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Film Theory after Copjec

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Abstract: The importation of Lacanian psychoanalysis into film theory in the 1970s and 1980s ushered in a new era of cinema scholarship and criticism. Figures including Raymond Bellour, Laura Mulvey, and Christian Metz are often considered the pioneers of applying Lacanian psychoanalysis in the context of film theory, most notably through their writings in *Screen Journal*. However, where French and British scholarship on Lacan and film reached its limits, American Lacanianism flourished. When Joan Copjec's now classic essay "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan" was published in 1989, the trajectory of Lacanian film theory would become radically altered; as Todd McGowan recently put it, the "butchered operation" on Lacan committed by Mulvey and (quoting Copjec) the "Foucaultianization" of Lacan under the auspices of *Screen Journal* were finally indicted in one gesture through Copjec's critique. Copjec and McGowan's unique American view of Lacan marks a pivotal point in the convergence of psychoanalytic theory and cinema studies; by seeking to wrest Lacan from historian/deconstructionist theories of the subject, and by revisiting Lacan beyond the mirror stage, Copjec and McGowan can be said to have instantiated a resuscitation or even a renaissance of Lacanian theory in film studies in particular and in American scholarship more generally. In this essay, this renaissance of Lacanian theory is examined, focusing on the innovations these two American thinkers brought to psychoanalytic film theory and the multiple paths carved out into other disciplines that followed. First, a detailed summation of the contentions between screen theory and Copjec's position is introduced, as well as McGowan's assessment thereof. Then, the trajectory of psychoanalytic film theory after Copjec's arrival is the focus, including the major innovations in her thought from cinematic subjectivity to sexual difference (most notably from *Read My Desire*) and the way her position spread to philosophy, ontology, and even race theory. Finally, the article identifies the limitations of Copjec's and McGowan's thought and seeks new possibilities through which we may continue to apply psychoanalysis to the cinema in the wake of these two important thinkers.

Key words: film theory, Joan Copjec, psychoanalysis, cinema, Jacques Lacan

Résumé : L'importation de la psychanalyse lacanienne dans la théorie du film au cours des années 1970 et 1980 a apporté une nouvelle ère de recherche et de critique cinématographiques. Des figures comme Raymond Bellour, Laura Mulvey et Christian Metz sont souvent considérées comme étant les pionniers dans l'application de la psychanalyse lacanienne au contexte de la théorie du film, surtout dans leurs écrits pour le *Screen Journal*. Par contre, là où les recherches françaises et britanniques sur Lacan et la cinématographie ont atteint leurs limites, le lacanisme américain a prospéré. La publication en 1989 de « The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan », l'essai classique de Joan Copjec, a complètement changé la trajectoire de la théorie lacanienne du film; comme Todd McGowan l'a récemment exprimé, « l'opération massacrée » commise sur Lacan

par Mulvey et (citant Copjec) la « Foucaultisation » de Lacan sous les auspices de *Screen Journal* avaient finalement été accusées d'un seul coup par la critique de Copjec. Le point de vue uniquement américain de Copjec et de McGowan sur Lacan marque un tournant dans la convergence de la théorie psychanalytique et des études cinématographiques. En cherchant à arracher Lacan des théories historicistes/déconstructivistes du sujet, et en revisitant Lacan au-delà du stade du miroir, Copjec et McGowan ont instancié une résuscitation, voire une renaissance, de la théorie lacanienne dans les études cinématographiques en particulier et dans les études américaines en général. Dans cet article, cette renaissance de la théorie lacanienne est examinée, mettant l'accent sur les innovations que ces deux penseurs américains ont apportées à la théorie psychanalytique du film et les multiples chemins tracés dans d'autres disciplines subséquentes. Premièrement, un résumé détaillé des différends entre la théorie du film et la position de Copjec est présenté, ainsi que l'évaluation de McGowan à ce sujet. Puis, la trajectoire de la théorie psychanalytique du film après l'arrivée de Copjec est mise de l'avant, notamment les innovations importantes de sa pensée de la subjectivité à la différence sexuelle (particulièrement dans *Read My Desire*) et la manière dont sa position s'est propagée dans la philosophie, l'ontologie, même la théorie raciale. Finalement, l'article identifie les limites de la pensée de Copjec et de McGowan et cherche de nouvelles possibilités à travers lesquelles nous pourrions continuer d'appliquer la psychanalyse au cinéma après ces deux grands penseurs.

Mots clés : théorie du film, Joan Copjec, psychanalyse, cinéma, Jacques Lacan

INTRODUCTION

The details of Joan Copjec's intervention into psychoanalytic film theory are by now well known and have been more than adequately dealt with at length by various authors: Todd McGowan (*Real Gaze; Psychoanalytic Theory*), Slavoj Žižek (*Fright of Real Tears*), Matthew Flisfeder (*Symbolic; "Dialectical Materialism"*), and Vicky Lebeau (*Psychoanalysis*). Rather than repeat Copjec's critique of the "Foucauldianization of Lacan" via the initial phase of psychoanalytic theory, there is another front to be considered, which has been, as far as I know, addressed in only one place up until now—namely, the question of why Copjec's intervention has been so thoroughly neglected in film studies throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Although "The Orthopsychic Subject" has been reproduced in introductory film theory texts and anthologies (Stam and Miller; Elsaesser and Hagener), it has very seldom been engaged with at the level of actual rigorous critique. As McGowan observes, "[A]lmost everyone is aware of it and yet almost no one pays attention to it" (*Psychoanalytic Theory* 67). "The Orthopsychic Subject" is not the only of Copjec's major works that has been neglected, but, as Žižek, observes, "It is symptomatic how [Copjec's] essay on the philosophical foundations and consequences of the Lacanian notion of sexual difference ["Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason"] is silently passed over in numerous feminist attacks on Lacan" (Barnard and Fink, 74 n14).¹ Despite her intervention being widely known to exist, and even understood by many to be a crucial intervention into film theory, cultural studies, and ontology, what is it that sustains our lack of engagement with Copjec?



Todd McGowan offers the most detailed and trenchant answer to this question, writing that film theory was so traumatized by Copjec's intervention with "The Orthopsychic Subject" that it essentially repressed it. McGowan recounts the story of when Copjec delivered an early draft of "The Orthopsychic Subject" to an audience of film theorists at a conference in 1988, describing how

[al]though [Raymond] Bellour agreed to write an essay in response to Copjec, he found her argument so out of bounds that he changed his mind. Instead of an essay, he wrote a letter to the journal [*October*] explaining why he couldn't write a response. In this brief letter, he contends that Copjec failed to appreciate the genuine contributions of both French and American psychoanalytic film theorists, and, what's more, she failed to follow "the rules of the game." (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 65–6)²

In his letter, Bellour writes that Copjec's text "lets one believe that they [the screen theorists] would all be incorrect in relation to a hypothetical truth of Lacan of which it [Copjec's text] would be the possessor" (66). According to McGowan, "The existence of the letter in place of the essay is an absence indicative of a trauma" (66). Bellour attempts to disguise the truly radical import of Copjec's intervention by "*displac[ing]* the true dimension of the conflict," claiming that she is breaking some unspoken set of rules about what it means to engage with film theoretically (Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears* 3; original emphasis).

Žižek describes how "a properly *philosophical* scandal erupts when some philosophy effectively disturbs the very substance of the communal being, what Lacan referred to as the 'big Other,' the shared implicit set of beliefs and norms that regulate our interaction" (*Fright of Real Tears* 3; original emphasis). According to this logic, Copjec's intervention, as indicated by Raymond Bellour's traumatic display, disrupted the very substance that bound together the big Other of psychoanalytic film theory—the implicit set of beliefs here being the insistence on the "Screen as Mirror" metaphor for cinema, and the reliance on the symbolic and imaginary at the expense of the real. By (re)introducing the real as the neglected concept of all preceding film theory, Copjec effectively indicts most if not all theoretical work that employed Lacanian psychoanalysis. Thus, at least part of the lack of engagement with Copjec can be linked to its traumatic impact in the field.

Another component worth mentioning is the shift from film theory to "post-theory" and the cognitivist model in the 1990s. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's collected volume *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* develops a critique of film theory via what they term "culturalism" and "subject-position theory." One of the major problems with Bordwell and Carroll is that their critique of the psychoanalytic model of film theory is launched exclusively against the first wave of psychoanalytic film theory—the very phase that Copjec herself critiques. In this volume, Stephen Prince claims that one of the major problems with the psychoanalytic model is the insistence on the scopic drive: "The problem with the 'scopic drive' is that it models viewing as a driven and reactive



process during which the viewer's passion for looking is cathected by particular formal cues (for example, 'fetishizing' close-ups). The scopic drive implies a unifocal fixation within the viewer maintained by a match of formal features and inner fantasy" (77).

What is interesting about Prince's criticism is that it is already addressed in Copjec's essay, where she problematizes the notion of a "unifocal drive" (78), opting instead for the more dynamic relationship between the subject and the gaze. To begin with, the gaze does not belong to the subject or the apparatus in Lacan but arises as a feature of the subject's external environs (more on this later). As well, the drive itself is not "unifocal" but split between itself and its representative, *objet a*, a nuance that neither screen theory nor post-theory recognized.

When Bordwell actually does engage with Copjec, critiquing her essay on *Double Indemnity* and film noir more general, his critique, however, is so misplaced that it is almost not worth mentioning; however, perhaps it is useful insofar as it illustrates the level at which the point is consistently missed in Copjec's body of work.³ Bordwell critiques Copjec's style of argumentation, claiming that it is flawed on account of its "associational reasoning" and that, essentially, Copjec commits grievous errors against positivism (Bordwell and Carroll 22). What Bordwell does not understand—in both critiquing Copjec's associational reasoning and claiming that film theory is missing real embodied spectators—is how free association is itself the original medium through which the embodied analysand of psychoanalysis came into existence for Freud. Just as the analysand participated in free association, the embodied spectator participates in the image; she gets "caught in the image," is implicated within it, just as she is caught in the unconscious web of signification, with all of its instances of parapraxes, slips, dreams, jokes, and alike. As McGowan puts it, "In order to sustain his assault on what he calls 'subject-position theory' and 'culturalism' in film studies, Bordwell must omit the one theory that fits within neither camp and that would therefore throw a wrench in his attack plan" (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 67).⁴

Stephen Prince also claims that the application of psychoanalysis to film (even psychoanalytic theory in general) is overdetermined by its first principles, such as the Oedipal complex and fetishism. Prince has a bone to pick with what he alleges as the false universality with which psychoanalytic film theory employs Freud's theories, ultimately failing to account for a real, empirical film spectator. The problem with Prince's conception of Oedipus in particular is that it misses the crucial point of why Freud chose Oedipus in first place, as Lacan puts it in *Seminar VIII*: "The reason Freud found his fundamental figure in the tragedy of Oedipus lies in the fact that 'he did not know' he had killed his father and was sleeping with his mother" (100; emphasis added).

Rather than the cinematic spectator simply "playing off unresolved sexual and Oedipal conflicts," as Prince diagnoses of psychoanalytic film theory, the properly Lacanian understanding of the Oedipal drama is contained in the subject's epistemological failure

(Bordwell and Carroll 74). This “*he did not know*” precisely indexes the foundational gesture of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, one that is missed in Prince and “post-theory” more generally, as much as it is in screen theory’s Foucauldianization of Lacan—the status of non-knowledge and its effect on the subject. Copjec insists that “[t]he reflexive circuit of the scopic drive does not produce a *knowable object*; it produces a *transgression of the principle of pleasure*, by forcing a hole in it” (*Imagine* 214; original emphasis). In critiquing psychoanalysis, and misapplying Lacan’s notion of the gaze in a Foucauldian hue, the crucial import of the unconscious in psychoanalysis is lost. Screen theory and post-theory have taken both the application of Lacan in the study of cinema, and the criticism thereof, so far off base that perhaps this is what sustains the lack of engagement with Copjec so thoroughly even today, given that psychoanalysis has thus far been misapplied and misapprehended in the realm of film theory for an entire half of a century. Copjec’s “return to Lacan” is very similar to Lacan’s “return to Freud,” which resulted in his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association; Copjec, although not explicitly expelled, has been nonetheless excised from criticism.

Post-theory’s charge of psychoanalysis’s “missing spectators,” having been launched against the first wave of psychoanalytic film theory, was aimed at the wrong target. Rather than root out and finally locate the missing empirical body of the spectator, Bordwell, Carroll, and Prince should have instead searched for what Copjec herself brought (back) to the foreground of film theory—namely, what is missing *in* the spectator herself. The missing element *in* the spectator runs parallel with Copjec’s prognosis of negativity in cultural studies more generally, as she writes that “[t]o urge analysis of culture to become literate in desire, [is] to learn how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements ... desire must be articulated” (*Read My Desire* 14).

It is on these grounds that Copjec begins her veritable “return to Lacan,” indicting panopticism in cinema as championing visibility as a form of knowledge, all while neglecting the unconscious facets of the subject, invisibility, and non-knowledge. The “profound deafness” of engagement with Copjec has continued “well into the 2000s,” writes McGowan: “[A]lthough critics acknowledge the existence of Copjec’s essay, no one engages with it until twenty years after its publication” (*Psychoanalytic Theory* 66). As Žižek writes on the blurb on the back cover of Samo Tomšič’s *The Capitalist Unconscious*, “To be a Marxist today, one *has* to go through Lacan,” I claim that the only way to do film theory today is to go through Copjec.

THE GAZE

As Žižek observes,

Nowhere is the gap more between Theory and Post-Theory so obvious as apropos of the Gaze. Joan Copjec asserts that the proto-transcendental status of “partial objects” (Gaze, voice, breast ...), which are the “condition of possibility” of their



organ-counterparts: Gaze is the condition of possibility of the eye, i.e. of our seeing something in the world (we only see something insofar as an X eludes our eye and “returns the Gaze”). (*Fright of Real Tears* 65)

The status of the gaze as it came to be in the psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and 1980s is not at all self-evident. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, psychoanalytic film theory enjoyed a relatively stable foothold in cinema studies; Laura Mulvey’s well-known essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Christian Metz’s *The Imaginary Signifier*, Jean Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory, and the works of so-called screen theorists Stephen Heath, Raymond Bellour, Colin McCabe, and others each had a stake in folding Lacanian psychoanalytic theory into cinema studies, predominantly on the grounds of ideological interpellation via the apparatus, the formation of a cinematic subject, the championing of ideas like imaginary identification, and, of course, the male gaze.⁵

As is by now well known, this initial phase of film theory has its roots in an over-reliance on Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” in an essay developed in the 1930s detailing how the ego comes to be in infancy through mis-recognition of the image of oneself in a mirror. As McGowan notes,

This deception, as Lacan sees it, is essential to the function of the imaginary order, which has the effect of creating an illusory wholeness. The crowning achievement of the imaginary order is the subject’s ego, but in this essay and throughout his career, Lacan emphasizes that though the ego is a bodily ego, it is imaginary in both senses of the term—an illusion and an image. The aim of the mirror stage essay is accounting for the formation of the ego through a process of imaginary identification. (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 58)

As McGowan writes, for Mulvey, who relies on the mirror stage in same sense as Baudry, “The look of the male spectator at the female on the screen is akin to the look of the infant into the mirror” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 61). “The mirror,” however, as McGowan insists, “has nothing to do with the production of a subject, but this is how screen theory interprets and deploys the essay” (58–9).

As McGowan writes, “Copjec’s essay introduces Lacan’s category of the real into a psychoanalytic film theory obsessed with the imaginary and symbolic orders” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 64). Screen theory misrecognized the function of the imaginary as being formative of the subject: “Cinema, for [screen] theorists, concerns the power of the apparatus over the spectator and the power of the male over the female[,] ... concerns itself with how the imaginary situation of cinema spectatorship furthers the ideological structure operating within the symbolic order” (65). The idea espoused by screen theory that “popular spectatorship is a political nightmare” (60) does not mesh with Lacan’s conceptualization of vision, as McGowan notes how “Lacan doesn’t align vision with a look of mastery as Screen theory does but instead focuses on

what disrupts our mastery when we look” (61). Thus, the strict correlation between the imaginary, the gaze, and mastery is falsely attributed to Lacan by screen theory.

It is important to remember that, for Copjec as for Lacan, “no position defines a resolute identity” (*Read My Desire* 18). Although often charged for being too structuralist, and in spite of being deeply influenced by the structural linguistics of Saussure and Levi-Strauss’s anthropology, for Lacan, the concept of structure is itself marked by an inherent incompleteness—as Copjec puts it, an “incompleteness of every meaning and position” in relation to the structure itself (18). In terms of the imaginary, as Lebeau deftly notes, “The visible always raises the spectre of the hidden, the secret—a secrecy that ... becomes inseparable from (structural to) the experience of looking as such” (58). Every act of looking thus, just as a position in a structure, is de-completed by a structurally necessary void. The gaze, instead of the screen theoretical notion of belonging to the spectator, is what is structurally missing from the visual field; it is what functions as a stain in the field of vision, “the limited resolution of our simulated world, as a sign of the ontological incompleteness of (what we experience as) reality itself” (Žižek, *Less than Nothing* 743), the “pre-ontological level of fuzzy proto-reality” (744), and not what is harboured by the subject via the strictures of ideological interpellation.

The gaze as object for psychoanalytic theory is thus more properly understood as a point of incompleteness rather than the subject as marking the sublime point of ideological completion of meaning produced via the imaginary apparatus harboured by the gaze. As McGowan states, “[T]he symbolic is not a closed system but one whose internal structure marks the point at which the externality of the subject manifests itself within the signifying system, and it thus testifies to the system’s necessary lack of completion or wholeness” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 61). According to this formulation, the subject is that which does not fit properly within the system, cannot but disrupt the conformity to the law, and is not simply a project of an intractable ideological hold.

Panopticism, by contrast, claims a kind of a perfect visibility, one in which a fully visible subject is by default fully knowable, foreclosing the possibility of “invisibility and nonknowledge” (Copjec, *Read My Desire* 17), both of which “undermin[e] every certainty” (18). When Copjec critiques the editors of *Re-Vision* (1984), noting how the alleged completeness of dyad of eye and gaze through the “localization of the eye as authority” (16), she presents a structure of the subject that “guarantees that even her innermost desire will always be not a transgression but rather an implantation of the law, that even the ‘process of theorizing her own untenable situation’ can only reflect back to her ‘as in a mirror’ her subjugation to the gaze” (17).⁶ Thus, any form of difference launched against this closed circuit of the subject and the gaze would ultimately fail, as Copjec pithily states how “[d]ifferences do not threaten panoptic power, they feed it” (18).



The only way to escape this structurally complete designation of the subjective circuit is by locating the points of failure belonging to both the subject and any apparatus of power. In this way, the proper object of analysis is not a uni-focal gaze localized in the subject's eye, but a *mise-en-scène* of drives and their objects. For Lacan, “[A] subject (as \$, a barred one) is the failure of its own actualization—a subject endeavors to actualize-express itself, it fails, and the subject is this failure” (*Less than Nothing* 750; original emphasis). Or, as McGowan puts it in terms of the field of vision, “The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see. Desire, in other words, the desire of representation, institutes the subject in the visible field” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 64). What is lacking in representation, the impossible limit marking the subject's failure, is the gaze itself as a stain in the fabric of material reality.

Whereas the “spendthrift’ Foucault” of screen theory that Copjec critiques carves a hole into the fabric of the image via panoptic power, establishing a vanishing point, a *mise-en-abyme* into which the subject's gaze becomes parasitically invaded by ideology, closed off via a matrix of power relations, trackability, and governmentality—a complete system of control descending on the subject as a product of a closed circuit of desire—the Lacanian model locates desire itself as arising from the stain as the impossible locus of failure as infinity located precisely where power, the law, knowledge, and visibility break down (*Read My Desire* 19). Thus, two vastly different film theories emerge: the former inheriting the Althusserian imperative of successful, complete interpellation while the latter proposes the point of incompleteness, the failure of every structure, as the point from which the subject's desire emerges. As McGowan asserts on Copjec's position, “[F]ilm confronts the subject with a real absence that remains irreducible to any imaginary or symbolic identification, and it is this absence that acts as the cause of the subject's desire” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 64).

For psychoanalytic theory, the gaze is a stain belonging to externality, not one that is emitted by the eye of the spectator. As McGowan insists, “There is no look that can see the gaze, but there is no look without the gaze that it cannot see” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 64). It is “[w]hen the gaze appears,” according to Copjec, that “vision is annihilated” (*Imagine* 195). The gaze as a point of failure marks the point of impossibility out of which the subject emerges (McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 64), “account[ing] for the disruptiveness of the real in cinematic spectatorship” (65). Copjec's reformulation of the gaze, returning to Lacan's own position from *Seminar XI*, reinigorates the study of cinema and the latent possibilities it harbours for the subject at the level of desire as a disruptive faculty formative of every subject.

For contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers such as Žižek, McGowan, and Copjec, this first phase of psychoanalytic theory missed much of the Lacanian theory it purported to rely upon: its misapplication of the concept of gaze, its over-reliance on the symbolic

and imaginary at the expense of the real, and, as McGowan puts it, “even with the confines of the mirror stage essay itself, Screen theory performs a butchered operation on Lacan’s concept,” tending to ‘culturalize’ Lacan’s theory of the gaze, minimizing if not altogether obfuscating its ontological import (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 58). Film theory relied heavily on the mirror stage; for screen theory, “Gaze always retains ... the sense of being that point at which sense and being coincide ... Sense finds the subject—that is the ultimate point of the film-theoretical and Foucauldian concept of the gaze” (Copjec, *Read My Desire* 22), ostensibly producing a theory of the way the screen functions as an “[i]mage of the subject’s perfection” (23).

Copjec summarizes the condition of this first phase of psychoanalytic film theory as operating a “Foucauldianization of Lacan” (*Read My Desire* 19), inverting and supplanting film theory’s reliance on the Screen as Mirror metaphor with a more apposite Lacanian analogy of “Mirror as Screen.” As McGowan puts it, “Screen theory on the whole views popular cinema as a grave political danger, precisely because, as Baudry and Metz notice, it tends to hide the act of production as it immerses spectators in a bath of images” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 57). The product of this Foucauldianized psychoanalytic theory had its basis in subject formation through visibility and knowledge production, and an account of panoptic power as the site of production of the subject, culminating in an attenuated Lacanianism—a Lacanian theory devoid of theoretical insight into the drives and their objects, the real, and the way cinematic spectatorship actually offers an account of the possibilities to break free of the stranglehold of ideology rather than simply being produced as in Foucault’s account of panoptic power. In the opening chapter of *Read My Desire*, “The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan,” Copjec unpacks the conditions upon which “a psychoanalytically informed film theory came to see itself as expressible in Foucauldian terms” (19).

In screen theory, “[t]wo ideas—the screen functioning as a mirror for the subject and the film suturing the subject into its signifying order—emerge as the primary takeaway from this initial burst of theorizing” (McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 57). What was consistently missed is the function of *objet a* as that which “is precisely what eludes the mirror image” (58) or the negativity inscribed in the spectator’s relation to the screen. Rather than the positive categories of visibility and knowledge following Foucault’s “assault on negation” (Copjec, “No: Foucault” 76) that typify the Foucauldian film theory passed off as Lacanian, the negativity of Freud’s original conception of the unconscious and the non-knowledge and the invisibility of the subject’s relation to the screen are to be understood as the properly Lacanian position of the film spectator.



THE STRUT OF VISION

Whereas “film theory interpret[s] ... objectivity as a *misrecognition* fostered by the belief that the observer could indeed transcend his or her body and world and thus truthfully comprehend it” (Copjec, *Imagine* 184; original emphasis), Lacan focuses on the “the geometrical dimension [that] enables us to glimpse how the subject who concerns us is *caught ... in the field of vision*” (*Seminar XI* 92; emphasis added). Lacan’s subject is caught in the matter of vision, not confined to the transcendental look of the eye but rather embedded or implicated in the scene in which she partakes. For Lacan, “[A]ll we see, we see from a certain *perspective*.” (Copjec, *Imagine* 184; original emphasis).

By threshing bare screen theory’s insistence on and misapplication of the mirror stage, and returning to Lacan’s concept of the gaze from *Seminar XI*, Copjec emphasizes Lacan’s “attempt to develop one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis: that of the drive” (*Imagine* 185). By relocating the gaze as a partial object of the drive, Copjec responds to post-theory’s charge of the “missing spectator” of psychoanalytic film theory. In *Seminar XI*, “Lacan proposes that Renaissance perspective provides the exact formula of the *scopic drive*, that is, it gives us the formula not of abstract vision, but of embodied seeing” (*Imagine* 184; original emphasis). The “place of the subject is the point of infinity (or vanishing point), projected into the world, not located outside it” (191). The act of seeing is thus not abstracted from the body of spectator, as Metz suggests when he concludes how “film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body” (45). For Metz, and screen theory at large, “The spectator is absent from the screen as *perceived*, but also ... present there and even ‘all-present’ as perceiver” (54; original emphasis), as though the body dissolves via the imaginary identification with the screen image.

In contrast with the Metzian formula that reads, “At every moment I am in the film by my look’s caress” (Metz 54), Copjec offers a description of the “strut of vision” as the material ligature between subject and object that supports the act of spectatorship as such. As Copjec insists, “The link between reality and the body is an essential datum of psychoanalysis, which nowhere lends support for a transcendent or noncorporeal constitution of reality” (*Imagine* 193).

Lacan turns to Renaissance perspectivism (arguably one of the aesthetic precursors to the cinema) to examine the underlying matrix between the seeing subject and the aesthetic object. As Copjec puts it, “The vanishing point and the horizon line that emerge in [projective geometry] are not to be taken ... as illusions of perception, as objects we mistakenly see. They inscribe the eye of the viewing subject which has been *projected* from elsewhere *into the visual field*” (*Imagine* 189; original emphasis): “If

the space of the paintings is not flat, it is because it is shaped, rather, like a torus or an envelope that folds the eye of the observer back into the field it observes. Through Renaissance perspective, the observer is topologically inserted, or projected, into the observable space, where it becomes visible in the world” (189). This is the message of the parable of Petit Jean in *Seminar XI* (Copjec, *Read My Desire*).

Perspective, thus, is an embodied position, running counter to “[t]he thought/extension dichotomy in [Descartes’s] theory[, which] was supposed to guarantee the independence of each term (pure thinking on one side, corporeality on the other), but Lacan argues that the Cartesian notion of extension has thought’s fingerprints all over it” (Copjec, *Imagine* 190). Read in this way, screen theory operates not only a Foucauldianization of Lacan but as well a vulgar Cartesianism. Psychoanalysis, by contrast, does not reduce the subject’s perspective to a “transcendental” locus outside of *res extensia* (Descartes), nor to the localized, extended organ belonging to the body of the subject (Foucault), but in the self-split *scopic drive*: “The perceiving subject cannot be represented as a mere point, a static and abstract position, but is representable only as the interval or gap separating the point from which we see and the one from which we are seen” (195).

For Copjec, this is what Lacan demonstrates in *Seminar XI* through his analysis of Renaissance perspectivism, “the existence of that pure distance which separates the perceiving subject from herself. This distance, which is necessary for representation to be possible at all, defines not the abstract subject film theory set out to deconstruct, but the embodied subject of the scopic drive” (*Imagine* 196). So, in reconsidering the gaze as belonging not to the subjective position but rather emanating from the object in the form of an impossible stain, and by understanding how the failure of the imaginary and symbolic is itself inscribed into the subject’s position as the real impossibility as the subject herself, Copjec is able to wrest an authentically Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory from the initial phase of “film theory, which consistently confuses the gaze with a single point or eye totally outside and transcendent to the filmic space, a point from which the space is unified or mastered ... from ... the gaze [as] a unifying or regulative category of my experience” (209). The gaze for Copjec is never *to be mastered*, but rather marks a traumatic excess in the field of vision: “The gaze looks at me, but I can never catch sight of it there where it looks; for there is no ‘there,’ no determinate location, no place whence it looks” (211). It is through the gaze as partial object of the drive, as indicative of the failure of the subject to apprehend the image—an infinity indexing the subject’s desire that is housed paradoxically in a *small object*, the *objet a*—that “the gaze is revealed to me ... as embodied subject, though sensible indications” (211). The gaze is an Other that does not look back at me, does not offer the point of view with which to see myself through; but rather the gaze is the stain, a perspective that is itself perspective-less, a point of incompleteness.



THE FEMININE ACT

One of the most undertheorized features of Copjec's entire body of work happens to be one of the more obscure and undertheorized features of Lacan's late seminars; although many know and have even offered analysis of Lacan's seminar on *jouissance feminine*, few have undertaken the project of actually understanding what Lacan means and what the ontological consequences are for the subject in this other, non-phallic satisfaction. Although it is a common mistake to think about feminine *jouissance* as a kind of mystical, divine experience occupying a place outside of the confines of the symbolic order, this could not be further from Lacan's intentions. Žižek turns to Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* in order to refute this common misreading of Lacan's Woman as "beyond" the symbolic, insisting instead that the woman is even more firmly therein, "immersed in the order of speech without exception" (Barnard and Fink 60). Elsewhere, Žižek offers a description of the way in which "Lacan establishes a logic of feminine sexuality wherein a certain precise reaction of identification, desire, and *jouissance* constitutes not only a uniquely feminine organization of sexuality, but an epistemological position as well" (*Less than Nothing* 65). Although Žižek's contribution here is valuable, he rarely offers a detailed account of feminine *jouissance* in his work, especially one that compares to the radical undertaking of just this in Copjec's *Imagine There's No Woman*.

On the very last page of *Read My Desire*, Copjec comments on the condition of the woman in contemporary theory, arguing, "It is now time to devote some thought to developing an ethics of inclusion or of the unlimited, that is, an ethics proper to woman. Another logic of the superego must commence" (239). This is just the project Copjec endeavours to undertake in *Imagine There's No Woman*, namely, to theorize a feminine form of sublimation that had hitherto been overlooked in place of the masculine. By turning her sights on feminine sublimation, Copjec ostensibly attempts to excise the (classical narrative of the) sublime out of sublimation in order to disinter the ethical from its seemingly indelible locus in the masculine logic of the sublime.

As Flisfeder already points out,

Much of Lacan's early work focused on the levels of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, keeping the Real in the background. However, as many contemporary Lacanians will point out—Žižek, and Joan Copjec in Particular—beginning with his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–1960), Lacan's trajectory started to move away from the Imaginary and the Symbolic, toward a more specialized focus on the Real as well as other provocative concepts like the Thing (*das Ding*); the "object" of psychoanalysis (the *objet petit a*); and, later on in his last seminars, on the "drive," transference, fantasy, enjoyment (*jouissance*), and the *sinthome*. (*Symbolic* 15)

Copjec's first step toward approaching a feminine form of sublimation is through the embodied subject in relation to drive, *jouissance*, and the *sinthome*: the body as a constellation of drives and their partial objects as the "partial incarnations of a lost



maternal One” (*Imagine* 55), the insistence on the drive as the ethical foundation of the body, and the body itself as a constellation of incomplete, failing drives with its objectal supplement housed in *objet a*. For Copjec, “[D]rive appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic ... as a measure of the demand upon the mind for work in consequences of its connection with the body” (185).

Copjec’s analysis takes us from the sublime as exception to the subject, the limit of the subject’s understanding, the *mise-en-abyme*—a vanishing point where subjectivity dissolves into the abyssal maw of *das Ding*—to an unlimited position, without exception, grounded in a *mise-en-scène* of (partial) drives and their objects, “in the thick of it,” rooted firmly in the subject as a body, though irreducible to the biophysiological body—one where desire supersedes demand and *objet a* trumps the *Einziger zug* of the signifier. Female sublimation can thus be read as the attempt to squeeze between the signifier and its unary trait, focalize the lack in the Other, and therefore deliver the subject to the universal-singular trait indexical to the incompleteness of reality as such. Feminine sublimation would thus stand simultaneously for that which is beyond the limits of knowledge; however, it is through a trace of the awareness of non-knowledge or, as Geneviève Morel puts it, apropos of the feminine masquerade as having the faculty of “metamorphos[e] a ‘not-having’ (the phallus) into a ‘being’ (the phallus)” (Barnard and Fink 83). Feminine *jouissance* is the other form of sublimation that attempts to upend the “historical transition” from Oedipal father to primal father, in which subjects “no longer have recourse to the protections against *jouissance* that the Oedipal father once offered” (Copjec, *Read My Desire* 182). Badiou would agree that “these protections have been eroded by our society’s fetishization of being ... [which] commands *jouissance* as a civic duty” (182–3).

In place of the obligatory duty of “civic” *jouissance*, the feminine subject practises a *jouissance* of the body that does not capitulate to the demands of the signifier but nonetheless gets expressed in the hole inscribed in the symbolic. Neither is feminine *jouissance* the mystical dimension of the woman excepted from the confines of the symbolic, nor is it the pure place of void itself. Rather, the feminine subject is to be “opposed to ‘subjectivization,’” insofar as the former “is designated by an act that maintains the ontological priority of the void,” while the latter is already in the process of acquiring—perhaps even acquiescing—to the whims of the signifier (Flisfeder, “Dialectical Materialism” 385). As Copjec puts it, “The futurity of feminine *jouissance* is not merely something that may arrive, but something that in its not-yet-arriving, its futurity, acts now to unground any ground that might be attributed to the sexual as such” (“Sexual Compact” 35). What this formulation reveals is that, far from representing a radically free “floating” subjectivity lost in the *jouissance* of the real, feminine sublimation is linked with a prohibition, one that is paradoxically unlimited, as it refuses to allow the sedimentation of the sexual form with its content, the metonymic faculty of *objet a* with its substantial “container,” but rather sublimates the drive via its fundamental substance: the cut that keeps the drive split between



itself and its object. Although “there is only one object of the drive in Lacan; the object *a* and the external object that has a particular ‘feature’ of not coinciding with itself” (Copjec, *Imagine* 60), feminine jouissance names the identification with the cut that is a feature the drive’s non-coincidence, exposing the Janus-like face of *objet a*: the metonymic infinity of phallic jouissance and the “sinthomatic” adherence to void at the centre of the signifying chain. This is why Žižek insists that “the only true ethics is that of *drive*, of our commitment to the sinthome which defines the contours of our relation to enjoyment” (Žižek, *Tarrying* 60; original emphasis). Feminine sublimation is the avoidance of the infinity of metonymic desire, opting instead for metaphor (subject *is* void/ $\$$ =Substance), standing for the stopping point of the drive, the *point de capiton*, “the quilting point” that reveals the feminine act of sublimation as non-all.

The cut that bifurcates *la Femme* stands for the “missing relation” on Lacan’s formulae of sexuation between *a* and the barred Other $S(\emptyset)$. As Ragland-Sullivan puts it apropos of how the woman “lack[s] a universalizing signifier ... that would point to some essence of Woman, human beings who do not identify with having a penis, identify, rather, with the real which inserts a lack in the symbolic (\emptyset)” (66), or, as Zupančič reiterates, “One is a woman if one carries castration as a *mask*” (55; emphasis added).⁷ This formula for the disruptive potential of the subject was neglected by screen theory; the theorists of which never take the step toward sexual difference as an ontological problem. This is why, for Zupančič, “[t]rue feminism depends on posting sexual difference as a political problem, and hence on situating it in the context of social antagonism and of emancipatory struggle” (36). To truly speak ontologically about sexual difference, one must reconsider how something like the male gaze came to stand for the way in which cinema constructed its subjects and turn instead to Lacan’s understanding of the way in which the “[w]oman has a relation with $S(\emptyset)$ and it is already in that respect that she is split, that she is not-whole, since she can also have a relation with Φ ” (*Seminar XX* 81); the woman is the subject of excess, fully “immersed in the order of speech *without exception*” (Barnard and Fink 60; original emphasis).

In terms of feminine sublimation, Copjec conceives of the “process which gives us access—through the intervention of the symbolic—to libido. Simply put, we would have no affects without symbolization ... That which does not exist for the subject, non-being, is converted by the symbol of negation to an experience of radical otherness” (“No: Foucault” 93). Against the ruptural-mystical sublime commonly misread as non-phallic jouissance, Copjec’s sexed-being demystifies the feminine act; rather than being a case of radical otherness grounded in an exception, feminine sublimation augurs a path through “the contradiction of the *symbolic space that appears because of the constitutively missing signifier, and of what appears at its place (enjoyment)*” (Zupančič 42; original emphasis). Feminine sublimation turns the subject protreptically to the real substance of enjoyment.



There is a clear separation between Copjec's embodied subject and her insistence on sexed-being against the neutered being implicit in gender theory, and the subject that the first phase of psychoanalytic film theory produced as "a subject that no body could be: a monocular subject of pure, abstract seeing, who occupied no space, was subject to no temporal fluctuations, and laid claim to no sexual identity, except— notoriously—by default" (*Imagine* 180). After Copjec, there can never any longer be a missing spectator in film theory.

LIMITATIONS, POSSIBILITIES

One cannot help but notice a certain flaw in the way Lacanian theorists so often speak of terminal points: that point at the end of analysis, Lacan's famous analytic Pass, the Act, and so on. Do these ends not sometimes leave us unsatisfied as to the actual potential of psychoanalytic theory to provide ground for the revolutionary act? Perhaps a certain utopian drive is latent in the psychoanalytic project, which can be detected in Copjec's ontology. For instance, does not her claim as to how "the futurity of feminine jouissance ... in its not-yet-arriving ... acts now to *unground any ground* that might be attributed to the sexual" ("Sexual Compact" 35; emphasis added) ring with a similar timbre as Walter Benjamin's notion of divine violence as the "unalloyed violence ... the sign, seal but never the means of sacred execution" (Benjamin 300)?

Read in this way, Copjec's notion that the ungrounding faculty of feminine jouissance seems to register in the dimension described by Badiou as "speculative leftism." For Badiou, "[S]peculative leftism imagines that intervention authorizes itself on the basis of itself alone; that it breaks with the situation without any other support than its own negative will ... fascinated by the evental ultra-one and it believes that in the latter's name it can reject any immanence to the structured regime of the count-as-one" (*Being and Event* 126). Does Copjec's feminine subject promise to unground any ground?

The answer may be found in Duane Rousselle's recent critique of Copjec's ontology. According to Rousselle, "Copjec's argument is that sex is always sexuation ... that sex always refers to the impossible relation or gap between and within linguistic existence" (36). It is true that such definitions pepper Copjec's work: "[S]ex is the stumbling block of sense" (*Read My Desire* 204); "[S]ex is the structural incompleteness of language" (206); the "structural incompleteness of language is "the only guarantee we have against racism" (209). For Rousselle, it seems that Copjec's "noumenalization" of sex functions as an Archimedean point that, rather than rooting the subject to the negative ligature of sexed-being as non-all, has the effect of "reduc[ing] the thing-in-itself to the correlate of existence ... knott[ing] the thing-in-itself into the human world of language, not *as* language but nonetheless within language," therefore unable to "solve the problem of externality" (Rousselle 36; original emphasis).



Copjec's insistence on the "unabsorbable negation" of the real as sexual difference (*Read My Desire* 10), indexing how "[s]ome elision or negation of its powers writes itself in language as the lack of metalanguage" (9), poses a problem for Copjec's ontology; from this vantage, it is not simply language that confines the subject to a subjective frame, and thus prohibits sex, but the fact that sex itself is inscribed into language through negativity that causes the prohibition. Copjec's entire ontology of the subject hinges upon one noumenal object, which happens to be sex as the stumbling block to reason. In this way, we begin to approach the questions of pre-critical, naive realism.

What can perhaps offer a salve to this problem—or perhaps protract it a bit further—and bring us back to film theory is the notion of *suture*, which was once a valuable topic in film studies. Suture theory provides the subject a localization of the void as a mathematical point; through the *matheme*, we can refine the objective status of the void carved out by *objet a*, and thereby track desire as it is articulated through the symbolic. Miller, following Frege, understands the necessity of the Zero as the sign of the not-identical to One essential for the passage from One to Two as "the first non-real thing in thought" (Miller 44), and it is precisely suture as this non-real thing in thought which Copjec's subject "sublates" through the act of sublimation as explained above: "That which does not exist for the subject, non-being, is converted by the symbol of negation to an experience of radical otherness" (Copjec, "No: Foucault" 93). Suture thus stands for the act of sublimation that installs the radically Other as a feature of the subject herself. The logic of the suture can tell us how subjects are stitched into the scene of the social through a necessary negativity. Suture in this sense names the locus of lack embedded in the subjective relationship with the symbolic interface, offering us a glimpse at what Badiou, paraphrasing Rimbaud, calls the "the place and the formula" (Badiou and Cassin 46). Suture as lack functions here as a *matheme*, as a way to domesticate the failure that is the subject's impossibility of knowing itself; it is the lost bit of 1970s' film theory that must be repurposed for today, allowing us to rethink the interface between the spectator and screen via failure, lack, and the cut part and parcel of the drives and their objects.

Copjec's drive-constellation concept of subjective embodiment may provide a much-needed hue of practicality to the oft-perceived sublimity of Badiou's notion of Event. Is Badiou's Event a grand moment of rupture or a subject that takes "the form of a body whose organs treat a worldly situation 'point by point'" (Badiou, *Logic* 399)? If we consider the latter, Copjec's configuration may indicate how Badiou's "points" and "organs" interact: the inside/outside relationship between "organ" and "point" is what Copjec describes as the "seat of sex" (*Imagine* 29). The subject is always "in the thick" of the worldly situation, and never transcendently abstracted therefrom; the twisted, mobius-like logic of the *extimate* reveals how abstraction itself is part of reality as the failure of the drive structure, which the cinematic screen is able to represent to the subject through fantasy. Copjec's passage from *mise-en-abyme*, the vanishing point of the sublime as an exception grounding the masculine subject, to



the subject of mise-en-scène as a constellation of drives and their partial objects, one without limitation, a subject whose very impossibility of knowing themselves, and impossibility of being in unison with itself, marks the new ethical terrain carved out by Copjec's ontology. It is this subject, a real embodied subject as spectator, marked by an epistemological limit and an ontological limit, defined by the contours of jouissance and occupying the negative space indicated by suture, that offers radical potential against the masculine formulation of the sublime as exception, against a ruptural sublime (against the grand narrative of a sublime Event) and toward the feminine iteration of *objet a* as an ethics without exception. In this way, we approach a more or less Fichtean solution to the problem of an ethical subject; "if our world is the sensible manifested material of our duty" (Bowman and Estes 105), then the aesthetic and the ethical are indelibly bound to one another. The feminine act of sublimation, via feminine jouissance, marks not a mystical beyond of the symbolic order but rather shares an affinity with one of Badiou's *les points qua* matheme, denoting the structural incompleteness of the subject and the object, marking the "deontological" twist at the centre of being as the ethical shape carved out by the drive that Copjec locates.

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NOTES

- 1 Žižek, whose work has relied heavily on Copjec's intervention into both film theory and sexual difference (even when it is not acknowledged), understands Copjec as one of the few theorists who claims Lacan as the "ultimate background" of her thought, whereas film theorists such as Kaja Silverman and Laura Mulvey, although they do engage with Lacan, do so only insofar as Lacanian concepts are employed to bolster support of their other theoretical implications (Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears* 2).
- 2 It was McGowan (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory*) who noticed the correlation between Bellour's phrase and Jean Renoir's 1939 film *Le règle du jeu*.
- 3 It is interesting to note that in his discussion, Bordwell also indicts Raymond Bellour, who was himself Copjec's pseudo-interlocutor at *Screen Journal* (Bordwell and Carroll 22–3).
- 4 In this way, not only does Bordwell fail to engage with Copjec's more crucial theoretical interventions into film theory but so too fails to recognize that in his search for the "missing spectator" of psychoanalytic film theory, he doesn't realize that Copjec is herself a real spectator.
- 5 For a thorough account of this history, see McGowan (*Psychoanalytic Theory; Real Gaze*) and Lebeau.
- 6 Henry Krips, another of the few scholars to actually engage with Copjec, claims that Copjec has misunderstood how panoptic power and the gaze actually function in



Foucault's work. Krips (96) cites Foucault from *The History of Sexuality* (159) on how a "[d]ifferent economy of bodies and pleasures" presents a "way out" of the deadlock of interpellation. On this very same line of Foucault, Copjec recently describes this economy as a "*qualitas occulta* [that] is nowhere to be found." ("No: Foucault" 93).

- 7 One should add, as Žižek does following Jacques-Alain Miller, "[a] mask which conceals nothing" (*Less than Nothing* 46).

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