ambition to know Ariane, will fail to materialize. In a quintessentially high-modernist gesture, Akerman brings bourgeois cinema's visual regime to its implosion. The seductive experiential vicariousness of the apparatus is revealed as an empty sham; and the beautiful cinematic window through which we seek escape from a pedestrian reality becomes the threshold of the death drive's wanton destruction. For, as we finally

discover, there is indeed nothing, no one in the boat except for Simon. 'What are you thinking about?' Simon insistently asks Ariane throughout the film. '*À rien*', she responds, echoing her name—nothing. 'What *more* is there to see in the cinema?' asks *The Captive*'s final sequence as we anxiously scan the boat. The unsettling answer: a conspicuous absence, *a nothing*.

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[1]   "The link between signal and signification is arbitrary," Saussure (1988) writes.
"Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a
signification, we can express this more simply as: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*" (p.12)

[2]   Peirce defines his iconic sign as one which is "determined by its dynamic object by virtue of its own internal nature," stressing in this way a relation of similarity or likeness. Quoted in Stam (et. al.) (1992), p. 5.

[3]   Mary Ann Doane (1987), for example, erroneously attributes the screen-mirror analogy to Metz's *The Imaginary Singifier* in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, p. 128.

[4]   The earliest manifestation of this conflict was likely the infamous *Screen* debate of the mid-1970s, during which psychoanalytically-influenced film theorists, including Stephen Heath, were effectively ejected from the journal's editorial board. This incident is briefly recounted in John Mowitt (2005), pp. 4-5.

[5]   This is not to say, however, that no excellent readings of Metz were produced during the heyday of psychoanalytic film theory. See for example Jacqueline Rose (1989); Stephen Heath (1981); and more recently, Kaja Silverman (1996) and Thomas Elsaesser (1995).

[6]   Contemporary cinematic phenomenology can be subdivided into two main tendencies, the first of which draws inspiration from the philosophical canon (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty primarily), the other from Gilles Deleuze's cinema books (1986-9). The most influential examples of the former tendency are doubtless Allan Casebier's (1991) *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation* and Vivian Sobchack's (1992) *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. For the Deleuzian tendency, see for example Steven Shaviro (1993), *The Cinematic Body* (1993) and Laura U. Marks (2000), *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*.

[7]   I distinguish in detail, via Lacan, between generic and structural understandings of perversion in the psychoanalytic tradition in *The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Absolute of Desire* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

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[8]   Freud in "On Narcissism" (1953-1974) actually maintains that the infantile period is characterized by what he memorably calls "real happy love," a "primal" condition in which a) "object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished" and b) the ideal (or "infantile") ego and ego ideal are not yet differentiated (p. 101). In my view, Lacan's more complex development of the interimplication of symbolic and imaginary functions beginning in infancy casts doubt on Freud's apparent assumption that such a 'happy love' is in fact ever experienced. Also, it should be noted in this connection that according to Freud's own definitions the ideal ego/ego ideal and ego-libido/object-libido pairings are not rigorously synonymous, since the notion of object-libido in this essay vacillates between two different meanings which are clearly distinguished in Lacan. More consistently than Freud, Lacan differentiates between the idealized symbolic mechanism of self-regard (ego ideal or *I*) and the real partial object of the drive (*a*), which is very precisely not an ideal, nor is it amenable to idealization.

[9]   For Lacan's development of his reading of Freud's concepts related to the ego, as well as a summary of his reconfiguration of the inverted vase experiment in optics, see "Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) pp. 667-683.

[10]   Citing transitivism—the phenomenon which sees an infant respond to stimuli received by others as if received by itself—Jacqueline Rose argues that this aspect of Metz's discussion mistakenly distinguishes the spectator's identification with a character from the mirror stage structure as outlined by Lacan. Though the implication of the imaginary in adult affective life—empathy, for example—draws our attention to the lingering effects of such identificatory transitivity, in my view Metz's development of the construction of point of view (secondary cinematic identification), in particular its dependence on the creation of a subjectivized perspective *in front of the screen* which must be distinguished from that of the spectator properly speaking, features a triangulated complexity at odds with the dyadic intimacy that Lacan associated with the imaginary. In other words, Rose underestimates the purchase of Metz's contention that the cinematic

apparatus reproduces the mechanism of human perception, but by *redoubling* or *reframing* it, by adding an additional dimension. See Rose (1989), p. 196.

[11]   In work subsequent to *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz elaborates on this notion of enunciation in the cinema, which he distinguishes from both a vaguely auteurist notion of an image engineer who arranges the shots and a deictic function which, like the demonstrative pronouns for example, would signal a contextually determined referent. "In film, when enunciation is indicated in the utterance, it is by *reflexive* constructions. The film talks to us about itself, about cinema, or about the position of the spectator." Metz, "The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film," *The Film Spectator*, pp. 145-6. The analysis I develop below of the first sequence of Akerman's *The Captive* assumes that it functions as an instance of enunciation in the precise Metzian sense. See also John Mowitt's work on Metz's notion of cinematic enunciation in *Re-Takes*, pp. 1-45.

[12]   Metz (1982), p. 55.

[13]   Ibid., p. 56

[14]   Ibid.

[15]   Laura Mulvey's early work is of course the classic reference here. The point, however, is that the "visual pleasure" argument remains limited to what I am calling the secondary level of spectatorship. The consequence for Mulvey's argument of Metz's thesis about a primary identification with the camera is that the spectatorial function can never be reduced to any particular instance of perspective or suture within the diegesis. Nor can it be reduced to the sum total of such perspectives and sutures. The 'feminist' question of who gets pleasure from what images in narrative cinema cannot therefore be translated in such brusque fashion into the terms of sexual difference. See Mulvey (1988).

[16]   See for example Bazin (2005).

[17]   Metz (1982), p. 53.

[18]   Ibid., p. 49.

[19]   Kant (1965/1781) defines transcendental apperception as the "transcendental ground of the unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions" (p. 135).

[20]   In fact the film makes very clear that Simon does not even know what Ariane could provide him on this level: He is only able to engage with her sexually when she is asleep, and all physical contact between them is mediated—by bedsheets, by mottled glass.