

GENDER, BODIES, SEX, TECHNOLOGY: DISMANTLING HETEROSEXUAL MALE
SUBJECTIVITY AND DESIRE IN TRANSNATIONAL FILM

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ABSTRACT

Stella Soojin Kim: Gender, Bodies, Sex, Technology: Dismantling Heterosexual Male Subjectivity and Desire in Transnational Film
(Under the direction of Samuel Amago)

This dissertation examines subversions of the male gaze in 21st century films from Argentina, Spain, and South Korea—Lucía Puenzo’s *XXY* (2007), Pedro Almodóvar’s *La piel que habito / The Skin I Live In* (2011), and Kim Ki-duk’s *Time / Sigan* (2006). This project begins with the idea that if mainstream cinematic practices create a perspective that “naturalizes” a heterosexual male viewpoint as the universal and the norm, then the specificity of this position may also be used as a starting point to subvert cinematic desire. Using a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as those proposed by Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed, Leon Festinger, John Berger, Robert Stam, and Bernadette Wegenstein, among others, this project explores how different embodied realities, such as the intersexed body, forced gender reassignment surgery, rape, female madness, and cosmetic surgery—address themselves to the heterosexual male viewer in a way that subverts, displaces, or otherwise problematizes this viewer’s privileged position.

For my Juicy J

And to a lifetime of riding and driving together through the Hollywood Hills

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INTRODUCTION

“Where there is power, there is resistance.” –Michel Foucault

“Invest in resistance.” –Judith Halberstam

The first time I read Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” I was absolutely stunned. It was as if I had been given the explicit grammar rules for a usage and expression I saw everywhere around me, but I had not yet the vocabulary to express.

In the years since then, I’ve watched a lot of movies with this essay in the back of my mind. The three movies discussed here have each been chosen because each *does* something to the spectator identified by Mulvey, and because each goes through mainstream cinema’s default assumptions to do so.

Through every epoch from the beginning of time, thinkers have sought to theorize subjectivity. They have said that subjectivity resides in the body, that it exists in thought and in consciousness, that many things lurk beneath its depths that are unaccounted for, that it resides in language and in signs and in utterances, that it exists within a network of infinite power relations of subjects exerting power inward, on themselves, and directing power outward, in as many number of resistances. They have said that subjectivity is gendered, that it is marked by embodiment, race, ethnicity; that it exists in desire to others that are same or different, and they have even dared to theorize the labyrinth of queer desire existing in the interstices, elisions, dualities, multiplicities, and contradictions between diametric opposites. Subjectivity has

likewise been compared to cyborgs and rhizomes as the lines between humans, animals, and machines become increasingly blurred; it has been called schizophrenic, fragmented, nomadic, postmodern.

In short, this is a dissertation about subjectivity and desire. More specifically, this dissertation builds on the idea that if dominant narrative cinema—that is, Hollywood and its derivatives—create a perspective that “naturalizes” a heterosexual male viewpoint as the universal and the norm, then the specificity of this position may also be used as a starting point to subvert cinematic desire.

The three films discussed in this dissertation—*XXY* (2007; Argentina) by Lucía Puenzo; *La piel que habito / The Skin I Live In* (2011; Spain) by Pedro Almodóvar; and *Time / Sigan* (2006; South Korea) by Kim Ki-duk—all do something interesting to the cinematic gaze, and they do it by blurring, destabilizing, or otherwise problematizing the traditional self/other dichotomy on which subjectivity is based.

Chapter 1 examines the issue of sexual difference through a perspective that fuses male and female in a dual and irreducible embodiment that destabilizes the position of the *spectator* that gazes at the image.

Chapter 2 looks at sexual difference through a narrative structure that at first positions the spectator to identify with the male protagonist (and consequently, objectify the female object of his desire), until a sudden shift in subject positions shows the viewer that what at first appears to be an unfortunate and imaginary violence enacted on the *other* is actually a real and tangible violence enacted on the *self*. Specifically, it does this by passing the distinctly *female* violence of rape through the distinctly *male* violence of castration.

Chapter 3 examines the use of cosmetic surgery as both a critique and an illustration of how the female body has literally embodied the burdens of the male gaze while at once using narrative circularity, interchangeable subject and object positions, and film form to illustrate the interconnectedness of self and other. At the same time, I demonstrate that female madness is indeed an effective strategy for inhibiting the spectatorial desire produced by the defaults of the cinematic gaze.

Teresa de Lauretis writes that if theorists have been particularly insistent on the transformation of cinema as an imaging practice, it's because the stakes themselves are especially high. Similarly, Marian Wright Edleman has made the equally compelling point that “you can't be what you can't see.”

In the following pages, I situate the specifics of my dissertation in the body of feminist film theory. The three chapters that follow offer variations on a single theme: how, by decentering the subject position of the traditional male spectator interpellated by the gaze, we can begin building a qualitatively different *kind* of cinema—one that extends significantly beyond just what meets the eye.

* * *

One of the most urgent issues in film theory today is the problem of the female body in film. For the female viewer, the pleasure associated with dominant narrative cinema comes at the price of a deep psychic ambivalence, for in order to enjoy the pleasures provided by mainstream protagonist-centered, story-driven, big budget film—to give in to it, to thoroughly “lose oneself” in the cinematic apparatus—the female viewer is implicated in a mechanism that alienates her

from herself. As Laura Mulvey observes, positioned within the structure of story-based cinema, the female spectator is not only given to identification with the male hero, in doing so, she indirectly appropriates his subjectivity and actions, despite (and including) his treatment of women.

In this project, which focuses on three contemporary narrative films: *XXY* (2007) by Lucía Puenzo, *La piel que habito* (2011) by Pedro Almodóvar, and *Time* (2006) by Kim Ki-duk, I analyze the ways in which the subject of each challenges traditional ways of looking. Through the frameworks of feminist film theory, which calls on a combination of approaches to address both the representation of women in film as well as spectator positioning in reference to these constructions, I will set a historical and social framework for the approaches that I use in my analysis, justify the use of said approaches in reference to the chosen texts, and situate my project in the current body of film studies. The questions that inform my analysis are: How does the presence of the non-normative or ambiguously defined body at the heart of each filmic text affect spectatorial desire? If it has been suggested that non-narrative cinema holds the greatest possibility for a rupture in hegemonic structures of looking, how does each film's adherence to a traditional narrative structure (or appearance thereof) affect the movement and orientation of spectatorial desire? Lastly, if the non-normative or ambiguously defined body does indeed alter the gaze, does it also permit a qualitatively *different* way of looking beyond the inversion of existing dichotomies?

In what follows, I provide an overview of feminist film theory from the late 1960s until the present alongside and in dialogue with the social and historical context in which it was conceived and developed. In doing so, I hope to establish an understanding of feminist film theory as a dynamic, highly adaptive, and constantly-changing set of approaches which both

influenced, and was influenced by, the ideas and events of its social and historical context. At the same time, however, an inevitable consequence of “following the theory,” as I have done, means that the ideas employed often reflect the Eurocentric biases of feminist scholarship itself, a limitation that also mirrors the inescapable paradox of marginalized subjects within the academy, which demands that one buttress oneself on the authority of hegemonic others before one is able to speak. However, by highlighting prominent arguments and debates in the field, as well as sites of elision, omission, and possible points of expansion, I hope to justify why my approach—which revisits and modifies an earlier theory—merits a re-visitation and a re-working of arguments past.

Feminist Film Theory: An Overview

Feminist film theory came about at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s alongside the second wave of feminism¹, which itself grew out of a period of intense social and political change. Indeed, 1968, the year often marked as heralding the “birth” of feminist film theory, was a landmark year in many respects. In the United States, growing opposition to the Vietnam War, punctuated by student demonstrations and anti-war protests, fomented a mood of civil unrest. The shock of the Vietnamese Tet offensive—a military attack led by North Vietnamese forces on South Vietnamese and U.S. troops despite the ceasefire agreed upon by both sides for the Tet (lunar New Year) festivities—left the U.S. public reeling. As Max Elbaum observes, the

¹The first wave of feminism is associated with women’s suffrage in the early 1900s in places such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United States; the second wave takes place starting in the late 1960s and addresses equality in the home, the workplace, in politics, sexuality, and society. In contrast to third wave feminism, which has also been dubbed “lipstick feminism,” third *world* feminism, the boundaries of which are widely contested but may be thought of as beginning in the 1980s or 1990s and continuing into the present, deals with the shortcomings of the second wave of feminism to appropriately address the differences in race, class, nation, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc., experienced by individuals within the same overarching category of “women.” Third world feminism rejects any essentialist notion or monolithic positioning of “women” as a category, and stresses instead plurality, multiplicity, and a diversity of voices and perspectives.

significance of the Tet Offensive was that in a solitary act, it singlehandedly “shattered the illusion of an invincible U.S. empire” (1), forcing Americans to rethink and reevaluate the importance of the U.S. (and consequently, themselves) in the world.

On the domestic front, 1968 found the Civil Rights Movement in full swing. Catalyzed by the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and spurred on by other, highly publicized “enactments of popular protest” (Russo 56), the unease of those on the bottom fighting for change was mirrored in those on the top who stood to lose terrain if change were indeed to take place. Still, perspectives were changing. The enactment of two landmark pieces of legislation—the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended racial segregation and outlawed discriminatory employment practices against blacks and women, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned discriminatory voting practices which had been used to disenfranchise black voters—legitimized and incorporated, legally and symbolically, previously marginalized perspectives into the discourse of the nation. Adding yet another dimension to the period, Max Elbaum explains that:

The energy of protest movements was also buoyed by the tremendous cultural ferment taking place among youth of all backgrounds. During the late 1960s political protest overlapped and intersected with a generalized youth rebellion and a burgeoning “counter-culture” in complicated ways, with folk music, rock n’ roll, and rhythm and blues often serving as a sound track for a generational challenge to existing social mores and culture as well as to political authority. (Elbaum)

Everywhere, and in diverse levels of society, the mood was “suggestive of the energies and possibilities of unlimited cultural and social transformation” (Russo 56).

However, the overwhelming and astonishing assassination of Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., in April of 1968, triggered an important ideological shift. For many, Dr. King’s assassination marked a significant turning point in the public imagination, for in effect, it succeeded in convincing “tens of thousands who had taken part in or supported protest movements that ‘the system’ could no longer be reformed via elections or non-violent protest: it

had to be forcibly overturned” (Elbaum). In more than a hundred cities across the nation, black riots broke out in an expression of the rage, helplessness, and frustration known intimately to the downtrodden at having their sincerest efforts for an imminent black equality—embodied in the figure of Dr. King—so abruptly and unceremoniously truncated.

Nevertheless, despite the rupture caused Dr. King’s assassination, the consequences of these two events—the re-evaluation and re-ordering of identity initiated by the Vietnamese Tet Offensive, and the legal and symbolic inclusion of hitherto marginalized perspectives brought about by the Civil Rights Movement—led to a widening of mainstream views which would find expression at all levels of society.

It was in this context that the Women’s Movement of the 1960s and 1970s first found its voice. During the 1960s, women (mostly students), rallied by the political debate and the sexual liberation movement, reacted against seeing their efforts for political change consistently subordinated to the work of their male peers. As Susan Hayward explains, “the failure of radicalism . . . to produce any substantive change for women led them to form consciousness-raising groups that effectively galvanized women into forming a women’s movement” (134-35).

With this second wave of feminism, diverse areas of study were opened up for renewed examination from the new perspectives afforded by the shift in society. As feminists turned to examine the community at large, the cinema, as a predominantly male-made and male-operated institution, became a distinct area of focus. The resultant feminist film theory—a discipline borne from the crossroads of feminism and film—would prove to be an integral contribution to film studies, not only in the 20th century, but in the 21st as well.

At this point, it may be useful to effect a digression for the purpose of defining terms. When broaching the subject of feminist film theory, it is important to note that contrary to a

unified approach suggested by a single theory, feminist film theory encompasses many different fields and perspectives, resembling the dynamic nature of feminism itself. In her work, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982), Annette Kuhn highlights the importance of understanding feminism as a highly adaptive, ever-changing *series* of perspectives—perhaps better understood as a process—as opposed to a rigid devotion to a single, consolidated approach. According to Kuhn:

Feminism is a political practice, or a set of practices, with its own history and forms of organisation, with its own bodies of theory constructed in and through that history and organisation. And it is not a monolith; it comes in different varieties, offers a range of analyses of the position of women, and different strategies for social change. Because of the forms of organisation it has adopted and developed over the years, and also perhaps because of its current cultural and political marginality, feminism presents itself very clearly as a process, and is therefore hard to pin down. (3)

Not surprisingly, then, the theory borne from this labor is distinguished by the same variety and multiplicity that characterizes feminism itself. Kuhn's work, which is informed by a series of responses to a single question, asks: "What is, can be, or should be, the relationship between feminism and cinema?" (4). While Kuhn does not offer any facile definitions, she does concede that: "given that feminism is itself many-sided, the possible dimensions and permutations of interrelations between it and cinema become enormous" (4). Similarly, according to Maggie Humm, for whom feminist film theory includes "perspectives from literary criticism, psychoanalysis, reproductive theory, postmodernism and Black feminism and feminist practice" (4), among others—feminist film theory is not only broad in scope, it is also "intensely interdisciplinary ranging across customary subject divisions, including history, philosophy, anthropology, and the arts" (5). In light of these various explanations, then, and above all with an understanding that the very nature of feminist film theory eschews fixity, I would like to further a working definition of feminist film theory as a political practice, following Kuhn's definition,

or a set of practices, “founded in analyses of the social/historical position of women as subordinated, oppressed or exploited either within dominant modes of production (such as capitalism) and/or by the social relations of patriarchy or male domination” (4); in my conception, feminist film theory is dynamic, highly adaptive, and ever-changing, calling for a broad spectrum of analyses surrounding *all* levels of the representation of women in film, including, but not limited to: 1) the films themselves, 2) the social and historical specificity of their production, exhibition, distribution, and reception, and 3) the variety of individual viewer responses, with careful attention directed toward the intersections of race, class, sex, sexuality, gender, and embodiment. To this tentative definition, following the ever-widening possibilities of inclusion provided by postmodernism and poststructuralism, I will add that in its present form, feminist film theory is simultaneously multiply positioned, offers multiple perspectives, and is polyvalent, accepting and accommodating of its various contradictions while offering different strategies for social change.

As we shall see, this wide-ranging scope of feminist film theory, a defining characteristic of the approach from its very inception, would lead to vastly different forms of expression in groups on either side of the Atlantic.

Feminist Film Theory: 1968-1974

In its first period, 1968-1974, the two divergent branches of feminist film theory may be associated with two distinct groups: those writing in the United States, such as Marjorie Rosen (1973)², Joan Mellen (1974)³, and Molly Haskell (1974)⁴, who adopted a sociological approach

² Marjorie Rosen - *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973).

³ Joan Mellen - *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (1974).

to the representation of women in film—that is to say, by examining dominant Hollywood films and drawing conclusions from their observations—and those writing in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, such as Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, Pam Cook, and Annette Kuhn, who were influenced by semiotics and structuralism and argued against the feminine “essence” advocated by their U.S. counterparts. Because cinema was seen to reflect reality, U.S. feminists believed that if they were to use systematic analysis to reveal filmic images of women to be stereotypes (which they did), they would also be able to show that film was a biased institution ruled by, and generative of, patriarchal ideology—hence the stereotypes. In their line of thinking, by exposing the images of women created by Hollywood to be stereotypical constructions—and conversely, by having filmmakers show images of “real” women, and not stereotypes, in the movies—they would be able to reverse the ideology created by patriarchal films, and consequently, transform society itself.

While in theory the plan seemed simple enough, in practice, the logistics of showing “real” women in the movies turned out to be highly problematic for several reasons. To begin with, it took as a point of departure the transformation of extant (patriarchal) representations. Secondly, the strategy, which proposed stripping these representations of bias, also presumed that by removing these biases, one could in fact arrive at pure filmic representation—an unmediated image of “real” woman, unfettered by predetermined trajectories or constraints. For the British feminists, however, the inherent flaw in this approach was that by suggesting a return to unbiased representation—an imagined “natural” pre-patriarchal state—U.S. feminists were also obliquely affirming their belief in a feminine essence, or an original “feminine” quality.

According to the British feminists, the strategy of stripping masculine bias from the female image (and the consequent imagining of ‘woman-free-from-patriarchy’ as equal to

⁴ Molly Haskell - *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974).

‘natural woman’ or ‘woman-in-her-natural-state’ that such removal would entail) was inadequate because of its underlying assumptions. They argued that because the institution of patriarchy had always used the inherent “naturalness” of sexual difference (i.e., anatomical sexual difference rooted in biology) to support the status quo and to justify its hegemony (“things”—i.e., the current division of gender with men on top—are the way they are because there is a biological basis for the divide), for the British feminists, “belief in a fixed feminine essence” would amount to nothing less than “legitimizing patriarchy through the back door” (Hayward 136). In other words, the reason why female essentialism was so vehemently refused by these theorists was because “by accepting the fixed essence of woman as a predetermined ‘given order of things,’ implicitly, what was also being accepted was the ‘naturalness’ of the patriarchal order” (Hayward 136).

In retrospect, while the essentialist underpinnings of Rosen, Mellen, and Haskell’s theories would eventually be discarded in favor of new directions, these women’s meticulous work in analyzing a significant number of Hollywood films was nevertheless invaluable. First, by providing concrete evidence that supported the existence of patriarchal bias in the construction of female images (seen in Hollywood stereotypes such as the virgin or the whore), Rosen, Mellen, and Haskell’s success lay in the construction of a tangible base—an initial point of departure—for feminist film theory to follow. By systematically proving that patriarchal bias was there, they consequently set the groundwork for future discussion and strategies about *why it was there, how it got there*, and, more significantly, *what could be done about it*.

For their part, the British feminists, who rejected the essentialist theories of their U.S. counterparts, turned to the development of theories of their own. In doing so, they were influenced by psychoanalysis, semiotics, and structuralism, the latter two of which found their

roots in Ferdinand de Saussure's theories on structural linguistics (1907-1911) as popularized by Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957). Semiotics was useful because it took the question of gender representation out of biology and placed it into the realm of language, bringing with it a variety of fresh possibilities stemming from the study of cinema as language.

As a language, the images seen in the cinema (indeed, the entirety of cinema itself) were understood to convey meaning. However, because semiotics also exposed the link between signifier and signified as an arbitrary one (by demonstrating a lack of one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified), the influence of semiotics on film studies was that the cinema was no longer seen as merely reflective of reality, but productive, rather, of *ideology*. Indeed, Jean-Louis Baudry's 1970 essay, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," published during this period, had argued precisely the same point. Baudry's claim that the cinema produces ideology (as opposed to *reproducing* reality), along with his insistence that the apparatus of film is (and functions at the level of the) unconscious, had significant influence on feminist thought: the former, because of the exchange it stimulated between semiotics and film, and the latter, because of its similar introduction of psychoanalysis as a critical approach to the area of film studies.

Feminist Film Theory: 1975-1983

As a result, in its second period, 1975-1983, the direction and development of feminist film theory was heavily influenced by two key texts: Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (1973) and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), each of which addressed the new possibilities offered by the introduction of semiotics and psychoanalysis into the field.

Johnston's essay, building on the arguments brought forth in Baudry's "Ideological Effects" essay, pointed out that the cinema was not only productive of ideology, but—reinterpreting the implications of ideology within a feminist context—of capitalist bourgeois ideology. As she notes in her essay:

All films or works of art are products: products of an existing system of economic relations, in the final analysis. This applies equally to experimental films, political films and commercial entertainment cinema. Film is also an ideological product . . . The idea that art is universal and thus potentially androgynous is basically an idealist notion: art can only be defined as a discourse within a particular conjuncture—for the purpose of women's cinema, the bourgeois, sexist ideology of male dominated capitalism. (28)

In her analysis, Johnston posits that only by deconstructing the technical aspects of a film's production (such as framing, lighting, wardrobe, editing, proxemics, mise-en-scène, perspective, camera angles, and so on) to show *how* the image is coded—we would be able to understand the *effect* of the female image being coded that way. In other words, only by extricating each factor involved in the construction of woman and examining it in isolation, apart from the effect of the representation as a whole, would we be able to accurately identify and combat destructive ideology. Quoting Hans Magnus Enzensberger's strategy that "a revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear . . . [but instead] make everyone a manipulator" (28), Johnston asserts that at the same time dominant meanings (ideology) are being exposed, new meanings must also be actively constructed. In her conception of this new women's cinema, however, she insists neither on the exclusive foregrounding of the modes of a film's production (to reveal ideology) nor on the absolute emphasis of a film's entertainment value (to highlight pleasure), but instead on a strategy that embraces both the idea of film as a political tool and film as entertainment (32). Furthermore, speaking to the notion of a women's cinema structured around fantasy and desire, Johnston submits: "in order to counter our

objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire" (32).

While Johnston does not detail how this cinema is to be constructed nor the particulars of how it should function, in its context, her essay was nonetheless significant for extending Baudry's ideas on ideology to dominant cinema's construction of women, generating critical discussion about the implications of ideology within a feminist context. Furthermore, Johnston's essay—anticipating forthcoming questions of female fantasy and desire—likewise set the stage for future investigation regarding not only the mechanisms by which desire is represented, but the consequences of such representation in the cinema as well.

While Johnston's essay explored the implications of semiotics, Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), took, instead, to psychoanalysis. At this particular juncture in feminist film theory, Maggie Humm explains that what psychoanalysis offered film was "a reading of the feminine rooted neither entirely in the social construction of femininity (which nevertheless organises the feminine) nor entirely in biology, but, rather, seen through language and subjectivity" (15).

In *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (1998), Anneke Smelik explains thus the shift to psychoanalysis:

From psychoanalysis . . . [feminists] learned to analyze structures of desire and subjectivity. Feminist film theory shifted its focus from the critique of the ideological content of films to the analysis of the mechanisms and devices for the production of meaning in films. Film is no longer seen as reflecting meanings, but as constructing them; thus cinema as a cultural practice actively produces meanings about women and femininity. (9)

In her essay, Mulvey draws on the theories of Jacques Lacan to demonstrate that the fascination in film is reinforced by the mechanisms of fascination already at work in society, at the level of the individual, while simultaneously using psychoanalysis to uncover the *where* and

how these mechanisms are reinforced. Advocating, furthermore, the propitiousness of the theory's application to film, Mulvey likewise espouses its use "as a political weapon" to reveal "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (837).

Mulvey asserts that the pleasure of classical narrative cinema comes from the way it caters to, and satisfies, the unconscious desires of the spectator. More specifically, Mulvey demonstrates that the prevailing techniques of dominant cinema provide the perfect conditions through which the divided self—which both Freud and Lacan assert is indeed the case—is able to achieve unity, however illusory or fleeting, once again with himself.⁵ The attendant problem, however, is that the same mechanisms that make the movie-going experience so pleasurable for everyone also oblige the viewer—regardless of gender or sexuality—to align with a male, heterosexual point of view. Consequently, for the spectator that falls outside the limits of this established paradigm, the pleasure of the movies comes also at an intense psychic cost, for in order to fully experience the "magic" of the movies, the viewer must identify with a viewpoint that is alien to herself (himself); identify, furthermore, with a viewpoint (which, being white, male, and heterosexual), may be in direct conflict with the viewer's lived experience as *not*-white, or *not*-male, or *not*-heterosexual, thus confirming the alien and conflicting viewpoint at the expense (denial) of self.

In her essay, Mulvey argues that the narrative structure of dominant cinema caters to the desires—or perhaps more aptly, the unconscious desires and anxieties—of the (heterosexual) male spectator, and that the pleasure of this cinema hinges on two contradictory mechanisms: the viewer's identification with the male image (the protagonist on-screen) and the same viewer's objectification of the female image, mechanisms which she argues are the same for all spectators,

⁵ The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional, as both Freud and Lacan focus (almost exclusively) on the development of the male child.

regardless of the spectator's gender or sexual identity. The contradiction of these mechanisms lies in the fact that while one (identification) requires an association with the image, the other (objectification) requires a separation from it. Per Mulvey's observation, the mechanisms of dominant cinema unite these two contradictory practices without any apparent problem. Likening the viewer in front of the screen to the child in front of the mirror, Mulvey demonstrates that like the child in Lacan's mirror stage, who lacks mastery of his body and appropriates his specular image as an external ideal, the viewer, through identification with the male hero on-screen, can likewise master the protagonist's actions and as such, control the outcome of the story. For the viewer as for the child, the image stands for the convergence of mastery and desire.

If, however, in psychoanalytic terms, the image of woman (at least for the male spectator) always threatens to evoke the original anxiety and loss occasioned by the recognition of her "castrated" body, Mulvey identifies two specific mechanisms of dominant narrative cinema used to allay that anxiety: voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia.

The first approach, which Mulvey explains as having to do with "investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery," is a technique at once "counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object" (844)—a strategy which Mulvey observes is closely related to sadism and often typified in the project of film noir. In contrast, the second approach, fetishistic scopophilia, emphasizes the physical beauty of the object in question—*woman*—thus transforming the uneasy and subconsciously anxiety-provoking act of seeing into a pleasurable and gratifying experience in itself. Mulvey points out that the built-in structures of identification in the cinema, the construction of the story "around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" (842), or the use of subjective camera viewpoints, for example, which promote identification with the male hero—also promote identification with his objectifying

gaze. As she explains, through this mechanism, “the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look” (845).

In other words, by structuring the plot of the film around an “ego ideal” (842), or a main male character with whom the viewer can identify, the cinema reinforces the narcissistic aspect of the ego by leading the spectator to believe that he is gazing at his own likeness. However, by identifying with the protagonist, the viewer also assumes his sexual viewpoint—one in which the eroticized female is necessarily the object of his desiring gaze.

In terms of spectator positioning and ideology, the default position of this cinema, which encompasses the majority of mainstream films, both inside and outside Hollywood, historically and presently, including films that are continuing to be made—is extremely troubling for many reasons, and brings with it a number of attendant questions.

The first, which has to do with the prevalence, and in fact, the dominance of this cinema which shapes so many aspects of our daily lives, begs the following question: how do mainstream representations of women in the media shape the views of society as a whole? What’s more: in an ever-present and hegemonic system in which the female image, with very little variation, is sexualized for the gratification of the male gaze, *but to which females are nonetheless identically exposed and whose images they equally consume*, what effect does such incessant repetition have on the unconscious psyche (and instinctive response) of male subjects when presented with desire? How do these images, which are unvaryingly assessed in terms of attractiveness and desirability, affect the female psyche in terms of how one can arrive at valued subjectivity?

Furthermore, in a system in which the designation of woman as object of the gaze necessarily excludes her from a subject position, how can woman speak? How can she participate in her own subjectivity? What options are available to her to exert herself as subject apart from the phantom position conferred on her by identification with the male hero, an entity alien to herself? Furthermore, given that many spectators identify in ways that are *not* authorized by the text, how do personal agency, subversion, and individual viewer response factor into the position of the spectatorial subject produced by the film? Lastly, what possibilities, if any, are available for a women's cinema that foreground the notion of pleasure apart from alienating the subjectivity of the viewer?

After Mulvey

In many ways, feminist film theory can be said to be divided into a "Before Mulvey" and an "After Mulvey," owing to both the originality of the Mulvey's argument (which was not, as we will see, without criticism), as well as to the enormous scholarship and debate that the essay generated in its aftermath. After 1975, following Mulvey's analysis of the narrative structures and strategies used in dominant Hollywood cinema, theorists began to examine the textual operations in different genres and the role of these devices in the construction of ideology (Hayward 139). Different categories of film, such as the Western, melodrama, film noir, and horror, are picked apart, formally and ideologically, to uncover the genre-specific construction of woman and the teleology of such constructions within the context of narrative.

For instance, the (genre of the) Western is examined and critiqued for its stereotypes of women, who are depicted either as saloon floozies or "pure as the driven snow" (Hayward 503),

with little variation in between.⁶ Film noir, developing Mulvey's observation of the sadism inherent in the genre, is also scrutinized. As Christine Gledhill (1978)⁷ shows, in this genre, of which the investigative structure forms a key, "woman becomes the object of the hero's investigation" (77). However, as Gledhill makes clear, in film noir, it is not so much woman as her sexuality that is interrogated. Female characters fall into one of two categories, with barflies, nightclub singers, mistresses, gold-diggers, and the ubiquitous *femme fatale* on one hand, and wives, long-suffering girlfriends, and would-be fiancées on the other (Gledhill 76-77). If film noir, by its absence, suppresses the place of woman in the home and at the heart of the bourgeois family, it also shows that in terms of survival, there are only two options available to women: work, or live off a man (Gledhill 78). As Gledhill points out: "in film noir both options emphasise the sexual objectification of women, for its criminal ambience situates working women in bars and nightclubs rather than in professions or factories" (78).

Along the same lines, the structural and textual mechanisms of horror as a genre are also investigated, leading to an explosion of feminist scholarship in the genre.⁸

However, the brunt of the attention and scrutiny in the aftermath of Mulvey's essay falls on melodrama and the woman's film, with the work of Mary Ann Doane,⁹ Annette Kuhn,

⁶ In *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramírez Berg draws a direct correlation between the racialized non-white (specifically Latina) imagery of the harlot in the Western and the depiction of her insatiable sexuality.

⁷ Both Christine Gledhill's "*Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism*" and Janey Place's "Women in Film Noir," found in E. Ann Kaplan's edition of *Women in Film Noir* (1978), are particularly useful for an understanding of the genre.

⁸ For further reading, see: Linda Williams – "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" (1984) and "When the Woman Looks" (1984); Tania Modleski – "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" (1986); Carol Clover – *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992); Cynthia A. Freeland – "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films" (1996).

⁹ Mary Ann Doane – "'The Woman's Film': Possession and Address" (1984); *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987).

Christine Gledhill, E. Ann Kaplan, Tania Modleski, and Mulvey¹⁰ herself leading the way. Susan Hayward contextualizes the rise of melodrama in the following way:

[A]s a genre, melodrama . . . developed alongside nineteenth-century capitalism – and . . . capitalism gave rise to the *need* of the family to protect, through the inheritance system, the bourgeoisie’s newly acquired possessions (including property). The family becomes the site of patriarchy and capitalism – and, therefore, reproduces it” (236).

The specificities of melodrama and the women’s film were of particular interest to feminist theorists because of their setting in the domestic sphere, at the heart of the family. Furthermore, in contrast to other genres, such as the Western or film noir, which were observed to marginalize female characters, melodrama distinguished itself by placing its female characters at the forefront. Of even greater interest to theorists from an ideological standpoint, however, was the metonymic stand-in of the family for society; the family as a site on which conflicting opinions and ideologies are played out. In this aspect, the study of melodrama and the women’s film was especially instructive, with the work of such scholars helping render visible on a smaller scale the clashes and apparent contradictions of ideology not so easily seen at the greater level of society.¹¹

Feminist Film Theory: 1984-2000s

Consequently, for feminist film theory, the third and final period, from 1984 onward—which Hayward broadly delineates as continuing into the 2000s, but the limits of which may be thought of as extending into the present to include postfeminist perspectives—has resulted in a

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey – “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama” (1977).

¹¹ For further reading, see: Annette Kuhn – *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982), “Women’s Genres” (1984); Christine Gledhill (ed.) – *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (1987); E. Ann Kaplan – *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992); Tania Modleski – “Time and Desire in the Woman’s Film” (1992).

garden of forking paths, due to the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism as well as to the questions of spectatorship opened up in the previous period.

Looking back, by the mid-1980s, feminists started to feel that the focus on the textual analysis of films (such as narrative structure or genre) was too narrow and that films needed to be examined once again in the social and historical context of their production and reception. Since Mulvey's essay claiming that the female spectator occupies a masculine position, there has been considerable debate around the issue of female spectatorship, with theorists after Mulvey positioning the female viewer as masochistic (1981),¹² conceptualizing femininity as a masquerade (1982),¹³ or, according to Teresa De Lauretis' re-reading (1984)¹⁴ of Tania Modleski's earlier essay (1982),¹⁵ as doubly-desiring.

As the analyses surrounding spectator positioning began to broaden, black feminist advocates, such as Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Jane Gaines, among others, accurately pointed out that the issue of race had thus far been completely ignored. Ironically, the omission of race (and the consequent default assumption of whiteness) had, as an effect, the exclusion of black women, as both subjects and participants, from the realm of theoretical discourse, implicating these same theorists that had accused the greater community of patriarchal assumptions of the same exclusionary practices.

In her essay, "White Privilege and Looking Relations" (1986), Jane Gaines aptly points out the necessity of feminist theory to take into account the social and historical specificity of both race and class in the construction of theory. Furthermore, she asserts that certain theories,

¹² Kaja Silverman – "Masochism and Subjectivity" (1981); "Masochism and Male Subjectivity" (1988)

¹³ Mary Ann Doane – "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator" (1982)

¹⁴ Teresa de Lauretis – *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984)

¹⁵ Tania Modleski - "Never to be Thirty-Six Years Old: *Rebecca* as Female Oedipal Drama" (1982)

such as those underwritten by Lacanian psychoanalysis on the one hand, or Marxist-feminism on the other, are either markedly ahistorical or simply incapable of addressing race and sexuality from a perspective that views sexual difference in terms of class. As Gaines aptly notes:

As feminists have theorized women's sexuality, they have universalized from the particular experience of white women . . . While white women theorize the female image in terms of objectification, fetishization, and symbolic absence, their black counterparts describe the body as the site of symbolic resistance and the "paradox of nonbeing," a reference to the period in African-American history when black female did not signify "woman." What strikes me still in this comparison is the stubbornness of the terms of feminist discourse analysis, which has not been able to deal, for instance, with what it has meant historically to be designated as not-human, and how black women, whose bodies were legally not their own, fought against treatment based on this determination. (186)

In the wake of black feminist critique and spectatorship studies, categories that have been sidelined are once again opened up for analysis and the issue of gender, which has heretofore occupied a central place in the debate, opens up again to address the multiplicity and intersectionality of female spectatorship, reintroducing the elements of race, class, sexual identity, and individual viewer experience to broaden analysis. In this period, questions of lesbian desire as well as the need for representation of other subjectivities outside the dichotomy of black and white, such as Asian, Latina, Indigenous, and Middle Eastern perspectives are again introduced. Furthermore, in this period, of which the present historical moment forms a part, there is a return to the importance of context—the social and historical specificity of a film's production and reception—along with a renewed emphasis on the interpretation of films as products of a specific historical moment.

Situating the Specificities of My Project

It is at this current juncture of feminist film theory, with its multiple, overlapping, and at times contradictory sites of viewer identification that I situate my project. This dissertation

examines films from Argentina, Spain, and South Korea with an eye to how different embodied realities—such as the intersexed body, forced gender reassignment surgery, rape, female madness, and cosmetic surgery—address themselves to the heterosexual male viewer in a way that subverts, destabilizes, or otherwise problematizes this viewer’s privileged position.

The three films that I have selected have been chosen for specific reasons. First, all three films, which have been produced in the last ten years, point to a wider interest in cinematic themes that demonstrate a significant departure from traditional binaries such as self/other, male/female, straight/queer by calling attention to, and highlighting, the concept of “bothness.”

Secondly, and along the same lines, the three films have been selected for their visibility, with Almodóvar’s success and renown as an established filmmaker at the forefront, leading the way. Like Almodóvar, Kim Ki-duk’s work addresses larger societal themes in a specifically national context, and his films have garnered critical acclaim on the international film circuit, earning awards at festivals in Pusan, Dubai, Tokyo, Moscow, San Sebastian, Cannes, Venice, and Berlin. Lucía Puenzo, though certainly lesser-known commercially, has also earned significant critical acclaim, garnering twenty different prizes and distinctions for her work on *XXY* (2007), after which she goes on to make *El niño pez / The Fish Child* (2009) and *Wakolda / The German Doctor* (2014). The importance of this visibility, and indeed, the recognition of these films within the greater context of big budget, narrative-driven, (male) protagonist-centered, heteronormative cinema cannot be adequately emphasized, for it creates both a presence and a rupture within the hegemony of dominant mainstream film. Recalling Claire Johnston’s call for a counter-cinema which operates both “within the male-dominated cinema and outside it” (33), I believe the visibility of these films to be a key element in the way that they challenge hegemonic structures of looking.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, in all three films, (the threat of) surgery or body modification plays an integral part in blurring or challenging the traditional distinction between subject and object, male and female, self and other. Moreover, at first glance, all three texts (appear to) adhere to a traditional narrative structure, which is indicative of their commitment to and immersion in mainstream culture. As Anneke Smelik observes, one of the historical shortcomings of feminist film has been to categorically dismiss participation in mainstream culture:

The neglect of the female spectator, as individual or as social group, has resulted in a feminist endorsement of alternative cinema and, simultaneously, in a dismissal of mainstream cinema. Gamman and Marshment and Pribam argue that these normative views reinforce women's exclusion from cultural production and reception and are therefore politically unproductive. Instead, they are interested in feminist interventions in mainstream culture and in empowering women's presence in popular culture and, accordingly, address the issue of female audience as a historical participant in popular culture. (Smelik 24)

The particular combination of the non-normative body, together with the dual mechanisms of identification and objectification frequently seen in mainstream cinema, sets into motion a unique set of circumstances which at once employ, but simultaneously call into question, the assumptions of the gaze.

In short, it is my belief that these films—all of which call on, and play to, the heteropatriarchal mechanisms of dominant cinema, nevertheless create a space for reflexivity about the spectator's own complicity in the process. As such, these films likewise mark the emergence of an entirely new kind of cinema—a type of cinema, which, by embracing the structures of hegemony, uses them against the viewer in a productive way, in the process creating an increasingly conscious and critical one.

CHAPTER 1: 'TWIXT FEAR AND DESIRE: THE INTERSEXED BODY, THE DIVIDED SUBJECT, AND THE DISSENTING GAZE IN LUCÍA PUENZO'S *XXY* (2007)

One of the most urgent issues in film theory today continues to be the problem of the female body in film. A cursory look at different types of big budget, protagonist centered, story-driven films in circulation today—contemporary films intended for mass consumption originating from within, and even outside, Hollywood—reveals that the trope of woman as object of the gaze is one that is both deeply rooted and pervasive.

Despite the fact that looking at erotic images of women may be pleasurable for *both* male and female spectators, the representation of woman as sexual object of male-centered, heteronormative desire presents two major problems. The first is one of subjectivity. As semiotician and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis writes:

If feminists have been so insistently engaged in practices of cinema, as film makers, critics, and theorists, it is because there the stakes are especially high. The representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty—and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze) is . . . pervasive in our culture, well before and beyond the institution of cinema. (37-38)

By naturalizing woman as object of personal, spectatorial, and narrative desire, such films contribute to the seamless and invisible pervasiveness of heteronormative male subjectivity as the default, universal, and the norm: manifest, ubiquitous, self-evident. What's more, they do so while fabricating "an impression of innocence, in which all becomes 'natural'" (Johnston 32).

Moreover, because these films do so *in representation*, the second problem raised is one of ideology. Claire Johnston, aiming to dissolve the myth of cinematic illusion, points out that: "if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure

mystification. The sign is always a product. What the camera in fact grasps is the ‘natural’ world of the dominant ideology” (29).

De Lauretis, further illuminating the relationship between cinema, subject, and ideology, observes:

Insofar as cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values, and ideology in *both* sociology and subjectivity, it should be better understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewer; and thus a semiotic process in which the subject is continually engaged, represented, and inscribed in ideology. (37, emphasis original)

The paradox, however, is that structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, the two main currents that have influenced film theory since the 1970s, nevertheless make no allowance for woman as subject: structural linguistics, because it “excludes any consideration of address and of the social differentiation of spectators (that is to say, [because] it excludes the whole issue of ideology and the subject’s construction in it)” (de Lauretis 16); and also because it takes sexual difference as a given. On the other hand, some have deemed psychoanalysis an insufficient theoretical framework because it is only able to account for woman as a *negative* value, an absence, a lack. “In the two models under consideration, then, the relation of woman to sexuality is either reduced and assimilated to, or contained within, masculine sexuality” (de Lauretis 16).

In both, women are denied status as subjects. Thus:

The dominant cinema specifies woman in a particular social and natural order, sets her up in certain positions of meaning, fixes her in a certain identification. Represented as the negative term of sexual differentiation, spectacle-fetish or specular image, in any case ob-scene, woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking-glass held up to man. (de Lauretis 15)

As de Lauretis points out, woman and text, following a circular logic, reveal an inherent contradiction: “first, sexual difference is supposed to a meaning-effect produced in representation; then paradoxically, it turns out to be the very support of representation” (24).

De Lauretis reveals important limitations posed by both the structural-linguistic and psychoanalytic models of spectatorship. However, instead of abandoning the gains that each has contributed to our understanding of film, text, and representation, following the theorist’s own admission that woman’s exclusion from language means that “the woman cannot transform the codes; she can only transgress them” (35), this dissertation proposes a close examination of different sites of contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity in contemporary film in order to see how these liminal spaces may be appropriated in order to bring about social change.

Lucía Puenzo’s film, *XXY* (2007; Argentina), is a particularly useful text for this type of analysis because the subject of the film, an intersex adolescent born with the genital anatomy of both sexes—both penis and vagina—presents an “irreducible contradiction” (de Lauretis 7) quite literally *embodied* in the material physical reality of the protagonist Alex’s flesh. However, in contrast to Pedro Almodóvar’s *La piel que habito* (2011; Spain) discussed in Chapter 2, which relies on a trick of mistaken identity to compel male spectatorial desire and to invite the sexualized gaze; and Kim Ki-Duk’s *Time* (2006; South Korea) seen in Chapter 3, which uses a combination of narrative circularity, female madness, and the use of body modification technologies to displace the centrality of the male subject; *XXY* starts with full narrative disclosure as to the identity of the body seen: a body neither fully male nor female, but quite literally, *both*. In other words, *XXY* offers an excellent circumstance for a study of the processes of cinematic spectatorship because on the one hand, it challenges the limitations of the structural-linguistic model, which has failed to account for conditions of address—that is, a consideration

of *who* is speaking; and second, because the structural-linguistic model, which takes sexual difference as “biological fact rather than sociocultural process” (de Lauretis 16)—presents a “fact” that the embodied reality of the intersex protagonist clearly defies. On the other hand, *XXY* also problematizes the psychoanalytic model of film theory which only accounts for woman in negative terms—as lack—by inextricably fusing the female’s “lack” to the positive value attributed to the phallus.

Indeed, if the base and support of representation is founded on the notion of sexual difference, whether biologically, socially, or culturally defined—I propose that the intersexed body, introduced as a third point of articulation in a binary system at the precise midpoint between “self” and “other”—presents a productive challenge to hegemonic structures of looking by blurring the traditionally clear distinction between self and other.

It is from this theoretical context that I propose an examination of *XXY*, a 2007 film by Argentine filmmaker Lucía Puenzo that centers on a 15-year-old intersex protagonist named Alex. The plot, which is based on Alex’s search for identity, presents the crucial dilemma of whether or not Alex will have the recommended operative surgery to “normalize” her intersex genitals. My analysis presents three main arguments. First, I argue that the way the film plays on the dissonant simultaneity of Alex’s body places the heterosexual male viewer in an impossible position in reference to desire. Relying on the force of habit, the viewer’s associative memory, and the spectator’s intrinsic fascination with erotic images, on the one hand—all of which occur at a subconscious level—the film elicits the viewer’s sexual objectification of Alex as an automatic and instinctive response to the image. At the same time, however, the same body that incites desire also repels the sexualized gaze.

Second, I argue that this division works on simultaneous and interconnected levels, all of which challenge the stability and thus, the psychic wholeness, of the viewer. The refusal to definitively “fix” Alex, whether in reference to body, sex, or sexuality, results in a proliferation of multiple, simultaneous, and dissonant subject/object positions that destabilize three interconnected axes of identity: male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, self/other. However, although the film first obscures these categories in reference to *Alex*, the ambiguity of such categories ultimately impinge on the boundaries of the viewer by eventually extending to him (her) as well. As a result, the ambiguity of the *image* at which the spectator gazes blurs the identity of the *spectator* that gazes at it.

Third, I contend that the refusal to “fix” Alex in either image or language leads to an inability on the part of the spectator to experience uncomplicated viewing pleasure. My analysis argues that by continuing to displace *the* defining image of Alex’s bodily identity—an image that is continually deferred, yet never produced—the spectator is denied access to what Laura Mulvey has identified as two traditional routes to pleasure: identification and objectification. As I show, the problematization of both processes within a protagonist-centered, story-driven narrative structure results in the viewer’s inability to successfully complete the male Oedipal trajectory, likewise hindering pleasure.

Turning to the concept of interpellation proposed by Louis Althusser, I show that although *XXY* constructs the viewer as a heterosexual male, it does so paradoxically: that is, by incorporating same-sex desire as a *condition* of the very heterosexuality that it calls into existence. Thus, the same image elicits dual and contradictory reactions. Using Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, I posit that: 1) while on the one hand, the intersexed body invites the viewer’s desire and elicits his sexualized gaze; 2) on the other, the psychological discomfort

created by the incongruity between identity and behavior simultaneously positions the viewer to disavow his desire and to deny the sexualized gaze. As such, the image not only elicits two parallel and contradictory reactions, it does so by opposing the viewer's *conscious* logic against his *unconscious* behavior, dividing the spectator from within. Moreover, because the narrative provides no possibility of resolving the central question posed by the film—that is, *who* or *what* Alex is—the viewer is left enacting an infinite vacillation that keeps him perpetually suspended between two contradictory poles. Instead of fulfilling the promise of wholeness and unity offered by the illusion of cinematic spectatorship, the image disperses the coherence of the spectator.

The fourth and final part of the chapter returns to the impossible situation of women in representation and argues that the way that Alex—as word, as image—inhabits the text successfully *enacts* the paradox identified by semiotics and psychoanalysis and thus, illustrates the question posed by feminist film theory itself—namely, how woman, existing outside of language, can be represented by it.

Set against the sprawling sea lines and cloudscapes surrounding Alex's family home in Uruguay, *XXY* tells the story of one intersex adolescent's search for identity. As the story begins, the viewer witnesses the arrival of family friends Erika and Ramiro (Carolina Peleritti and Germán Palacios), along with their teenage son, Álvaro (Martín Piroyansky), in Uruguay from Buenos Aires, where they are greeted by Alex's parents, Suli and Kraken (Valeria Bertuccelli and Ricardo Darín).

Unbeknownst to Alex (Inés Efron), however, the real reason for the family's visit is to discuss the possibility of a surgical operation that will “normalize” her intersex genitals. Having been born with both penis and vagina, a detail hinted at and slowly unveiled from the beginning of the film, Alex's body stands at the literal embodiment of duality, simultaneity, and in a certain

sense, contradiction. As the plot unfolds, the viewer finds that due to mounting social pressures as well as her own concern to secure for Alex as “normal” a future as possible, Suli has invited Ramiro, a renowned plastic surgeon and the husband of her childhood friend Erika, to visit the family in Uruguay. The implication is that by cutting off Alex’s penis, Alex will be able to transition from the mere designation of female to embodying the regulatory norms of femininity itself. However, when discovered, the idea is met with resistance from Alex’s father, Kraken, a marine biologist.

Further complicating matters are two recent occurrences: first, two weeks prior to the beginning of the film, Alex has stopped taking the hormones that gender her female. Without them, her body will “masculinize” (“virilizar”), a concern expressed by Ramiro and confirmed by Suli and Erika. Second, the viewer learns that Alex has recently had a fight with her best friend, Vando, which is directly related to Vando’s discovery of Alex’s intersexuality. This, as we will see, will lead to a series of unintended consequences.

From a formal perspective, the sweeping panoramas of sea and sky play an important part in setting the tone of the film. The aquatic blues and grays of the *mise-en-scène*, together with the expansive stretches of natural wilderness, either alone or as a backdrop for the characters, lend a boundless quality to the cinematography. Moreover, the content of the film, which revolves around the question of whether or not Alex will accept the normalizing surgery that will enable her body to be circumscribed within a single gender category, is further mirrored in film form, which is expressed in the limitless expanses of sea and sky which are “bounded” only by the limits of the camera’s frame. Alex’s plight, which is linked to that of the aquatic creatures seen throughout, such as the sea turtles that her father rescues, or the numerous aquariums containing aquatic wildlife in the house, is mimicked in the way that the fluidity of water is

bounded only by the receptacle that contains it. Moreover, the glass, windows, aquariums, and mirrors seen throughout the film contribute to the play on (and confusion of) boundaries.

However, in contrast to what we see in *La piel que habito*, in which heterosexuality of the viewer is called into question through a gender-bending trick of identity, *XXY* parts from a full narrative disclosure as to the nature of the body seen, beginning with the title of the film itself: *XXY*—a reference to a sex neither wholly male nor wholly female, but even at the chromosomal level, quite literally, both.¹⁶

With this knowledge comes an ambivalence about Alex that directs the viewer in dual and contradictory ways. Through formal and narrative cues, the film draws on different aspects of the intersex body, emphasizing one, or another, the androgyny, or the dissonant simultaneity, of Alex's embodied reality in order to suit the purposes of the narrative.

For example, the first sequence of the film, which takes place during the opening credits, opens to a tracking shot of Alex's feet—a decidedly androgynous part of the body—stalking an unseen prey in the forest. The image, still focused on Alex's feet, then readjusts to reveal the tip of a machete at the left of the frame. As the image unfolds, we see the first pair of feet joined by a second pair of feet belonging to Alex's friend, a conventionally more "feminine" friend who appears sporadically at different times during the film, yet remains nameless throughout. As the friends chase their prey, images of the girls running through the forest are crosscut with a series of computer generated images of what appear to be sea anemones or underwater flora that are equally reminiscent of internal reproductive organs. The images of the girls running, which are accompanied on an aural register by the sound of heavy breathing, provide a sharp juxtaposition to the muffled subaquatic sounds that accompany the underwater shots. The final image of the

¹⁶ Charlotte Glohorn remarks that "the figure of the intersex adolescent recognizes the limitations of sexual dimorphism, acknowledging that there are other combinations of gender and sexuality which are, in fact, humanly possible" (155).

sequence shows Alex rushing toward an unseen target, machete held high, before bringing it down with an emphatic grunt. As she does, the screen goes completely black for a moment before it cuts to a subaquatic image as “XXY” appears on the screen.

However, even in this opening sequence, the way that Alex, as a decidedly intersex individual, is formally presented to the viewer differs from the way that her female friend inhabits the screen. In it, Alex, who appears with her dark hair cut to her shoulders, is seen running, wearing a dark, loose-fitting tank top. However, the way that her body is angled away from the viewer as the camera moves to incorporate her into the frame means that Alex enters the shot *ahead of the viewer*, with the result that the entire front side of her body—and in particular, her breasts—remain crucially outside the spectator’s view.

This, in turn, contrasts with the way that Alex’s friend, an unequivocally female character who, wearing a form-fitting tank top decorated with orange flowers, is semiotically constructed and formally introduced. In contrast to Alex, whose shoulder length hair and androgynous clothing reinforce the ambiguity of her gender, the friend’s hair is worn long and loose and waves in the wind as she runs, a detail which, together with her more “feminine” wardrobe choices, serves as a semiotic marker of her uncontested femininity. Moreover, the friend, who is shot from the front as she is running, continues to move past the viewer in a way that allows the eye of the camera to move across the entire front of her body, highlighting her incipient breasts as well as obliging the viewer to participate in a visual exploration of her body.

Thus, at the beginning of the film, the tightly framed shots—of Alex’s feet, as discussed, which comprise the opening image; or the film’s first close-up of Alex, which is deliberately engineered so that Alex’s head and shoulders appear within the frame while her chest is left strategically without—deny the viewer even the possibility of looking at parts of Alex’s body

that might provide a clue as to the “mystery” of her sex. On yet another level, Alex’s wardrobe, which consists of a series of loose fitting, chromatically androgynous, gender-neutral clothing, such as her standard outfit of shirt, cutoffs, sweatshirt, and boots—is from the first semiotically constructed as a site of ambivalence.

Consequently, even as the narrative establishes Alex as the center of the film, film form sutures the viewer into a highly restricted way of looking.

Alex as Social Construction

However, Alex’s formal construction as female, which is buttressed in turn by her social and linguistic construction as female, combine to emphasize Alex’s sexual difference in a way that assures the viewer of her femininity and invites the objectifying gaze. Although the film is quite frank about the fact of Alex’s intersexuality, it is also clear that she has been socially constructed as female—that is, that Alex has been raised by her parents as a girl—a detail that is first brought to the viewer’s attention via a series of childhood photos that Álvaro sees upon first entering Alex’s family home. In the photographs, which depict various images from Alex’s childhood and adolescence as the filmic eye moves from one framed image to another, Alex is shown exhibiting one of the most universally-accepted signs of femininity: long hair. By observing the length and style of Alex’s hair at different stages of her life, and by considering these images together, in the context of the larger whole, the viewer is able to piece together a trajectory of Alex’s changing attitudes toward the identity that has been imposed upon her.

In the youngest pictures of Alex, she is seen with long hair, often worn loose, as if suggesting a childhood still untouched by the decidedly “adult” concern of gender. In one photograph, which depicts Alex at about three years of age, she sits naked, waist-deep in a pool

of water. The combination of Alex's long hair, which falls to her waist, and her carefree smile, which is directed away from the camera toward an entity that remains outside the frame, points to a time prior to the diegetic 'now' established by the narrative—one in which the viewer finds Alex entirely unencumbered by the unique distinction of her sex. At the same time, even though the viewer knows that Alex is intersex, the pool of water in which she sits obscures her genitals from view, denying the viewer access to what s/he most desire to see.

In contrast, the last two pictures of the series, which depict an older, adolescent Alex, convey an entirely different mood. Although Alex appears in both with longer hair, in both photographs, her hair is pulled back and tied away from her face, as if suggesting an increasing discomfort with her designated identity. More importantly, however, Alex's posture and body language also reveal a changing attitude toward the gaze. In contrast to the earlier pictures, in which she is seen smiling, Alex's expression in the later photographs grows increasingly somber. In the first of these photographs, Alex holds her hand up to the camera, as if instructing the photographer not to take the picture; in the second, she refuses to meet the photographer's gaze altogether, looking down and away from the camera instead. In short, the photographs provide a succinct and concise pictorial illustration that the knowledge of sexual difference has made the gaze intrusive.

Although the sequence is brief, the photos serve a two-fold function. With the exception just of one photograph—an image in which Alex's genitals, as discussed, despite her being naked, are completely obscured from the spectator's view—the rest of the photos frame just Alex's face and shoulders, as if forcing the viewer to view Alex in a way that takes precedence over the sight of her dual embodiment. For as Suzanne Kessler reminds us, the way that intersex genitals are treated makes it seem “almost incidental that they are connected to people” (5).

In short, rather than fixing Alex as just a body—as nothing more than the *sight* of her intersex genitals—the photographs establish Alex within the context of a rich personal history, providing the viewer with an intimate look at the specifics of Alex’s journey as well as inviting a deeper reflection on the challenges faced by Alex’s life on the sexual boundary. At the same time, consonant with Alex’s *formal* unfolding as female, the images also establish Alex’s *social* construction to be female, thus inviting the viewer to treat Alex in a normatively female way.

At the same time the photographs make the case for Alex’s social construction as female, the film begins to employ spoken signifiers of sex to reinforce Alex’s construction as female on another level—the level of language. Indeed, with the word “hembra” (“female”), the first utterance of the film, the movie exerts its influence on the viewer and begins to make a case for the “femaleness” of a body that the viewer knows to be both.

As the narrative unfolds, however, the film begins to play on the dissonant simultaneity of Alex’s body in a way that places the conventional male viewer in an impossible position in reference to desire. Indeed, one of the central conflicts posed by the film is that although the repeated image of Alex’s naked breasts addresses, and hence constructs, a heterosexual male spectator, it does so paradoxically—that is, while incorporating *homosexual* desire as condition of the same heterosexuality it calls into existence. Consequently, by entangling the spectator in dual and contradictory codes of cinematic address, the film constructs a heterosexual male spectator while using the default assumptions of this viewer’s identity and behavior to ultimately divide the spectator from within.

Althusser and Ideology

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1969), Louis Althusser argues that Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, which he identifies as dominant state and societal institutions that dictate individual norms of conduct, such as one’s parents, education, religion, culture, society, and the law, for example—act in a way that addresses distinct individuals and in the act of addressing them, converts the individuals into subjects. This idea is most succinctly expressed in his famous statement, “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (48). According to Althusser, in the act of addressing, or “hailing” the person—a process he identifies as ‘interpellation’—the individual is called into existence as a subject.

Using the example of a police officer hailing a person in the street by saying, “Hey, you there!” Althusser elaborates his argument in the following way:

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed’ (and not someone else). (48)

In this context, Althusser’s assertion declaring “an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born” (50)—makes perfect sense, especially in regard to cinematic spectatorship.

Using Althusser’s ideas, film theorists (Baudry, Bellour, Metz) began to use the concept of interpellation to explain how a film constructs the spectator. However, while these first theorists argued that the ideology of dominant cinema constructed a bourgeois spectator, it took the insertion of a third point of articulation to uncover the bias that had been naturalized into this assumption: that although the ideology of dominant cinema *did* construct such a spectator, this viewer was also implicitly understood to be a heterosexual male.

With the publication of Laura Mulvey's now seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), feminist film theory was solidified as a field of analysis and the seed for the myriad directions that it would take in response to her essay was planted. Drawing on Althusser's theory of interpellation as well as the theories of French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to support her analysis, Mulvey argued that the fascinations in film reflect the fascinations already present in society, at the level of the individual, while using psychoanalysis as a tool to uncover the *where* and *how* these mechanisms are reinforced.

Mulvey's argument asserts that the pleasure of classical¹⁷ narrative cinema comes from the way it addresses itself to, and satisfies, the unconscious desires of the spectator, who is interpellated by the film as a heterosexual male. Moreover, in the context of dominant narrative cinema, Mulvey identifies the processes of identification and objectification as two traditional avenues that lead to the fulfillment of the viewer's pleasure.

In the nearly forty years that have transpired since the publication of her essay, Mulvey's article has inspired much scholarship that has sought to defend her assertions, refute them, or to expand her ideas, opening up rich areas of inquiry and debate for film theory and feminist scholarship. The major complaint expressed in response to her essay, however, has been that Mulvey's analysis of the way classical cinema constructs a heterosexual male spectator has sidestepped the issue of female spectatorship entirely.¹⁸ In response, feminist film theorists have argued for an understanding of the female spectator as masochistic (Silverman)¹⁹, the

¹⁷ Defined as narrative centered Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s. In her essay, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess" (1991), Linda Williams provides a more succinct definition of classical narrative cinema: "efficient action-centered, goal-oriented linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of narrative action leading to definitive closure" (728).

¹⁸ Mulvey addresses the issue of female spectatorship in a subsequent essay published in 1981 entitled "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)."

¹⁹ Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Subjectivity" (1981); "Masochism and Male Subjectivity" (1988).

understanding of femininity as a masquerade (Doane)²⁰, as well as for the consideration of the female spectator as doubly-desiring (de Lauretis)²¹. Mulvey's essay has also led to an examination of how images of women and female spectators are constructed in different genres, such as film noir (Kaplan),²² melodrama and the "woman's film" (Gledhill and Doane)²³, horror (Clover, Modleski, Creed, Williams)²⁴, pornography (MacKinnon, Williams, Dworkin)²⁵, as well as how the constructions of race (Gaines, Diawara, Doane, Modleski, hooks, Chow, Shohat and Stam, Rodríguez, Feng)²⁶ figure into representations of gender. In addition, there has been increased attention to the materiality of the body and questions of embodiment (Braidotti, Kuhn)²⁷ as well.

Although Mulvey's essay has received its fair share of criticism since its publication, I propose a re-examination of her theoretical model for several reasons. First, although Mulvey's

²⁰ Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" (1982).

²¹ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984).

²² E. Ann Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir* (1982).

²³ Christine Gledhill, ed. *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film* (1987).

²⁴ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992); Tania Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" (1986); Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993); Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks" (1984).

²⁵ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: The Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1999); Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (1987).

²⁶ Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory" (1988); Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1988); Mary Anne Doane, "Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and Cinema" (1991); Tania Modleski, "Cinema and the Dark Continent: Race and Gender in Popular Film" (1991); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992); *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (1996); Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994); Ed. Clara E. Rodríguez, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U. S. Media* (1997); Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (2002).

²⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994); Annette Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism" (1997).

essay has been accused of sidestepping the question of the female spectator, she examines the issue of female spectatorship in a later essay entitled “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946).” Going back to Freud’s theories on femininity, Mulvey makes the point that although Freud understood femininity to emerge out of a period of parallel development that occurs in *both* boys and girls, following the patriarchal patterns of language that subsume male and female under a universal masculine pronoun, Freud nevertheless misleadingly designates “masculine.”

According to Freud, although the development of a “correct” femininity involves the repression of “masculine” activity, some women will alternate between periods of passive femininity and regressive masculinity at various points during their lives. Mulvey concludes that the female spectator’s identification with a male hero allows her to recuperate a former aspect of her sexual identity that the development of a “proper” femininity would have her repress. Nevertheless, Mulvey argues that although “trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*” (1981; 125), using the metaphor of the transvestite, she argues that the identification is always an uneasy one, “restless in its borrowed transvestite clothes” (1981; 129).

Notwithstanding Mulvey’s analysis of female spectatorship, however, I am nevertheless primarily concerned with how *XXY*’s intersex protagonist addresses itself to, and thus constructs, the *male* spectator, although my interest in this topic clearly extends to the possibilities of such for feminist film theory and practice. Following de Lauretis’s assertion that “the woman cannot transform the codes; she can only transgress them, make trouble, provoke, pervert, turn the representation into a trap” (35), I examine how cinematic practices that work from the default assumption of heteronormative male subjectivity may be appropriated in order to subvert, challenge, or otherwise problematize the system from within.

Second, whereas Mulvey's argument indicating the processes of identification and objectification to be divided along gendered lines has been criticized for its inability to account for the fact that spectators *can* and *do* identify in opposition to their lived identities²⁸, what has not been contested is the notion that spectators, both male and female, *do* identify with the characters that they see onscreen.

Given that *XXY* presents a protagonist who, in possessing the genital anatomy of both sexes, occupies a unique and irreducible embodied duality, I propose a re-examination of Mulvey's thesis to see how the processes of identification and objectification, which she identifies as (traditionally) separate, but which in *XXY* converge in the same dissonant image, might be expanded to account for how such contradictory mechanisms construct the male spectator. More specifically, I posit that by condensing these two processes in a single individual, rather than enabling the viewer to experience the feeling of wholeness and unity offered by the illusion of spectatorship, the image disperses the coherence of the spectator, dividing the viewer from within.

Moreover, according to Freud, the threat of homosexuality on which this division is built is not the same for male and female subjects. As de Lauretis argues, female spectators experience "a double identification" (143); they "uphold both positionalities of desire, both active and passive aims; desire for the other and desire to be desired by the other" (143); they have no problem with same-sex configurations of desire which are nevertheless barred the male viewer due to the taboo of heterosexuality.

Lastly, in contrast to *documentary* films of recent years that focus on intersex individuals—such as Grant Lahood's *Intersexion* (2012) or Phoebe Hart's *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2010), in which the intersex individuals portrayed speak to the reality of their

²⁸ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993).

personal experiences and thus directly on their own behalf—*XXY* presents a unique set of circumstances for several reasons. As a first feature-length *fiction* film of its kind to portray an intersex character in the *protagonist* role (in contrast to Julia Solomonoff's *El último verano de La Boyita* (2009), for example, which deals with the theme of intersexuality, but through the perspective of the *friend* of the intersex individual), I am concerned with how Alex's positioning as the protagonist of the film blurs the traditionally distinct mechanisms of identification and objectification and how this, in turn, problematizes the desire of the heterosexual male spectator interpellated by the film. What's more, given *XXY*'s designation as a fiction film, I am also interested in how the intersex image is constructed in reference to the male spectator and how narrative, image, and the gaze converge to inscribe and orient spectatorial desire.

An examination of *XXY* in light of both Mulvey and Althusser's contributions to theories of ideology reveals that the numerous scenes depicting Alex in various stages of undress, frequently with her breasts uncovered and on several occasions, completely naked, attest to Alex's construction in the film as sexual object of (heterosexual) male spectatorial desire. That is, by addressing the erotic image of Alex's breasts to the attention of the male spectator, the film constructs such a spectating entity. What's more, Alex's construction as the (male) viewer's sexual "other" is further reinforced through a variety of techniques, such as framing, perspective, *mise-en-scène*, camera movement (propelling the eye across Alex's naked body, for example), as well as shot/reverse shots aligning the spectator's gaze with that of the male "others" that look at her.

However, as an inextricable part of an intersex character sexed *both*, the repeated image of Alex's breasts—"a body part most indicative of the female's otherness" (Allison 71)—is particularly effective because it aligns Alex's formal construction as the viewer's sexual "other"

with the added force of habit, cues from the viewer's associative memory, humans beings' intrinsic fascination with erotic images, and the spectator's unconscious fears and desires, all of which occur at the subliminal level—in order to incite the viewer's desire and to elicit his sexualized gaze. At the same time, however, the film opposes this instinctive response with the logic of the viewer's self-identity at a cognitive level in a way that simultaneously compels him to *resist* this objectifying gaze. Thus, the way that the film is constructed elicits these two contradictory responses *simultaneously* and deliberately opposes them, without possibility of resolution, for the entirety of the film.

In what remains of this chapter, I examine the neurology of habit, the role of associative memory, and the wiring of the male brain in response to erotic imagery to demonstrate that *XXY* makes use of all three functions to elicit the viewer's desire and to compel the objectifying gaze. However, in the same way that sexual objectification and desire are constructed as an instinctive response to the image, the film likewise elicits a *denial* of desire and a *negation* of the sexualized gaze as a parallel and contradictory response. As a result, the same body that invites desire also repels the sexualized gaze.

Habit

In assessing the male spectator's response to the image, we find an unlikely clue in the study of habit—more specifically, *how* a habit manifests itself in the brain and the role that familiar cues play in the formation of this process. In *The Power of Habit* (2012), Charles Duhigg provides a fascinating look at the neurology of habit and asserts that habits likely play a bigger role in all of our lives than any of us might first suspect. According to the results of a

study conducted by researchers from Duke University²⁹, investigators found that “more than 40 percent of the actions people performed each day weren’t actual decisions, but habits” (Duhigg xvi).

According to Duhigg, in the 1990s, MIT researchers designed a way to study the effects of the basal ganglia, a mass of tissue in the brain, on the formation of habit. Observing that animals with damage to their basal ganglia had problems with routine tasks such as remembering their way through mazes or opening containers of food, researchers hypothesized that the basal ganglia plays an important role in memory and habit formation and designed an experiment to test their hypothesis.

The experiment resulted in the construction of a T-shaped maze for rats that included a starting area separated from the rest of the maze by a sliding door that lifted with a “click.” Researchers then placed a rat at the start of the maze and a piece of chocolate at one of the T-shaped ends. The rat’s task was to find the chocolate. Prior to the experiment, investigators anesthetized the rats and fitted each with a set of sensors that would enable them to see how the rat’s brain was responding as it completed each task. What they found was astounding.

Initially, when the door lifted, researchers observed the rats wandering up and down the central passageway in no particular direction, sniffing at the corners, scratching at the walls, and engaging in what appeared to be typical rat behavior. At the end of the maze, sometimes the rat would take a right (away from the chocolate), and sometimes it would take a left. Eventually, most rats would find the treat. To the researchers, however, there seemed to be no discernible pattern in the wanderings. The rats simply appeared to be taking a leisurely stroll.

²⁹Verplanken, Bas, and Wendy Wood. “Interventions to Break and Create Consumer Habits.” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 25.1 (2006): 90-103. Print.

Neal, David T., Wendy Wood, and Jeffrey M. Quinn. “Habits—A Repeat Performance.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15.4 (2006): 198-202. Print.

However, the sensors in the rats' brains told a different story. The microscopic wires showed that every time the rats took a turn or sniffed at a corner or scratched a wall, their brains would explode in a frenzy of activity. It was as if their brains were working furiously to make sense of each new stimulus.

After completing the maze several hundred times, however, scientists observed a new pattern emerge. As the rats got quicker at completing the maze, the process became more automatic. Instead of sniffing at corners or scratching the walls, the rats would head straight for the chocolate. Curiously, "as each rat learned how to navigate the maze, its mental activity *decreased*. As the route become more and more automatic, each rat starting thinking less and less" (Duhigg 15).

In short, the sensors showed the rats' brain activity to be the highest right *before* hearing the click, as if shifting through prior experiences and associations for a cue for what to do. Once they heard the click, however, the rats' brain activity decreased, and they went through the maze as if on autopilot until the activity had been completed. After the rats found the chocolate and the routine had been completed, researchers observed brain activity to spike once again as the rats' brains switched out of autopilot and back to its regular mode.

According to scientists, the reason why habits form is because the brain is always looking for ways to conserve energy. It is for this reason that brain activity peaks at the beginning of an event—because the brain is sifting through prior experiences and associations for a clue to what to do. For a rat, because a closed door holds the equal possibility of hiding a hungry cat as well as a tasty treat, it is in the rat's best interest to stay on high alert until it knows for sure what's behind the door. Once an appropriate response has been selected, however, the routine takes over

and the brain follows along on autopilot until the completion of the activity shakes the person out of automatic mode and charges the brain with making conscious decisions again.

Based on the research, Duhigg identifies a habit as composed of three distinct elements—cue, routine, and reward—that link together in what he describes as a “habit loop.” As the results of these and other studies show, “when a habit emerges, the brain stops fully participating in decision making” (Duhigg 20). In other words, according to the results of empirical analysis, habits function well below the realm of conscious thought.

What Duhigg emphasizes is that although there are countless choices that appear to be the product of rational thought, habits are actually the product of subliminal mechanisms that are “influenced by urges most of us barely recognize or understand” (6-7). What’s more, given the findings, he asserts that it is “possible to learn and make unconscious choices without remembering anything about the lesson or decision making . . . We might not remember the experiences that create our habits, but once they are lodged within our brains they influence how we act—often without our realization” (Duhigg 25).

A similar study conducted by psychology professor K. Anders Ericsson and his colleagues at the Human Performance Lab provides an interesting counterpoint to the study of habit. In this experiment, both members of the Tallahassee SWAT team and recent police academy graduates were given a blank gun and placed in front of an enormous floor-to-ceiling screen projecting a variety of different situations. What researchers wanted to know was how officers of varying experience would respond to each situation. In one scenario, officers watched a man with a suspicious bulge under his shirt that could have easily been a bomb strapped to his chest as he approached the front door of a school.

Upon seeing the man, the more experienced officers immediately pulled out their guns and yelled for the man to stop. When he didn't, they fired at the man and shot him before he entered the school. In contrast, however, the newer officers allowed the man to walk up the steps and enter the building without the slightest attempt to stop him. They just didn't see the danger. In other words, the newer officers "simply lacked the experience to diagnose the situation and react properly" (Foer 55).

But what exactly does experience entail? According to Joshua Foer, these studies affirm the same thing that Ericsson has found "in every other field of expertise that he's studied: experts see the world differently. They notice things that nonexperts don't see. They hone in on the information that matters most, and have an almost automatic sense of what to do with it" (55).

But what constitutes an expert? In short, Ericsson's study and others like it show that expertise resides within the vast networks of neural connections in the brain that function through associative memory. When faced with a new situation, the brain shifts through a countless number of patterns in the brain's image repository that tells you how you should respond to the current situation in light past encounters. As Foer contends, "in most cases, the skill is not the result of conscious reasoning, but pattern recognition. It is a feat of perception and memory, not analysis" (63).

So what constitutes an expert, and how does this influence the way that both male and female spectators respond to images of women?

If we apply the neurology of habit, the role of associative memory, and the average American's exposure to sexualized images of women to our understanding of cinematic spectatorship, the implications are tremendous. As discussed previously, Duhigg identifies three elements of a habit—cue, routine, reward—that link together to form a "habit loop." Taking the

‘cue’ to be the way that the perspective of the camera guides the viewer’s gaze across the surface of the female body, a body which is framed and positioned to meet the viewer’s gaze in a way that elicits maximum erotic impact—and the ‘routine’ to be the countless number of previous cinematic experiences in which narrative structure and film form seamlessly fuse the viewer’s sexualized gaze with that of the male protagonist who, through cinematic designation as active agent and font of narrative action, elicits the viewer’s identification and as a result, objectification of his (and the viewer’s) female “other”—and the ‘reward’ to be the pleasure of surrogate mastery and the sexual gratification provided by identifying with this powerful image—one begins to get a glimpse of the pervasiveness of the practice of sexual objectification in regard to the female image and how automatic and instinctive this reaction may be. Moreover, because the urge to sexually objectify the female image runs consonant to the fears and anxieties of the male spectator expressed in psychoanalytic theory as well as a deep-rooted human interest that programs us to find sexual images of the human body appealing, the response is both subliminal and instinctive.

By calling thus on the “otherness” of Alex’s body, most concretely exemplified in the image of Alex’s naked breasts, *XXY* builds on existing norms that posit the female body as object of spectatorial desire. Building on habit, a result of living in the world saturated with sexualized images of women, which in turn runs consonant with the viewer’s accumulated experience in watching movies; on biological instinct, which programs us to find naked images of people intrinsically fascinating; and on the subconscious fears and desires of the male spectator, all of which run consonant to the viewer’s preconscious impulses and subliminal desires, the film elicits the viewer’s sexualized gaze, inviting sexual objectification of the image.

However, the impulse to sexually objectify the image that takes place on a subliminal level is countered by an equal and opposite response based in logic at the conscious level that positions the viewer to simultaneously deny this impulse and to resist the habit of the objectifying gaze.

To explain, I turn to a psychological theory developed by Leon Festinger to explain how *XXY* interpellates a heterosexual male spectator, but that the way it does so makes use of the viewer's interpellated heterosexuality in order to *deny* desire and to *disavow* the objectifying gaze.

Cognitive Dissonance

Coined by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957, the theory of cognitive dissonance is a psychological theory based on the belief that human beings are coherent entities driven by a need for internal consistency. The theory is guided by two main principles:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance. (Festinger 3)

In other words, A) we actively avoid situations that are dissonant; and B) when we *do* experience them, we actively avoid acting in ways that will increase the dissonance.

Festinger makes the analogy that cognitive dissonance creates as powerful a psychological discomfort as hunger or thirst, such that when faced with situations of dissonance, a person will be motivated to act in ways that reduce the dissonance just as surely as a person experiencing hunger or thirst will be motivated to alleviate such sensations. According to

Festinger, however, many inconsistencies rarely register *as inconsistencies* by the person involved; more frequently, the person will make attempts to rationalize their behavior.

Nevertheless, people are not always successful at explaining away inconsistencies. In situations in which the inconsistency between two cognitions is so great that it cannot be explained away, Festinger postulates that an individual will respond to the dissonance in one of two ways: 1) by changing their actions; or 2) by changing their “knowledge” about the thing itself (6).

Using the illustration of a smoker who has been smoking his whole life but who has just been presented with evidence that smoking is harmful, according to this theory, the person would react in one of two ways: A) by changing his behavior—that is, by discontinuing the habit, thereby creating consonance between cognition (the knowledge that smoking is harmful) and behavior (continuing to smoke); or B) by changing his “knowledge” about the thing itself.

In the second case, the smoker might react by deciding that smoking does not have any harmful effects, or alternately, s/he might accumulate so much “knowledge” regarding the positive effects of smoking as to make the negative ones seem negligible. In both cases, the individual would seek to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance by either changing their behavior, as in the first scenario, or by changing their knowledge about the thing itself, as in the second.

Of particular importance to the theory is Festinger’s observation that “the more these elements are important to, or valued by, the person, the greater will be the magnitude of a dissonant relation between them” (16).

In short, the application of Festinger’s theory to our present analysis of spectator positioning postulates that when presented with two incongruent cognitions, the viewer,

interpellated as a heterosexual male by the erotic content of the gaze—will react by either changing his behavior (discontinuing the objectifying gaze); or by changing his “knowledge” about the thing—in this case, the intersex protagonist—itself.

However, given that the second option is not a possibility permitted by the parameters of the narrative—that is, because the spectator cannot fully participate in the illusion while simultaneously negating Alex’s intersexuality—the viewer is left only the option of changing the behavior itself—in other words, by retracting the sexualized gaze. Similarly, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault avers that the creation of categories such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ lead people to behave in ways consonant with their perceived identities. Put differently, it is the *category* that results in the policing of individual behavior in order to conform with the subject’s self-identity.

Thus, whereas *XXY* builds on the habit of the viewer’s previous experience as a spectator, his bank of associative memories, and the spectator’s instinctive interest in naked images in order to provoke his desire and invite the objectifying gaze, at the same time, the knowledge that Alex has a penis shakes the interpellated heterosexuality of the viewer and imbues his desire for the image with a distinctly queer tone.³⁰ The results are multiple and contradictory. At the same

³⁰ Although Alex has both male and female genitals, thus theoretically rendering her neither male nor female, but equally *both*, it is of interest that for the male viewer, the presence of the penis necessarily renders the entire body male. Put differently, although Alex’s sexual embodiment means that she is equally both, as feminist scholar Susan Bordo puts it, “the cultural equation of penis = male” (37) is an inescapable one in today’s society.

In a telling illustration, Bordo cites an experiment conducted by psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna in which subjects were shown two pictures: a figure of a person with typically female attributes, such as long hair, breasts, and hips—but *with* a penis—and another figure without breasts, hips, or body hair—but *with* a vagina. “They found that the presence of the penis was the single most powerful, *the* definitive cue for deciding which gender the figure was” (Bordo 23-4). 96 percent of subjects determined the figure with a penis to be male, despite the presence of other typically feminine characteristics—whereas 33 percent of subjects were able to overlook the presence of a vagina as a female cue in the second (Bordo 23-4).

But if such studies have found the presence of a penis to be *the* defining characteristic of maleness, the disavowal of this gaze is also intimately related to the threat of homosexuality that the intersex body presents. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling, a leading researcher on the biology and psychology of sex, “the debates over intersexuality are

time the placement of familiar cues draws upon the viewer's heterosexuality in order to elicit desire and to invite his objectifying gaze, the knowledge of Alex's distinctly male anatomy clashes with the viewer's identity and simultaneously positions him to *refute* the impulse of this objectifying gaze.

Moreover, because the option of objectifying the image presents itself as a new possibility every time that Alex appears naked, repulsion and desire are opposed over and over without possibility of resolution throughout the entirety of the film. For example, in one moment, Alex, lying face down and shirtless in front of a window, flips over suddenly, compelling the viewer to gaze at her breasts. The next shot, an extreme close-up of her chest, is structured so that her breasts occupy the entire frame, offering the viewer no possibility of looking away. In another moment, Alex is seen floating topless on her back in the sea: however, although the underwear she is wearing obscures her genitals from view, her breasts take center stage within the frame, on full display.

Combining preconscious elements of cinematic spectatorship with conscious and rational elements of logic and identity, the incongruence not only disrupts the viewer's desire, it brings focused awareness to the disparity itself. But instead of allowing for one impulse to give way to the other, resulting in psychic release, the two mechanisms are opposed against each other and actively sustained throughout the text. As a result, rather than fulfilling the promise of wholeness and unity proposed by psychoanalytic models of spectatorship, the film stages the viewer in an active and perpetual state of division with no possibility of resolution.

inextricable from those over homosexuality; we cannot consider the challenges one poses to our gender system without considering the parallel challenge posed by the other" (112). Similarly, Charlotte Gleghorn notes that "the imperative to denote a category for the human body at birth, either male or female, corresponds to society's anxieties surrounding homosexuality, perceived as a threat to the normative heterosexual matrix" (165).

In addition to the unseen penis that problematizes the viewer's desire for the image, Alex's status as a minor adds yet another level of prohibition to the gaze. The conflicting mechanisms of the spectator's own positioning can be seen, via surrogate, in a telling incident that occurs when Alex sleeps over at her female friend's house. As the scene opens to an image of the girls lying together on the bed, we find the friend relaying the details of her first sexual experience to Alex. However, the girls are shortly interrupted by the friend's father, a colleague of Kraken, as he enters the room. Ushering the girls to stop their chitchat and get ready for bed, he hands Alex a shirt, whereupon Alex immediately gets up, takes off the shirt she is wearing, and changes into the other, in the process exposing her breasts.

In this moment, the *look* that the friend's father gives Alex allows the viewer a tenuous glimpse into the spectator's own positioning between curiosity, habit, and desire, on the one hand, and the dissonance created by this desire on the other, for although we see him instinctively look to Alex's breasts with sexual fascination, he catches himself, as if questioning the legitimacy of the look, and we see him quickly avert his gaze.

As one of the few males in the film who is neither related to Alex (Kraken); who has no medical interest in her body (Ramiro); whose heterosexuality is not uncertain (Álvaro); or whose knowledge of Alex's intersexuality in some way complicates the gaze (Vando; the three teenage "rapists" who force themselves on Alex), the friend's father provides an excellent illustration of the impulse to gaze with desire at a body whose breasts clearly designate it sexual "other." In this case, however, Alex's status as a minor adds an extra layer of prohibition to the gaze.

XXY thus poses the subliminal impulse created by the film's formal cues against the conscious logic of the viewer's own identity as well as his knowledge of Alex's implicit phallus to elicit a dual and contradictory response. At the same time, however, the incongruence between

behavior (objectifying Alex as sexual other) and cognition (Alex has a penis) has the effect of de-naturalizing the same mechanisms which in reference to a normative female body would pass undetected, thus bringing focused awareness to the incongruence itself. With this shift, however, the unconscious moves into the realm of consciousness.

As a result of this incongruence, the viewer is given a possibility of consciously acknowledging the same mechanisms that are often seamlessly incorporated into the structure of cinema, calling attention to, and challenging, the processes by which these mechanisms are rendered invisible (and hence “natural”). In other words, the creation of dissonance enables self-conscious awareness to emerge, providing just the necessary distance to make visible the invisible.

Alex as Linguistic Construction

In addition to playing up different elements of Alex’s formal and social construction in order to suit the purposes of the narrative, *XXY* likewise experiments with Alex’s construction as a linguistic sign. For example, toward the beginning of the film, shortly after the series of photographs reveal Alex’s social construction to be female, but before the viewer has had any significant opportunity to look unobstructed at the whole of Alex’s body, the way that Alex is first introduced to the visiting guests is especially notable. In short, while Alex’s parents and their guests are relaxing on the porch shortly after the visitors’ arrival, Alex’s first full-bodied appearance is punctuated by Suli’s mellifluous exclamation of “¡hija!” (“daughter!”) as Alex first appears onscreen. In short, after having deliberately evaded all use of gendered signifiers—no easy feat in Spanish—eight minutes into the film, the text marks the image in language from the moment it appears onscreen.

However, given Roland Barthes's assertion that "all images as polysemous" (117)—that is, because what an image can "mean" is countless—what Alex's linguistic designation does is anchor the image to a word, and hence, an idea—from its inception. By thus anchoring the image in language, the word conditions the reception of the image. Alex equals sexual difference equals "other": meaning *not-I*.

Writes Barthes:

In the cinema itself, traumatic images are bound up with an uncertainty (an anxiety) concerning the meaning of objects or attitudes. Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques. At the level of the literal message, the text replies – in a more or less direct, more or less partial manner – to the question: *what is it?* . . . When it comes to the 'symbolic message', the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation. (117-18)

Hence, Barthes's declaration that "the text *directs* the reader" (118). In other words, the series of photographs seen at the beginning of the film, which prime the viewer to the idea of Alex as female body, converges with the idea of femininity on another level by anchoring Alex in language.

Following this initial linguistic designation as female, the film immediately reinforces Alex's "femaleness" again, for the next words out of Suli's mouth are: "Ella es Alex" ("She is Alex")—as she introduces her daughter to their guests, pointedly using a gendered pronoun that is completely unnecessary in Spanish. In other words, the text intertwines Alex's social and linguistic construction as female with her formal construction as object of spectatorial desire in a way that invites the viewer's sexually objectifying gaze.

But although the initial linguistic signifier that anchors Alex is female, as the story continues, the viewer finds that this designation is neither stable nor fixed. Indeed, no sooner does this initial designation take place, thus heterosexually legitimizing (and in this way,

obliquely inviting) spectatorial desire, does the film begin to employ fluctuating gendered signifiers of Alex's sex. For instance, when Kraken visits a transgendered man in order to ask his advice regarding Alex's surgery, Alex's father succinctly summarizes the issue at hand: "tengo una hija, un hijo" ("I have a daughter, a son").

In contrast, when Alex and her father are reunited for the first time after Kraken inadvertently discovers Alex having sex (and thus having made a distinct, if temporary, object-choice), Kraken responds to Alex's comment that the way he is now looking at her differently ("Me mirás distinto") with an appropriate signifier that linguistically reflects the complexities of Alex's dual embodiment: "Es porque estás más grande" ("It's because you're bigger").

The ambivalence of the word "grande," a gender-neutral sign which in Spanish may be used to modify males and females, to indicate neutrality, or to elide the identity of its referent—likewise layers Alex in similarly ambiguous ways. In contrast, after Alex is assaulted by a group of boys and the secret of her identity is disseminated without her consent, Kraken's threat to the assembled crowd, "El que vuelva a tocar a mi hijo..." ("Whoever touches my son...") serves as a public affirmation of the maleness that Alex has, up until that moment, had to deny. In so doing, the film enables Alex to float through differently gendered identities—sexual difference marked in language—while refusing to confine the image to any one category. By bringing the variability of such signifiers to the fore, however, the film makes a tangible case for the biases that language is able to impose on thinking itself. For if the signs built into our systems of signifying recognize only two different *types* of bodies, what effect does this have on the way that we are able to imagine that people can exist? What's more, what effect(s) does this have on the way that people are able to *desire*?

In the same way that the film repeatedly fixes, then destabilizes, Alex in language, it also refuses to fix Alex in image, creating a double negation that further adds to the ambiguity of the sign. However, the point is that in a medium that equates looking with power, the missing image of Alex's intersex genitals creates an irresolvable disjuncture by preventing the viewer from fully identifying with the image (Alex as self); while withholding the *means* to posit the image as sexual object (Alex as other). In other words, the absent image of Alex's genitals creates two simultaneous effects: the first prevents identification with the image; the second makes objectification impossible. In the process, narrative, desire, and the gaze converge to thwart two traditional avenues to pleasure.

For instance, in a pivotal moment of the film, shortly after Alex and Álvaro are interrupted having sex, Alex is shown in a moment of crisis as she stands naked, gazing at her genitals in the mirror.



Figure 1.1. XXY (2007). Although Alex is shown gazing at her genitals in the mirror, the viewer is nevertheless denied scopisic mastery of the body that purports to represent the self.

However, despite the fact that Alex is completely naked, the dramatic backlighting shrouding her pelvis in darkness also ensures that the viewer is formally barred from seeing what the narrative most positions us to desire—the revelatory *image* of Alex’s elusive self.

The result is that although Alex is shown—*represented*—as having full and uninhibited access to her body, at the same time, the viewer who is positioned to identify with Alex is denied access to what she sees. In so doing, the film inscribes the viewer within the surrogate mastery of the image while simultaneously designating the spectator to a perpetual position of lack.

At the same time, however, the repeated use of mirrors throughout the film create a space in which the contradictions of subject and image can play out. In the same sequence, Alex, illustrated above, filmed from behind with the mirror in front, faces away from the camera. As a result, the viewer sees the back of Alex’s body while the reflection in the mirror allows a simultaneous perspective of the front. In a glance, then, the mirror enables the viewer to see the same body from two distinct perspectives. In so doing, the film disperses the coherence of the subject by formally illustrating Alex to occupy dual and simultaneous perspectives.

With the viewer positioned in the blind spot of the image, the film begins to trouble and disperse the coherence of the spectator in a way that echoes the internal division created by the film’s conflicting codes of address. As a result, the missing image of the phallus denies the viewer scopic mastery of the same body that purports to represent the self. As it does, the image moves perpetually ahead of the viewer, generating object and lack—desire for the image and the wish for its fulfillment—simultaneously.

But given that Alex-as-sign never stabilizes, either in image or in language, the instability of what Alex *means* also ultimately works to disperse the coherence of the spectator. By refusing to reveal what the spectator most desires to “fix” on multiple axes of identity—that is, by

denying the spectator final answers to the question of Alex's identity in both *image* and *language*—the film destabilizes the stability and coherence of the spectator in a way that effects multiple registers of identity.

In other words, given that the central question posed by the narrative—encapsulated in the missing image of Alex's intersex genitals—is only asked, yet never answered—the refusal to definitively “fix” Alex, whether in word, image, or meaning results in a proliferation of multiple, simultaneous, and dissonant subject/object positions that destabilize three interconnected axes of identity: male/female, heterosexual/queer, self/other. However, although the film obscures these categories in reference to *Alex*, the ambiguity of such categories ultimately impinge on the boundaries of the *viewer's* identity by eventually extending to him (her) as well.

In her essay, *Powers of Horror* (1980), semiotician Julia Kristeva sets forth a theory of what she identifies as “the abject”: in her words, that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4); similarly, “what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Relating the abject to the physical embodiment of the female sex as discussed in Luce Irigaray's “This Sex Which Is Not One” (1977), Kristeva argues that what is abject is loathsome to phallogocentric society precisely because of its ambiguity; its lack of clearly-defined parameters. The skin on the surface of milk, vomit, body fluids, excrement, and blood, particularly menstrual blood—are all abject because they represent “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4), thus confusing and unsettling the boundaries of the self on which heteronormative masculine subjectivity is founded. In short, what is abject provokes horror because it disrupts established boundaries. The abject is repulsive because I am unable to designate it self or other; it is abject because it is indistinguishable from *me*.

Similarly, Nick Mansfield opines that: “the anxiety grounded in the permeable dividing line between the inside and the outside of the body is replicated endlessly in unease over frontiers and separation in general. We are unsettled by things that cross lines, especially those that seem to belong to both sides, that blur and question the whole process of demarcation” (83).

According to Irigaray, however, this ambivalence is at the heart of female subjectivity and is similarly *embodied* in the ambiguity, simultaneity, and multiplicity of the female sex:

Whence the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units, to inventory everything as individualities. *She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no “proper” name. And her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*. The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ . . . the penis. (26, emphasis original)

Whereas theorists from Freud onward have theorized the self as complete, cohesive, and neatly contained within the bodily parameters of one’s skin, Kristeva imagines subjectivity as incomplete and discontinuous; a *process* rather than a fixed position.

In the same way that the linguistic signifiers used to describe Alex continue to fluctuate depending on who describes her, in effect *representing* the sign as process, the lack of a final and definite “answer” to the question of Alex’s embodiment enables alternate bodily realities to take hold, creating further ambiguity about the image.

In other words, in the absence of a concrete image formally reproducing for the viewer the defining image of Alex’s body, the viewer is left to anchor the sign to an imagined image that nevertheless continues to fluctuate. For example, shortly after Alex and Álvaro are interrupted while having sex but significantly before Álvaro has an opportunity to talk about the incident with Alex, he comes upon a journal in Alex’s room.

As Álvaro flips through Alex's journal, the viewer is presented with a number of drawings—all created by Alex—in a way that further disperses the possibilities of the sign. In one drawing, in place of Alex's genitals, the viewer sees two flowers with long stems. Another image depicts Alex with a single sex suggestive of a penis; in another drawing, Alex's pelvis is blurred and made inaccessible altogether. These images, which are dreamlike and incoherent, further disperse the constancy of the image—and thus, the stability of the spectator that gazes at them.

Moreover, because the original image is never revealed, the viewer must depend on the surrogate images of Alex's body in order to fill in the gaps left by the narrative. But because each image is different, Alex-as-image is also infinitely deferred, supplanted by a countless number of imagined realities. However, by refusing the viewer mastery over the image, the film opens up a countless number of subject/object positions that infinitely defer meaning. As a result, instead of providing closure, finality, or resolution, the film opts to maintain open as many ambiguities as are created by the narrative.

In effect, the consequence that this has on the spectator is especially important, for if the “other” against which the self is defined never assumes a definitive form, but continues to fluctuate, this lack of definition likewise leaves the viewer in a perpetual state of flux. At the same time, it leaves Alex the freedom to define herself without ever letting the viewer in on exactly what that definition is.

Mirrors

Similarly, the mirrors in the film disrupt the seamlessness of the narrative and invite reflexivity about the presence of the camera. In the first such sequence, which takes place shortly

after Alex and Álvaro meet, Álvaro, who is brushing his teeth in the bathroom, is briefly joined by Alex. What is interesting about this sequence, however, is that the two are not filmed directly; instead, as the camera focuses on the mirror, Alex and Álvaro appear as a *reflection* across its surface.



Figure 1.2. *XXY* (2007). Alex gazes Álvaro in the mirror. The presence of the mirror enables Alex to be simultaneously illustrated as absent *and* present.

Indeed, the only detail alerting the viewer to the fact that what is shown on the screen is actually a reflection is the movement from Álvaro's body at the far right of the frame. However, in contrast to Álvaro, whose face at the right of the screen anchors his reflection to a physical body that also appears onscreen, the way that Alex is represented creates distance between Alex and the viewer and keeps scopical mastery of Alex's body at an additional remove. In so doing, the text loosens the link between body and image and enables Alex to evade the gaze of the spectator even as she is simultaneously represented onscreen. At the same time, the mirror enables the image to be simultaneously *represented* as presence and absence.

As a result, although Alex-as-image appears onscreen, at the same time, her body, which is notably absent, offers the possibility of extricating body from image and thus introduces a distance between Alex and the viewer that destroys the tenability of the body.

Of note is that the scope of the camera is wider than, and consequently unbounded by, the smaller space of the mirror, which is positioned vertically within the frame with bathroom tiles flanking either side. As Alex and Álvaro brush their teeth, the unchanging image of the tiles on either side of the mirror contrasts with the movement of their reflection within, and in so doing, ensures that the image maintains its status *as an image*. Moreover, because the tiles immediately adjacent to the mirror continue up to its surface and are also reflected within it, the result creates a visual continuity that visually confuses the certitude of established boundaries.

But given its ability to reflect, fragment, or infinitely defer the image, the presence of the mirror also brings a heightened awareness to the presence of the camera as well as the incongruity between the projected subject (Alex), the viewing subject (the spectator) and the material reality of the camera. In “The Imaginary Signifier” (1975), film theorist Christian Metz points out: “thus 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” (822). In other words, although the ‘suspension of disbelief’ demanded by the illusion of spectatorship involves an implicit understanding that the camera recording the events will never actually appear onscreen, because “the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror” (822) and understands its function, the presence of the mirror, which enables Alex and Álvaro to be represented *as images*, nevertheless threatens to shatter the illusion of the narrative by suddenly materializing onscreen. By staging this sequence as a *reflection*, in the space of the mirror, the film sustains the viewer’s

awareness of the body as image while simultaneously maintaining a heightened awareness of the material reality of the camera.

Sex/Sexuality

In the same way that the film refuses to define Alex in word or image, Alex likewise resists definition in the way that she exists in relationship to others.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out that despite the myriad of sexual identifications and preferences that exist, heteronormative society demonstrates an illogical insistence that it is only the object-choice that counts. According to Sedgwick:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include the preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.” (8)

In other words, if the film is silent about what Alex ultimately *is*, it also remains stubbornly quiet about the question of her sexual orientation.

But given that the notion of sexual orientation is built on a clear gender designation—a clearly defined and stable subject—Alex resists fixity both on her own terms as well as in relationship to others. Put differently, if Alex’s dual embodiment makes her an ambiguous sign to begin with, the ambivalence of the desire in the “others” that Alex exists in relation to further disperses the certainty of meaning. Furthermore, given that “semiotics tells us that similarity and difference are relational categories” (de Lauretis 17), then “the simple inference that meaning is differential, not referential, has profound implications for our understanding of the relations between human beings and the world” (Belsey 10).

In other words, an analysis of Alex-as-sign offers a reminder that meaning is never purely positive—that language is never produced in a vacuum—but instead takes shape and derives meaning through its relationship to other signs. However, if we consider O’Shaughnessy and Stadler’s insistence “that sex and gender are two of the most important ways that humans classify themselves and other people” (360), then the ambivalence posed by an ill-defined and unstable protagonist becomes more clear. As a free-floating sign, one that refuses containment in any final, stable, or fixed category, Alex further evades fixity in the way that she exists in relationship to others.

As a result, instead of consolidating meaning, the movement of narrative ensures that the possibility of what the image can *mean* is forced down increasingly fragile lines. Moreover, because the film allows at least two possible answers to each question it presents regarding Alex’s identity, neither of which is conclusive, it likewise enables meaning to occupy *all* possibilities, dispersing the coherence of the spectator.

In the process, it *represents* to the viewer his own ambivalences and his divisions. Moreover, it does so while showing *the image* to have complete mastery of the self in a way that is nevertheless denied the viewer. At the same time, the spectator is dually positioned at the convergence of repulsion and desire: they converge in him, and in so doing, they divide the self.

For example, in a pivotal moment of the film, Alex and Álvaro—who up until that moment is unaware that Alex has a penis—have sex, but the scene culminates with *Alex* unexpectedly penetrating *Álvaro*. However, any notion that Alex’s sexual encounter with Álvaro thus “answers” the orientation of Alex’s desire quickly dissipates as the film presents the viewer with the added possibility that Álvaro might be gay. Toward the end of the film, when Álvaro expresses reticence about leaving Uruguay earlier than expected, Ramiro, intuiting Álvaro’s

interest in Alex, expresses relief at his son's assumed heterosexuality with a cutting remark: "Tenía miedo de que fueras puto" ("I was afraid that you were a fag"). Significantly, the comment, which Álvaro neither confirms nor denies, ensures only that the instability is raised while the larger question of Álvaro's sexuality remains crucially unresolved.

Moreover, further troubling the ambiguity of Alex's sexuality is the relationship between Alex and her female friend, at whose house Alex seeks refuge shortly after her sexual encounter with Álvaro. Throughout the scene, Alex and the friend occupy close physical space on the bed, creating curiosity about the nature of their relationship. The ambiguity continues the next morning when the friend enters the bathroom and finding Alex in the shower, takes off her clothes and joins her. As the girls wash each other in the shower, the intimacy of the scene creates further anxiety about the ambivalence of the relationship. Moreover, similar to the sequence of Alex and Álvaro brushing their teeth, the shower scene is also filmed through a mirror. In this way, however, the film continues to maintain a level of distance between Alex and the viewer, contributing to the elusiveness of the image. Like the image of the subject dispersed ad infinitum in the hall of mirrors—*mise-en-abyme*—Alex inhabits image in a way that alienates the viewer. As a result, the film disperses the coherence of the image by maintaining mastery of the image at a perpetual and infinite remove.

In contrast to the first mirror sequence, in which the scope of the camera is larger than, and thus unbounded by, the limits of the mirror; in the second sequence, the mirror, which is larger than the frame of the camera, threatens to engulf it. Despite Jean-Louis Baudry's assertion that "an infinite mirror would no longer be a mirror" (362), the film reproduces an image of a limitless mirror that nevertheless manages to retain some of its mirror-like qualities.

What alerts the viewer to the fact that the image is a reflection, however, is that the eye of the camera approaches the edge of the mirror and crosses over it before losing the boundaries of its gaze in the middle of the mirror's reflective surface. In the meantime, the reflection of Alex and her friend in the shower that unfolds across the mirror's surface is understood *as a reflection* due to the visible spots of rust on its surface. As a result, although the limits of the mirror remain outside the camera's frame, the splotches of rust on its surface nevertheless remind the viewer that just like the events being witnessed, the sign always remains one step ahead of the spectator, just outside his (her) grasp.

Meanwhile, the tones seen throughout the film in the colors of Alex's clothing, her piercing blue eyes, or the blue grays of the sea and sky emphasize Alex's connection to the sea. Appropriately, when Kraken recalls the circumstances surrounding Alex's birth, he notes: "Alex nació azul" ("Alex was born blue"). Throughout the film, the numerous shots depicting Alex against the unbounded expanses of sea and sky, limited only by the frame of the camera, repeatedly challenge the notion of the "unnaturalness" of the intersex body. Instead, the film opposes the untamed boundlessness of nature with the limiting constraints of culture and society, seen in the windows, curtains, and other human-made structures that formally enclose such views.

Indeed, the numerous shots depicting Alex against the endless tracts of sea and sky point to a more open ending for Alex—a future in which she may be accepted as is instead of having to modify the physical parameters of her body to fit the rigid constraints of society. This move for an acceptance *sin condiciones* is likewise reflected in the final exchange between Alex and her father, who says that he will protect her: "hasta que puedas elegir" ("until you can choose"). To which Alex asks: "¿Qué?" ("What?")

Says her father: “Lo que quieras” (“Whatever you want”).

“¿Y si no hay nada que elegir?” (“And if there’s nothing to choose?”) Alex asks.

The ending shot is an image of the clear blue sea, barely distinguishable from the sky.

CHAPTER 2: QUEERING THE “DEFAULT” SPECTATOR: GENDER-BENDING, RAPE, AND SHIFTING SUBJECT POSITIONS IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR’S *LA PIEL QUE HABITO* / *THE SKIN I LIVE IN* (2011)

In *La piel que habito*, Pedro Almodóvar takes the viewer on a journey that productively harnesses years of cinematic inculcation by encouraging the viewer to objectify Vera, the female protagonist. When the dramatic reveal shows that the “she” the viewer has been eyeing all along is in reality a “he,” the narrative creates a shift in subject positions, structuring the viewer to identify with an image that has up until that point been posed as object of the gaze. In doing so, however, the film turns its gaze back on the viewer, bringing attention to the fact that despite awareness that the objectification of the female image forms an active part of the viewing experience, the process has been naturalized in such a way as to render it invisible. By strategically withholding a key detail only to unleash it near the very end, Almodóvar shows the viewer that far from our imagined role as passive observers, we are in fact active and complicit participants in the process of objectification, and that as viewers, not only do we contribute to the problem, but that the problem lies in *us*.

Set against the backdrop of an extravagant country home situated on the outskirts of Toledo, *La piel que habito* (*The Skin I Live In*, 2011) relates, in the director’s own words, “a horror story without screams or frights” (Ríos Pérez). Unfolding along two narrative lines, the first follows Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), a brilliant surgeon and scientist driven by the tragic circumstances of his late wife’s death to develop, despite explicit prohibition to the contrary, a superhuman transgenic skin resistant to fire, insect bites, and pain. Through this first narrative line, the viewer is likewise introduced to Vera (Elena Anaya), a beautiful and

mysterious patient held prisoner under constant video surveillance in Robert's home; as well as Marilia (Marisa Paredes), Robert's servant and the caretaker of his estate. Whereas the first narrative line revolves around Robert's relationship with Vera, the second revolves around Robert's desire to exact a fitting revenge on Vicente (Jan Cornet), the young man responsible for his daughter Norma's (Blanca Suárez) death. As the story unfolds, the viewer is transported six years back in time to witness Norma's release from a mental hospital, to which she has been committed following the trauma of her mother's suicide. On Norma's first night of freedom, however, she accompanies her father to a party where she meets Vicente, who, as the narrative obscures, either rapes her or tries to rape her. However, although the truth of the rape is ultimately elided, the event nevertheless triggers a relapse that eventually leads to Norma's suicide.

Thus, in a horrifying retribution enacted against his daughter's aggressor, Robert kidnaps Vicente, forcibly anesthetizes him, and consequently subjects the young man—all without the slightest warning as to his real intentions—to a complete sex change operation, informing the incredulous Vicente only *after* the surgery has been completed that he now has a vagina.

But the horror continues. Although the first three-fourths of the film uses visual cues to compel the viewer's desire and to elicit his sexualized gaze, it is only at the 88-minute mark—nearly an hour and a half into a two-hour movie—that the narrative suddenly reveals a startling detail that changes the entire structure of the game. For as the plot quietly moves along to its finish, the two narrative lines unexpectedly converge and the film reveals that Vicente is Vera, Vera is Vicente and that each is simply a different physical manifestation of the same entity. With this knowledge, however, comes the realization that the woman who the viewer is positioned to desire—the beautiful woman who Robert has sex with, and whom his half-brother,

Zeca (Roberto Álamo) rapes—is none other than Vicente in an unwilling body and it is the viewer who has projected his desire onto the image who has effectively been queered.

In short, my analysis proposes that the psychic mechanisms that converge to queer the default spectator do so via a series of mechanisms that build on the viewer's identification with Robert (with Robert's half-brother, Zeca, functioning as a temporary place-holder), the viewer's attendant objectification of Vera, as well as empathy for, and eventual identification with, Vicente. In the process of the "reveal," however, the text fragments and ultimately destabilizes the viewer interpellated by the text: first, by creating a dissonant relationship between identity and desire; and second, by constructing a narrative means for the male viewer to fully experience the distinct physical *embodiment* of female subjectivity.

Identification with Robert

As seen in the introduction, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze argues that narrative cinema is constructed around two mechanisms, identification and objectification, which naturalize heteronormative male subjectivity and desire as the "default" and the norm. Thus, as we have seen, by identifying with the male protagonist and objectifying the woman, who, through formal conventions is posited as the object of both the viewer *and* the diegetic character's desire, the spectator experiences mastery, pleasure, and an illusory feeling of wholeness and unity. Moreover, the mechanisms used to do so render cinematic spectatorship not only psychologically pleasurable, but sexually gratifying besides.

Drawing on these defaults, which are inscribed within, and draw upon, the male-centered tradition of narrative cinema, the first part of the film positions the viewer to identify with Robert by placing him at the center of the story. The plot, which follows the pattern of a rape-revenge

film (though with a twist), positions Robert as the viewer's in-film surrogate by structuring the entire narrative action around him and his desire to enact a fitting revenge on Vicente, his daughter's aggressor. Moreover, because at first, the connection between the two narrative lines—depicting Robert and Vera's relationship and Robert and Vicente's relationship, respectively—is unclear, Robert is understood to be the common thread connecting two apparently disparate narrative threads and thus bringing meaning to the story as a whole. Thus, as the film's principal mover, Robert fulfills “the ego's desire to fantasise itself in a certain, active, manner” (Mulvey 1981; 125).

Adding further weight to his narrative authority and importance, Ledgard's construction as semiotic sign likewise presents a compelling case for the viewer's identification. In addition to the prestige conferred on him through his vocation, the details of Robert's semiotic construction imbue him with all the material accoutrements of power, making identification with the image all the more compelling. For example, the grandeur of his surroundings—the enormous estate, complete with a private operating room *and* impressively-equipped science laboratory on the property itself; Robert's unmistakably phallic³¹ BMW, a conspicuous consumer choice denoting privilege and belonging; an entire staff of domestic workers at his disposal; the magnificent views, the opulent furnishings, and the enormous art pieces seen throughout the house—speak not only of money, but of *wealth*—in short, a kind of privilege and social class that one does not merely arrive at, but is rather born into.

Just as important, however, as a semiotic sign, Robert is designed in every way as to connote *power*. In this regard, the godlike comparisons are unmistakable, as evinced by his ability to grow human skin, for example, or the emphasis placed on Ledgard's role as *creator*—

³¹ Of phallic objects, Susan Bordo notes “it's not just the visual or verbal allusion to penislike anatomical features that makes a car (or a rocket) a phallic symbol (those allusions may in fact be pretty schematic or obscure); rather, the suggestion of masculine authority and power is required” (85).

and to Vera as his *creation*. Indeed, as Francisco Zurian observes, constructed as an omnipotent deity:

Ledgard projects the role of the quintessential patriarchal figure, the alpha male, who directs the actions and behaviors of those around him. He possesses all the attributes of traditional masculinity: strength, audacity, shrewdness, ambition, power. Vicente as transformed into Vera is an object in his hands, his creation and possession, a new incarnation of Adam's rib. (272)

But instead of creating Vera in his own image and likeness, Robert molds her in the image of his dead wife, Gal. Thus, at another level, Ledgard's seemingly superhuman power to create—and more concretely, his power to create “woman,” tailor-made to the specifications of his own desire, independent of any biological reality—is overlaid with a parallel power to resuscitate the dead.

In the same way, Robert asserts dominion over his creation by exerting his power to name. Thus, after subjecting his decidedly male patient to a number of involuntary operations, including a surgical castration, whereby exchanging the (literal and symbolic) phallus for a material *lack*—he marks the completion of his new creation—her figurative birth—with an entirely different name: “A partir de hoy te llamarás Vera” (“From today, your name is Vera”) he says, admiring his handiwork. Yet, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out, the act of naming, “a mark of possession” that has played “a crucial role in colonial history” (142), is premised on a power dynamic that is, by definition, unequal. As they assert: “the power of creation is inextricably entwined with the power of naming – God lends Adam his naming authority as a mark of his rule, and Eve is ‘called Woman because she was taken out of man’” (Shohat and Stam 142).

Like a god, Robert's surveillance of Vera via the security cameras in her room imbues him with an omniscience and omnipresence characteristic of the divine. As a result, despite the

distinct limitations on his sight imposed by the physical materiality of his body, the surveillance system nevertheless allows Robert to function as a “transcendental subject” (Baudry 360) of vision, fettered by neither time nor space. Consequently, there is nothing that Vera does which Robert does not see or is otherwise informed of, and as the all-knowing, all-seeing, disembodied eye/I of the narrative, the gaze of the camera and the look of the spectator are likewise formally aligned with Robert’s perspective.

But instead of fusing the gaze of the camera (and hence the viewer’s) to Robert’s perspective from the onset, the film stages this eventual conflation as a gradual unveiling that builds on the viewer’s existing fears and fascinations by first foregrounding the extensions to Robert’s scopic authority enabled by the panopticon. In so doing, the text allows for Vera, its female object, to be posited as like object of spectatorial desire. This link, in operation from the beginning of the film, is seen in the technologically mediated extensions to Robert’s sight present in the opening montage, such as the video phone installed at the front gate, the CCTV camera in the opening credits, or the dual TV monitors in the kitchen streaming live feed from Vera’s room to different viewing stations throughout the house. Notably, however, the beginning of the film only underscores such devices, thus calling attention to such technologically mediated ways of seeing, while significantly refraining from aligning the view of the camera to any one character’s perspective until later in the story.

In fact, one of the first images of the film is a close-up of a CCTV security camera mounted on a wall in Vera’s room. Significantly, however, the dark plastic sphere that encases the device means that one cannot see where the eye of the camera points, recalling Foucault’s assertion that it is simply the *possibility* of being watched that exerts a self-policing effect on the subject itself. As the image zooms out, the words “un film de Almodóvar” appear immediately

below the diegetic camera, and as the frame continues to move outward, we catch our first glimpse of Vera wearing a skintight flesh-colored body stocking, frozen in an inverted yoga pose across a couch. Significantly, the way that the camera zooms out to incorporate her into the frame, together with the inverted 'C' created by her body, means that Vera's breasts are the first part of her body to enter the frame before the rest of her body comes into view.

The next shot, in which Vera appears to have repositioned herself on the same couch in the same pose but facing the opposite direction, begins with her feet and then moves up the length of her body, across her knees, up her legs, pelvis, torso, and her breasts before coming to a stop in a medium close-up that frames her breasts, head, arms and hands. This gaze, a distinctly sexual gaze, is further emphasized as such by the full length skin-colored bodysuit that she wears, which, in addition to its prominent seams, such as the U-shaped zippers immediately under her breasts accentuating the curves of her body, in this way highlights Vera's *constructedness* while simultaneously imbuing her with the illusion of nakedness.

On a separate, yet interconnected level, the film also works to seduce male spectatorial identification through—to paraphrase Mary Ann Doane—an 'excess of masculinity' which finds added influence through the way it intersects with Robert's construction as a figure of medical and scientific authority. Indeed, from the first, the way that Robert is presented to the viewer shows his own personal authority to derive power from the way it converges with, and is buttressed by, the greater authority conferred on him as a representative of the rational and "objective" discourse of science. For instance, the first image of Robert in the film shows him dressed in a suit standing at a podium in the middle of an amphitheater auditorium, elucidating both his personal and professional influence by showing that people have gathered there for the explicit purpose of hearing what he has to say. On the screen behind him, the viewer sees six

rotating computer-generated images of different faces, each with a prominent facial deformity. The next shot, a reverse shot taken from immediately behind Robert, which explicitly includes him, from the waist up, within the frame—formally aligns the view of the camera with Robert’s perspective while simultaneously revealing to the viewer the audience to whom he speaks.

Furthermore, Robert’s discourse, in which he affirms that he has participated in “three of the nine face transplants carried out in the world” (“he participado en tres de los nueve trasplantes de rostro que se han llevado a cabo en el mundo”), substantiates the importance of his contributions to the profession and provides the viewer with evidence of his power and influence on a global level as well. In addition, Robert’s presentation, which establishes the need for burn victims to have a face and explains how face transplants can make this need a reality, thus links him to the “scientific” ideals of progress and technology, lending further weight to his semiotic positioning and design.

In the sequence that follows, which transitions from Robert’s medical lecture to a narrative emphasis on ‘man-in-his-natural-surroundings,’ the viewer witnesses a surreptitious hand-off of what is later revealed to be a unit of blood which, notwithstanding the clandestine nature of the transaction, is legitimately packaged in a medical carrying case reminiscent of the kind used to transport human organs. We then see Robert enter his private laboratory, upon which he abandons the suit coat he is wearing in exchange for a white lab coat. This, along with the various instruments of science seen in the sequence, such as the latex gloves, petri dish, syringe, microscope, cryogenic freezer, test tubes, glass bottles, and so on, metonymically construct Robert as an-film symbol of medical and scientific authority. Appropriately, then, when Robert looks into the microscope, a reverse shot reveals to the viewer the microscopic life forms that Robert sees.

All of these clues, which foreshadow the eventual conflation of Robert's gaze with that of the viewer, are explicitly brought together in the following sequence, in which the film presents the viewer with an illustration of how the gaze of the 1) pro-filmic camera, 2) the diegetic surveillance camera, 3) Robert's gaze, and 4) that of the spectator are fused together via the image of the woman as sexual object of the gaze.

The beginning of this sequence, which is marked by a change of scenery that takes the viewer from the science laboratory that precedes it to the sumptuous interior of Robert's house, opens with a tracking shot of Ledgard ascending the staircase. Of note is that Robert has once again changed his white lab coat for his gray suit coat, which, in turn, complements the lavish interior and the sleek modern lighting fixtures hanging in the stairwell. As Robert moves up the stairs, past Vera's room, and to his office, he passes by two enormous paintings, Tiziano Vecellio's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and *Venus with Organist and Cupid* (1548), respectively, hanging prominently in the hall outside Vera's room. The paintings, each of which features a naked woman reclining within the boundaries of an elaborate frame, add a feel of opulence to Robert's surroundings and also provide the viewer with additional proofs of Robert's wealth and power.

Entering his office, Robert is filmed from the front as he picks up the remote control and turns on the TV. The next shot, taken from behind him with Robert facing away from the camera and toward the diegetic TV, reveals him to be standing in front of an enormous television screen on which Vera appears lying naked on a bed with her back to the viewer. Whereas on one hand, the film uses high-contrast lighting to emphasize the perfection of her body, the presence of the additional frame provided by the diegetic TV also allows Vera to be explicitly represented *as an image*. At the same time, the enormity of the TV screen and the content of the image—a nude

female body—create direct parallels to the naked women in the paintings seen in the hallway only moments before. The shot then cuts from a full-body image of Ledgard, watching the screen, to a close-up of Robert’s face, then to an image that formally aligns *the viewer* to see what *he* sees: an extreme close-up of Vera, naked, as the camera moves across the surface of her body, up her legs, along her backside, and across her torso before coming to rest in an image that frames just her head and trunk. In this moment, “the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is . . . a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look” (Mulvey 844-45).

Thus, eight minutes into the film, after alternately foregrounding the technologically mediated extensions to Robert’s sight and aligning the gaze of the camera to Robert’s perspective, the film finally conflates the two, and in so doing, formally fuses the spectator to Robert’s subject position.

But at the same time the camera focuses on Vera’s body, simultaneously reproducing Robert’s look, an infinitesimal detail leaves just enough distance to disallow complete immersion in the illusion: the extreme close up of Vera’s naked body, unbounded on three sides by the diegetic screen, leaves a nearly imperceptible sliver of gray to the very left of the frame, pointing to the limits of its own illusion. This “negative” space, perceptible only in contrast to the movement that characterizes the rest of the frame, offers the viewer a subtle reminder that what the audience is watching is nevertheless taking place on a screen-within-the-screen.

In contrast, the next shot is zoomed back out to include the entire TV, on whose screen Vera’s naked body, explicitly represented *as an image*, is seen within the frame of the larger frame on which the spectator of *La piel que habito* watches the movie unfold. By transitioning

thus from extreme close-up (i.e., (near) complete illusion), to a full shot depicting Robert before the diegetic TV, the camera reframes the image in a way that reflexively reminds the viewer of his own relationship to the text. In other words, whereas the close-up that omits three-quarters of the diegetic frame allows the viewer to enjoy the erotic content of the image; the larger shot, which shows Vera *as an image*, disallows the viewer complete immersion in the illusion. Or, to paraphrase Robert Stam, the film ‘indulges in the illusion and then pulls us out.’ “It casts a spell and then as quickly disenchant” (5). Moreover, on a formal level, the sequence likewise gives explicit evidence to show that the gaze of the camera is thus formally aligned with Robert’s sexually objectifying gaze.

In so doing, Robert’s semiotic construction, which compels the viewer’s identification, converges with film form to stitch the viewer into Robert’s subject position.

* * *

In the remainder of this section, I examine the paintings in Robert’s house and link them to the following ideas:

- 1) That the paintings in Robert’s diegetic world create formal parallels to Vera—the nude woman—who has been *constructed*, in every sense of the word, for Robert’s—and consequently, the viewer’s—sexual pleasure, which
- 2) I then compare to what art historian John Berger has said in reference to the nude, or the specific type of paintings seen in the film; which I connect to Berger’s observation in regards to placeholders and surrogate lovers expressly depicted in such paintings, relating this idea back to Robert’s character in relation Vera, the female protagonist, as well as the spectator interpellated by the film.

- 3) I conclude my analysis by examining the use of rape as a cinematic trope that, together with a sudden shift in the availability of subject positions, sutures the viewer to imaginatively live the same subjective experience twice: once from the pleasurable (if problematic) vantage point of its male subject and again from the embodied physical violence enacted on its female object.

The Nude

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), art critic John Berger reiterates an idea first made by the art historian Kenneth Clark in his book, *The Nude* (1960): that while to be naked is to simply be without clothes, the nude, in contrast, is a particular type of art—it is a specific way of seeing that the painting (image, artwork, advertisement, photograph) achieves (53). However, because the nude is, by definition, “a painting of sexual provocation” (54), the statement it makes is ultimately one of lived sexuality, for whereas to be naked is to be oneself, to be nude is to be seen naked by another (53-54). Or, as Berger puts it: “a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (54).

According to Berger, in this category of art, the spectator is not only assumed, he—and the spectator is most definitely male—forms an inextricable part of the painting itself. As Berger explains:

In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger—with his clothes still on. (54)

As Berger elaborates, it is precisely for this reason that “almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal—either literally or metaphorically—because the sexual protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it” (56).

Appropriately, the enormous paintings seen throughout Robert’s house, such as Tiziano Vecellio’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538) (Figure 2.1); the same artist’s *Venus with Organist and Cupid* (1548) (Figure 2.3); Guillermo Pérez Villalta’s *Dionisio encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos* / *Dionysus Finds Ariadne in Naxos* (2008) (Figure 2.4); and Juan Gatti’s *Ciencias Naturales* all point, in different ways, to the spectator for whom the image has been created.

In the first painting, Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, which in the film is seen directly outside Vera’s room, a woman gazes out at a viewer who looks at her naked.



Figure 2.1. In Tiziano Vecellio’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), the artwork (embodied in the woman’s gaze) points to its own status as a construction.

The nakedness of the woman's body and the directness of her gaze, the latter of which points out from the painting to match the gaze of the spectator without, call attention to the painting's status as a *construction*—an erotic image called into existence for the sexual gratification of the spectator. By thus addressing the viewer, however, the painting points to its own status as an artwork in a way that cannot be ignored. Implicit in this structure, then, is the presence of the spectator, for in positing the woman as *object*, what the nude circuitously reinforces is the spectator's *subject* position.

However, by placing such paintings *within* Vera's world, *La piel que habito* accomplishes two things:

First, the work-within-a-work—that is, the painting within the film—adds an additional layer of representation that allows for the traditionally invisible spectator-owner of the painting to be *explicitly represented* within the larger space of the film. In other words, the painting-within-the-film allows Robert, as owner of the artwork, to be not only implied, but to be explicitly portrayed as its spectator-owner.

Second, the diegetic surveillance system at work in the story creates parallels between Vera, who, either wearing the flesh-colored bodysuit or wearing nothing at all, appears naked within in the boundaries of a different frame—the in-film screens on which the in-film spectators watch her.

Throughout the movie, Vera is most frequently depicted within the confines of her bedroom-prison, which in turn is equipped with video cameras providing up-to-the-moment feed of her various activities—whether practicing yoga, piecing together lumpen human sculptures à la Louise Bourgeois using fragments of skin-colored sackcloth, watching the limited (censored) TV channels in her room, or writing on the walls of her prison-diary with a makeup pencil—to

different viewing stations within the house. At the same time, the dual TV monitors in the kitchen, each of which depicts a different angle of Vera's room, provide the in-film viewer—whether Robert, Zeca, or Marilia—two different perspectives of the same event as it occurs in real time.

In the same way, the enormous TV in Robert's office, on which he watches Vera, recalls, at one remove, the viewer's relationship—*our* relationship—to the screen. In short, the presence of this screen-within-a-screen—that is to say, A) an *in-film* screen on which an *in-film* character watches Vera; depicted within B) the larger bounds of the *actual* screen on which the spectator watches the movie—occasions a heightened awareness of the process of spectatorship, while is happening.

Like the tiny sliver of gray at the far end of the diegetic movie screen signaling the limits of its own illusion, such metacinematic cues permit a measure of immersion in the illusion while allowing just enough space in order for self-conscious awareness to emerge. In other words, in the process of watching others watch, the film provides the perfect opportunity for us to realize that we, too, are watching. In so doing, *La piel que habito* keeps one foot firmly planted within the tradition of illusionism, and in so doing, allows the viewer its pleasures, while simultaneously highlighting the spectator's own complicity in a structure that it later uses to alienate the viewer from himself.

At the same time, the emphasis of such dynamics in regard to Robert, Vera's "spectator-owner," brings self-consciousness reflexivity to the viewer of *La piel que habito*, watching the film unfold. In other words, because watching is an embodied experience, although one may readily experience the *sensation* of watching, one is unable to watch oneself watch. However, by externalizing the process of looking and transposing the look that resides in the self to the realm

of the other—*La piel que habito* successfully represents, at one remove, the spectator's relationship to the text.

In Mulvey's essay, the author argues that the cinematic look is so powerful precisely because it conflates three different gazes: 1) that of the original camera as it records the pro-filmic event; 2) that of the spectator as s/he watches the final film product; and 3) the gaze of the characters as they look at each other within the film (847). Yet, as Mulvey argues, in order for the audience to fully immerse itself in the illusion, "the conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third" (847). In other words, although the cinematic gaze consists of three separate looks, conventional narrative cinema denies the gaze of the camera *and* the gaze of the spectator, conflating both with the look of the protagonist—the gaze of the male hero as he looks at the woman.

However, when Robert watches Vera on the private TV in his office (Figure 2.2), the camera cuts to a shot that formally unites *four* different gazes instead of the traditional three: 1) that of the original camera recording the event; 2) that of the diegetic camera that makes 'Vera-as-image' narratively possible, shown on an in-film screen; 3) the gaze of the in-film protagonist (Robert) as he looks at an in-film object (Vera); and 4) that of the extra-diegetic spectator, positioned directly behind Robert, watching the film unfold.



Figure 2.2. *La piel que habito* (2011). Robert gazes at Vera as if looking at a work of art. The screen-within-a-screen, which enables Vera to be *represented* as an image, adds a measure of reflexivity to the text.

Whereas Mulvey shows that the male gaze functions on the combination of three different looks—looks 1, 3, and 4, above—the incorporation of the extra metacinematic layer provided by the in-film camera and the in-film screen—provides the perfect circumstance to bring reflexivity to the act of looking. In other words, by incorporating an additional frame around Vera, and in this way, explicitly portraying her *as an image*, the film presents a model of the apparatus in miniature and obliges the spectator to observe, via Robert’s subject position, his own relationship to the text.

Robert as the Viewer’s Surrogate

In contrast to this first painting, in which the gaze of the woman acknowledges her submission to the spectator-owner without, Titian’s *Venus with Organist and Cupid* (Figure 2.3) and Guillermo Pérez Villalta’s *Dionysus Finds Ariadne in Naxos* (Figure 2.4), which in the film

are seen hanging in the hallway immediately outside Vera’s room and on the wall in Robert’s office, respectively—each depict a male lover within the frame presuming to possess the naked woman. However, as Berger observes, even in cases in which the nude explicitly portrays a lover within the boundaries of its frame, it is clear from either the way that the woman’s body is arranged (maximized for the benefit of the spectator without, as opposed to the lover within, for example), or the direction of the woman’s gaze (directed away from her lover and toward the viewer without), that the man in the painting merely serves as a placeholder for “the one who considers himself her true lover – the spectator-owner” outside (Berger 56).

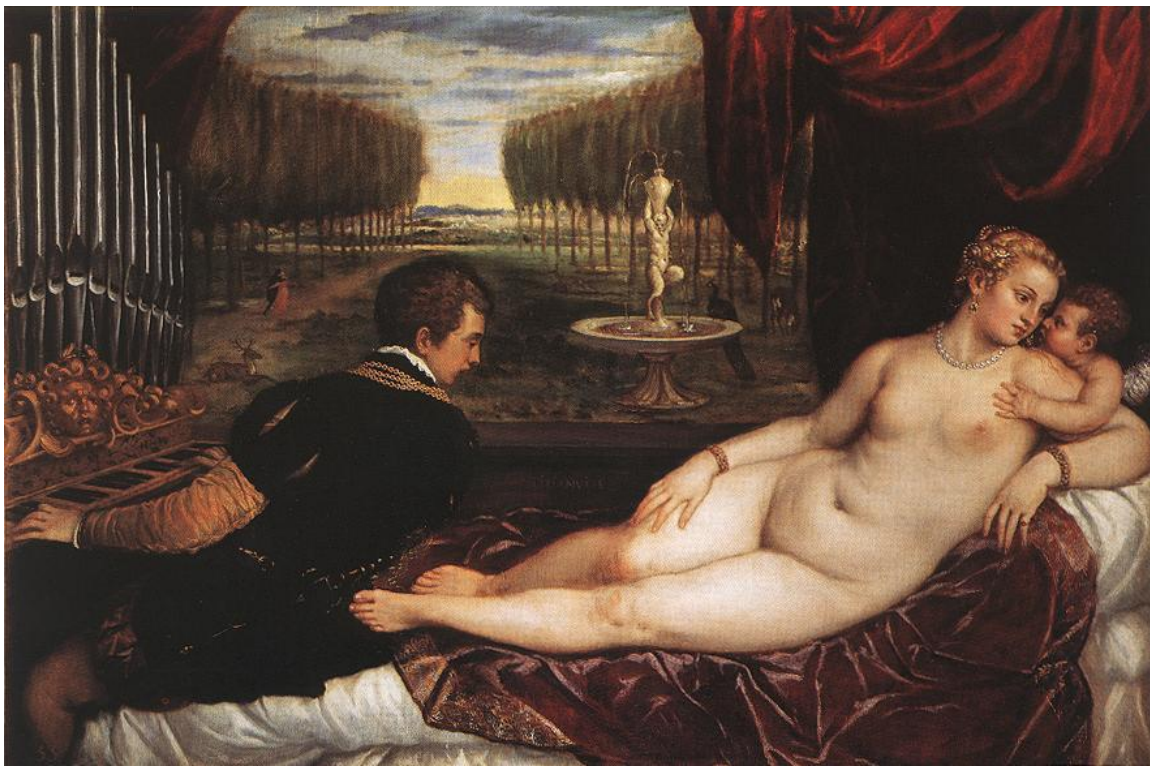


Figure 2.3. In Tiziano Vecellio’s *Venus with Organist and Cupid* (1548), although the painting explicitly portrays two different lovers within the boundaries of its frame, the way that the woman’s body is positioned shows that these would-be lovers serve merely as placeholders for the spectator-owner outside.

In the film, the way that the Pérez Villalta painting is revealed provides an important clue regarding Robert's relationship to the spectator. Notably, the first time we see the painting is in Robert's office, located in time between the two Titian paintings seen in the hallway a moment before and immediately before film form fuses the spectator's gaze to Robert's gaze via the image of Vera on the diegetic screen.

However, the way that this image first comes into the frame and is consequently presented to the viewer creates a striking parallel between Ledgard and the male figure in the painting. As Robert enters his office through the door at the right of the frame, the painting, which hangs on the wall to the left, is visually cut in half so that only the man of male-female pair is seen, creating a link between Robert and the male figure in the painting. The camera, which lingers for a moment with the painting at the left of the frame and Ledgard to the right, then tracks left to incorporate the rest of the painting—i.e., the image of the naked woman—into the frame, upon which it then moves down to show Robert picking up the remote control and pressing the “on” button before finally cutting to a full-body shot of Robert before a diegetic TV on which a nearly-identical image of Vera is seen.



Figure 2.4. Guillermo Pérez Villalta, *Dionisio encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos / Dionysus Finds Ariadne in Naxos* (2008). The way that this painting first appears in *La piel que habito* visually divides the artwork in half so that only the male figure appears, at the left of the cinematic frame, while Robert appears on the right, and is likewise suggestive of the way that Robert exists in the film as the extradiegetic viewer's filmic surrogate.

However, whereas the presentation of this painting only hints at Robert's relationship to the viewer, several sequences later, the spectator is given explicit evidence that like the surrogate lover in the paintings, Robert exists in the film as a diegetic surrogate for the spectator-subject *outside*—the one to whom the image is addressed and for whom the illusion is staged.

This sequence, which transports the viewer through a montage of Robert conducting various “mad scientist” experiments in his underground laboratory, then cuts to an aerial view of a naked and headless female mannequin whose body lays supine to the camera. The mannequin’s body, which is sectioned into pieces, recalls Vera’s Louise Bourgeois figures seen earlier in the film and likewise points reflexively to Vera’s own body due to the prominent seams etched into her bodysuit. The sutures along the mannequin’s neck, down the middle of the body, across its abdomen, along the breasts, and prominently around its sex, in this way foreground the seams of its own construction. At the far right of the frame, the back of Ledgard’s head hovers over the mannequin’s nonexistent head, momentarily obscuring the space from view. As he pulls away, however, the aerial image of the headless mannequin dissolves into a nearly identical image of Vera lying naked with her eyes closed on the same table in the same position with her head now superimposed onto the neck of the dummy. Notably, the mannequin’s seams are now etched into Vera’s own body.

Immediately after the dissolve, Vera, filmed from directly above, opens her eyes and looks directly into the camera and hence, straight at the spectator. The very next shot, a low angle shot intended to formally reproduce Vera’s perspective and thus show the viewer what she sees, reveals a low-angle shot of Robert, thus explicitly illustrating that like Robert’s relationship to the women in the paintings, Vera exists within the fiction of the film as the *spectator’s* surrogate lover—the one through whom the viewer is able to possess the naked woman.

Moreover, when the film reveals that Vicente is Vera, this sequence repeats almost identically. In it, we see a close-up of Vera’s face as she lies on an operating table as Robert removes her silicone mask. The camera first moves upward to focus on the mask, and then reframes itself to show Robert standing over Vera, looking down. Its reverse, a high angle shot

of Vera from Robert's perspective, is taken from above as Vera looks directly into the camera—and consequently, at the viewer. The next shot, which shows Robert from Vera's perspective, thus explicitly fuses Robert and the viewer into a single entity. With the cyborg mask now lifted, Robert's declares, "ya no puedo seguir llamándote Vicente" ("I can't keep calling you Vicente"), thus explicitly confirming the same horror that the viewer has already come to suspect.

However, even as the narrative encourages regarding Vera as object of spectatorial desire, it does so critically and self-consciously, using metacinematic cues that foreground, to paraphrase Robert Stam, the processes of Vera's construction, production, authorship, reception, and/or enunciation (xiii) while at the same time using the sexual lure of the "female" image to encourage patriarchal patterns of looking. Woman appears at once metaphor and embodied, de(constructed) and specularized *within* the film in the same way that Vera, as metaphor and embodied construct, exists in reference to the film as well as to the spectator outside it, the one to whom the artwork is addressed.

Reflexivity as Political and Narrative Strategy

In *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* (1985), Robert Stam defines reflexive texts as literary and filmic works that "break with art as enchantment and point to their own factitiousness as textual constructs" (xi). In contrast to illusionism, which aims to present "its characters as real people" and "its representations as substantiated fact," Stam contends that reflexivity "points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture" (1). In practice, this can manifest itself as a direct visual address to the camera, a direct verbal address, a frame-within-the-frame, a film-within-the-film, reflexive intertitles, or the display of the apparatus within the text (Stam xiv). Broadly defined, then, a reflexive text is one that is self-

referential or anti-illusionistic in some way, either by calling attention to its status as artwork, by openly flaunting the codes of its construction, or by pointing to the “gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue” (Stam 7).

If reflexivity in the paintings above is characterized by the awareness that a work of art creates about itself as a construction, then *La piel que habito* occasions this awareness on several different, interpenetrating levels. In short, although the film posits Vera as object of spectatorial desire, it does so while simultaneously foregrounding Vera’s status as *body*, as *image*, and as *art*—that is, by actively using the three traditional tropes that patriarchal cinema has historically used to represent women.

While on the one hand, the film draws on established modes of heteropatriarchal normativity and uses it to invite spectatorial desire; it does so self-consciously, while pointing to its own complicity with the mechanism itself. Or, as Samuel Amago has observed in reference to *Los abrazos rotos / Broken Embraces* (2009), “throughout the film the apparatus of cinematic enunciation is signaled reflexively, making itself visible through self-reference” (27).

The motif of woman as image/body/art is echoed in the nude paintings, the lumpen Bourgeois figures, Vera on the television screen, as well as a motif identified by Leora Lev in *¡Atame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), but in this case equally applicable to *La piel que habito*: “characters framed by and/or peering through elaborate apertures” (206). For example, in a part of Vicente’s flashback that takes place in his mother’s clothing shop, the latter is shown peering through a rectangular opening that separates the back of the shop from the front. The way that the wooden molding on the wall wraps around the bottom of the aperture means that it looks conspicuously like a picture frame. Moreover, the two wooden artist mannequins perched on its ledge create further parallels to Vera.

As a result, even as the viewer is positioned to find the experience of woman-as-object pleasurable, the film does so while simultaneously foregrounding Vera's *constructedness* as body, as image, and as work of art. More importantly, due to the elaborate surveillance system inscribed into the narrative and thus expressed in film form, Vera is posited as "herself" as well as explicitly "image," on the one hand corroborating the illusion while on the other acknowledging the processes of her own constructedness. As a text, she literally *embodies* "the metaphorical capacity of cultural productions to 'look at' themselves" (Stam xiii). Moreover, Vera is represented as body and image and artwork *within* Robert's scopic universe as she is simultaneously constructed as all three, on another level, in reference to the film as a whole. As a result, the film, embodied in Vera as a character, directly addresses the spectator watching *La piel que habito* unfold. In so doing, however, the film aligns the fourth and fifth walls of the illusion (Lev 205) and effectively breaks through both.

In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1975), Christian Metz likens the spectator in the audience to the subject before the mirror while emphasizing one fundamental difference between mirror and screen: "although . . . in the latter [film], 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" (822).

However, instead of seamlessly incorporating such constructs into the film, thereby "naturalizing" the process by rendering it invisible, *La piel que habito* brings conscious awareness to the act of looking: first, in acts of looking which momentarily "break" the film's illusion; and second, by conflating Vera's existence as body, as image, and art, *within* the space of the film in reference to how she exists in relation to the spectator without, deliberately blurring the boundaries between illusion and the film's diegetic reality; and finally, by way of setting Robert up as Vera's explicit spectator, within the space of the text.

In other words, although Metz avers that the only thing that cannot be represented in the film is the spectator's own body, what *La piel que habito* does is create a cinematic circumstance that represents, and thus returns, to the viewer his own relationship to the image. Put differently, in the process of watching others watch, the film reminds us that we, too, are watching.

Vera Cut to the Measure of the Spectator's Desire

But just like Vera exists within the text for the benefit of Robert's pleasure, she also acknowledges that she has been literally "cut to the measure" of Robert's desire; that is, that she has been *constructed*, literally and figuratively, for the benefit of *his* sexual and scopophilic pleasure. For example, in an incident that takes place shortly after Vicente's vaginoplasty, Robert enters Vicente's room with a case of synthetic penises—which the former calls "dilators" ("dialadores"), but which are in reality dildos of various sizes, each larger than the last. As a horrified Vicente looks on, Robert explains to Vicente that he must now use these synthetic penises in order to keep his newly formed vagina open, using Robert's surrogate phallus to enact a repeated rape on himself:

Escucha bien lo que te voy a decir, Vicente. Es muy importante. Bien. Como acabas de ver, la operación ha sido un éxito. Pero los tejidos que forman la vagina están todavía muy tiernos y podrían pegarse. Pero no te preocupes. Evitarlo es fácil. Tienes... tienes que mantener abierto el nuevo orificio y conseguir que poco a poco se haga más profundo. Piensa que tu vida depende de ese orificio. Que respire por él. Dentro de este martín hay varios dilatadores de distintos tamaños. Empieza introduciéndote el más pequeño. [Levantando el más pequeño]. Te dolerá al principio. Pero en pocos meses, te cabrá el más grande [Levantando el más grande] sin esfuerzo. La piel estará perfectamente cicatrizada.

Listen carefully to what I'm going to say. It's very important. As you've just seen, the operation was successful, but the tissues of the vagina are still very tender and could stick together. But don't worry, it's easy to prevent that. You...you have to keep the new orifice open and manage, bit by bit, to make it deeper. Think that your life depends on that orifice, that you breathe through it. In this case there are several dilators of different sizes. Start by inserting the smallest one. [Holding up

the smallest]. It will hurt at first, but in a few months, the largest one [Holding up the largest] will fit without any effort and the skin will be perfectly healed.

In this way, the film shows that Vera, as body, has been literally constructed to the measure of Robert's desire, and, as the last penis that he holds up suggests, the dimensions of Vera's vagina have been molded, with surgical precision, to the specificity of *his* subjectivity and desire. In other words, Vera, as body, is constructed as a living breathing sexual cavity created specifically for the benefit of *his* sexual pleasure.

However, the spectator's identification with Robert means that when Robert has sex with Vera, the film puts the viewer in a position to possess her as well. For example, the first time in the film when Robert is has (non-consensual) sex with Vera, the shot, taken directly from above with Robert on top of Vera and Vera on her back under him, facing the camera, she looks directly into the camera, thus acknowledging the "real" spectator for whom she (as body, as image) has been constructed—the extra-diegetic spectator without. In this way, film form reflexively corroborates that Robert is a mere stand-in for the viewer, who is in this way formally interpellated and incorporated into the illusion.

Moreover, because it is Robert's penis that dictates Vera's sexual construction—that is, because it is *her* sex that has been explicitly made to receive his penis, later, when Vera says:

VERA. ¿Te gusta lo que ves? Soy tuya. Estoy hecha a tu medida. Y acabas de decirme que te gusto.
ROBERT. ¿He dicho eso?
VERA. [Mirando directamente a la cámara y luego a Robert] Sé que me miras.

VERA. I'm yours. I'm made to measure for you. And you've just told me that you like me.
ROBERT. Did I say that?
VERA. [Looking directly at the camera and then at Robert]. I know you look at me.

By looking directly at the camera when she says “I know you look at me,” Vera acknowledges the viewer’s gaze and the fact of her own constructedness for both Robert and the extra-diegetic viewer’s gratification and makes explicit reference that the two are fused.

But in the process of representing, diegetically, the *constructedness* of the image, the spectator is also led to understand that Vera’s constructedness extends to several different levels. Like the nudes, whose bodies on display confirm that they have been created in order to be looked at, Vera is called into existence on several different levels: first, by Robert, as a body, within the diegetic space of the text; second, in reference to the work as a whole, by the creator of the film; meaning that she has also been constructed for the benefit of the historical spectator in the audience, watching the movie take place. As an image, then, Vera is doubly aligned to the spectator’s gaze: first, to the spectator *within* the text—Robert—and second, to that of the spectator of the film.

What’s more, Robert’s ability to zoom in, via remote control, on various parts of Vera at will, likewise brings awareness to the way that the film is constructed in a similar way. By creating a context that returns to the viewer the mechanics of how the spectator is incorporated into the text—that the fact of *what* the camera shows, *how* it shows it, and *where* it aims its focus are all subjective decisions made by concrete individuals obscured behind the story—“representation undertakes to represent itself” (Stam 3), thus bringing focused awareness to the act of looking.

Moreover, Robert’s ability to zoom in on Vera via the remote control in his office offers a reminder that regardless of the viewer’s acknowledgement, the purportedly impartial gaze of the camera necessarily assumes the subjectivity of the distinct individuals behind it just as surely as any film is a subjective product of the individuals—although the phallic institution of cinema

privileges the exclusive role of director—who have pieced it together. As the film makes clear, in neither case is it a disembodied event. With the inclusion of this extra “checkpoint” of consciousness, however, the text offers a poignant reminder of just how much of the viewer’s perspective is controlled by this invisible entity.

By structuring the narrative in such a way that the process of looking takes center stage, the spectator is reminded that the movie is ultimately about *the viewer’s* own relationship to the film, and that as such, the looking of the characters is explicitly related to the viewer’s own complicity in the act of looking. Consequently, each time a character looks at a screen and sees Vera, the frame of the diegetic TV seen just inside the boundaries of the actual screen on which *we* are watching creates just the necessary distance to realize that we, too, are watching.

Empathy with Vicente

In addition to encouraging the viewer’s identification with Robert and suturing the gaze of the camera (and hence that of the spectator) to Robert’s gaze, narrative and visual design also converge to encourage the viewer’s empathy for Vicente. Consequently, at the end of the film, when an unforeseen turn of events complicates the dominance of Robert’s subject position, the urgency of Vicente’s story, which builds increasing momentum during the second half of the film, makes the eventual shift in viewer identification appear both natural and effortless—a logical consequence of eliminating the first narrative line.

Moreover, in designing the narrative to encourage the viewer’s empathy for, and eventual identification with, Vicente, the film structures the viewer to occupy opposing ends of the same subjective experience by mapping the distinctly female violence of rape onto the bodily parameters of the male body.

The use of rape in Almodóvar's films has been severely criticized. According to Leora Lev, "nearly all of Pedro Almodóvar's films deal with rape either as a principal action propelling plot or an insistent narrative trope" (203). Yet, as Lev points out, although Almodóvar's films do use gender-based violence, they do so reflexively—that is, while critically foregrounding the same structures that the films employ.

In the same way, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes that rape, attempted rape, and sexual abuse appear throughout Almodóvar's oeuvre, including in *Pepe, Luci, Bom* (*Pepe, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, 1980), *Labyrinth of Passions* (*Laberinto de pasiones*, 1982), *Matador* (1986), *Tie Me Up! Tie me Down!* (*¡Átame!* 1990), *Kika* (1993), *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002), *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004) and *Volver* (2006) (142).

Indeed, the critiques against the use of rape in representation are many and the charges that have been leveled against it are allegations of which *La piel* is guilty. However, rather than dismissing the film outright for its use of sexual violence, my analysis proposes a more nuanced and critical reading of the multiple rapes portrayed in the film. On the one hand, although the film's portrayal of rape colludes with, and fulfills, many of the anti-feminist accusations that have been leveled against it, I argue that it is precisely the use of rape that renders the final horror of the film so effective.

Through a self-critical narrative that compels the spectator to regard the violence of rape from two different subject positions, each with its own vested interest—first from an embodied subjectivity that fuses his own physical embodiment to that of the male figure onscreen; then again from the embodied reality of the female victim on whom the rape is enacted—the film demonstrates that what is inconsequential and even pleasurable when seen from one subject position assumes a whole new meaning when viewed from another. As such, although the

portrayal of rape in the film contributes to some of the same accusations that critics have leveled against it—namely, its ambiguity (as in Norma’s case), or its use “as metaphor, symbol, plot device, for character transformation, catalyst, or narrative resolution” (Russell 4), each of which draws attention away from the victim on whom the violence is enacted, I propose that the film employs the violence in a way that acknowledges, builds on, and/or works through these problems in a way that destabilizes the subject position of the hegemonic viewer.

To begin, a look at the scholarship on rape reveals a litany of compelling arguments against its portrayal that are nevertheless exemplified in *La piel*. For Lynn Higgins, as for others, a key problem of the portrayal of rape onscreen is the element of ambiguity. As she observes, “the specific difficulties of ‘proving’ that what occurred was a rape, framed within the possibilities and limitations of filmic representation, add up to stage (even invite) the discursive disappearance of a crime” (306). Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Dominique Russell makes the declaration that: “in art cinema as in other forms of filmic narrative, rape is at once present and absent, a given, but not quite there” (2). In other words, because the option of formally corroborating the physical act of rape is unauthorized by the parameters of the genre, the result is that such restrictions replace certainty with ambiguity, often with deleterious effects.

Notably, *La piel que habito* portrays three different rapes, the most crucial of which—Norma’s—is characterized by the same type of ambiguity. Because the film uses a medium close-up to portray the assault as it takes place—that is, a shot focusing on Norma and Vicente’s head and shoulders with the rest of their bodies implied the space-off—in the absence of a concrete formal affirmation of rape, the viewer is left to context (the expressions on Norma and Vicente’s faces during the assault, for example; aural and visual clues suggestive of penetration) and subsequently, speculation—“What does Norma look like after the fact?” “Can we deduce

anything from the way her clothing looks?”—in order to extricate meaning from a highly ambivalent situation.

But if *La piel que habito* negates the corroboration of rape on a formal level, it likewise denies the validation of Norma’s rape on a narrative level as well, exemplified in the elisions and discrepancies between the two competing flashbacks used to tell the story as well as the inability of its characters to produce a final and coherent narrative truth, as exemplified in the discrepancy between Robert and Norma’s doctor as well as the exchange that takes place between Robert and Vicente.

According to critics, however, it is precisely this type of ambiguity surrounding the portrayal of rape that contributes to its naturalization (and consequent effacement) in the cultural imaginary. “Rape, as an event that can be made to disappear through narrative (as the story of seduction, or sex), a trauma that depends upon interpretation and the possibility of multiple truths, introduces the very issues [with which] art cinema is centrally concerned” (Russell 5).

Instead, as Russell explains, there is a marked difference between the depiction of rape in other filmic genres as opposed to the way it is portrayed in art cinema:

When rape is represented as unequivocal, as in legal and popular discourses, it is stranger rape, violent and crippling. But in art cinema, where reflexivity, the elusiveness of truth and importance of interpretation are privileged, rape is less a fact to be avenged, judged or overcome through cathartic closure (marriage, legal action, death) as in rape revenge and Hollywood films, than a specter to cast doubt on those very words: fact, vengeance, judgment, closure. (5)

Moreover, as Higgins points out, because internal psychological states, including intent or consent, cannot be portrayed “except through arbitrary filmic conventions” (306), the possibility of conclusively identifying rape as rape remains a highly subjective interpretation. However, the consequent problem is that such representations replace the embodied physical violence of the *victim* with an interpretation dependent on *the viewer’s* subjectivity. In any case,

the actual physical embodiment of the violence from the victim's perspective is conveniently elided.

But this is exactly what *La piel que habito* does in reference to Norma. In fact, the ambiguity of the film in conclusively pinning down this first rape, either formally or narratively, serves as a key element in shaping the viewer's attitude toward Vicente. In the absence of a definitive answer portrayed by the formal conventions of the image, the viewer is compelled to look to the characters themselves for clues to help solve this crucial ambiguity. However, the question of rape, an issue to which the film continually returns to alternately corroborate, refute, and/or contradict—remains uncertain, in the process implicating the viewer in a highly ambiguous world devoid of ultimate narrative authority.

For instance, of the two individuals in the best position to corroborate whether or not the rape actually occurred—that is, Norma and Vicente—it is significant that neither is portrayed as a particularly reliable witness to an event that each has lived firsthand. Of particular importance is that Norma, as the victim of the attack and thus the ideal person to confirm *whether or not she herself was raped*—is never portrayed, in the aftermath of the assault, as lucid enough to do so. Instead, following the incident, when Robert visits Norma in the hospital, we find that the incident has left Norma babbling and incoherent—in a Freudian word, hysterical—completely incapable of meaningful communication. Moreover, she appears to have displaced responsibility upon her father, which adds another level of disquiet and anxiety to the embedded rape narrative.

However, the way that Norma is presented even *before* the attack occurs casts considerable doubt on her sanity, and consequently, on her dependability as a reliable narrative witness. Indeed, the fact that Norma has spent the last six years in a mental hospital neither weighs particularly in her favor nor fosters the viewer's confidence in her ability to objectively

convey narrative truth. Moreover, shortly before the incident, as Norma and Vicente are making their way away from the party and into the garden where the attack takes place, the spectator is presented with yet another semiotic marker of Norma's mental instability. In this sequence, in which Vicente confesses to Norma that he is "high as hell" ("voy hasta el culo") from the pills that he has ingested, he asks Norma if she, too, has taken any pills. However, Norma's response, which is to answer Vicente's question with a list of prescription medications that she is currently taking, suggests that she is so out of touch with reality that she has completely missed the point that Vicente is taking his drugs *recreationally*. In addition, the medications Norma names³² not only cast doubt on her present psychological stability, they locate her within a long personal history of mental illness as well.

More importantly, however, as Vicente begins to undress Norma, we see Norma's eyes start to flutter uncontrollably and briefly roll back into her head before she catches herself and "comes back" to reality. This incident, which takes place without remark from either party, is quickly reabsorbed into the narrative as the action continues up until the moment of the attack. As the actual rape sequence occurs, images of Vicente and Norma are crosscut with a scene from the reception taking place inside, which reveal the wedding singer to be singing the same song that Norma is singing when she discovers her mother's dead body. As the camera cuts back again to Norma and Vicente in the garden, Norma, hearing the song, utters "no" several times before she starts to scream. As a panicked Vicente covers her mouth, trying to stop her, Norma bites him, upon which Vicente instinctively retaliates by hitting Norma, unintentionally knocking her unconscious.

³² Among the medications that Norma names, which include Cipralex, Deprax, Trankimazin, Rohypnol, and Lyrica, complete with prescribed dosages—we find an impressive list of antidepressant, antipsychotic, and anti-anxiety medications.

However, the limitations of this scene only create further questions about what is being represented onscreen. Are Norma and Vicente actually having sex, or simply engaging in (nonconsensual?) foreplay? If they *are* having sex, is the sex consensual? Although we observe Norma say “no,” the larger question seems to be if the “no” is addressed to Vicente, or if it is in response to the song that she hears (and the consequent memory of her mother’s suicide that the song evokes). Moreover, the ambiguity of the sequence replaces the certainty of rape with the significantly attenuated possibility of being simply a case of “consensual sex gone awry” (Russell 1).

In short, although the moment is brief, the “crazy” eye roll immediately preceding the rape, which casts doubt on Norma’s mental stability, interpreted in the ambiguity of its aftermath, raises the question of whether Norma goes crazy *because* she is raped (i.e.—if Norma’s insanity is *proof* of the rape having occurred) or if she goes crazy because crazy was a dormant possibility all long. Moreover, the song, which introduces the added possibility of how a traumatic psychological trigger might factor into the mix, creates further ambiguity surrounding the most important event of the story.

Notwithstanding its ambiguity, however, Norma’s rape nevertheless serves several different functions. First, if the rape itself is ambiguous, then the viewer is unable determine whether or not Vicente’s “punishment” is fitting of the crime. In other words, it leaves the viewer at a moral standstill, unable to make any definitive judgment all of the subsequent events that follow. Second, it sacrifices Norma to the forward movement of the story and thus naturalizes her rape as an unfortunate but necessary plot device.

Depicted as teetering on the brink of insanity even prior to the attack, after the assault, Norma descends into complete and irrevocable madness. Thus, by depicting Norma as mentally

unstable *before* the incident as well as completely hysterical *after* it, narrative design renders Norma an unreliable witness and therefore unfit to produce the answer of her own embodied truth. What's more, shortly after Robert's visit, Norma commits suicide, thus turning the quickest and most reliable means of resolving the ambiguity into a narrative dead end.

The result of this ambiguity, however, is a perfect narrative set-up: by deliberately obscuring a 'final signified' regarding the answer of rape, the story creates a situation that demands narrative action while simultaneously ensuring that "no price is extracted for the spectator's identification with [Vicente]" (Russell 1).

As a result, when a sudden change in the availability of existing subject positions disallows the continuation of Robert's subject position, the viewer is forced to align himself with an image that up to that moment has been posited as object of the gaze. But because Vicente (as Vera) is the object of multiple rapes, when the reveal takes place, what this essentially does is force the viewer reimagine and thus re-process the violence of rape from the distinct position of its female object.

However, the uncertainty regarding Norma's rape persists throughout, fragmenting and challenging the coherence of the text and thus creating ambiguity about whether or not the narrative can be credibly trust to reveal whether the defining event of the story even took place at all. In fact, for every detail that seems to offer a definitive step toward certainty as to whether or not the rape occurred, the viewer is presented with an equal and contrary step in the opposite direction that dissolves the affirmation offered by the previous clue.

For instance, in the aftermath of the party, when Norma is admitted back into the same mental hospital from which she has recently been discharged, we find an intriguing discrepancy in the exchange that occurs between Robert and Norma's doctor.

Observing Norma to descend into a fit of hysteria as Robert approaches her, Norma's doctor offers Robert the following suggestion:

- DOCTOR. Doctor Ledgard, yo creo que no debería venir a verla con tanta frecuencia.
- ROBERT. ¡Es mi hija!
- DOCTOR. Pero su hija no le reconoce. Empeora cuando le ve. En su mente, ella está convencida de que usted la acosó.
- ROBERT. Yo sólo le encontré allí tirada, ¿por qué no le meten eso en la cabeza?
- DOCTOR. Ella le identifica con *el violador*. No sé. Quizás nos precipitamos sacándola tan pronto.
- ROBERT. Fue idea suya que empezara a socializar.
- DOCTOR. Estaba superando su fobia social. ¿Cómo iba yo a suponer que alguien *intentaría violarla* estando con usted?
- DOCTOR. Dr. Ledgard, I don't think you should visit her so often.
- ROBERT. She's my daughter.
- DOCTOR. But she doesn't recognize you. And she gets worse when she sees you. In her mind, she's convinced that you attacked her.
- ROBERT. I just found her lying there! Why can't you get that into her head?
- DOCTOR. She identifies you with *the rapist*. Maybe we let her out too soon.
- ROBERT. It was your idea that she should socialize.
- DOCTOR. She was getting over her social phobia. How could I know that someone *would try to rape her* when she was with you? (emphasis mine)

Despite the closure evoked by the doctor's choice of the word "rapist"—"*violador*," suggesting that this indeed is what took place—the possibility is extremely short-lived, for in the very next moment, when Robert suggests that Norma's breakdown is due to the physician's poor judgment in granting his daughter leave from the hospital before she is fully ready, Norma's doctor contradicts the certainty of the rape suggested just a moment before by retorting: "How was I supposed to know that someone was *going to try to rape her* while she was with you?"

As a result, every step forward is coupled with an equal step back, creating a rapidly shifting world of highly unstable realities for the viewer.

Indeed, this back and forth, this ambivalence as to whether or not the defining event of the movie actually took place—produces a mounting tension that is seen once again when Robert confronts Vicente about the incident itself. After Norma’s suicide, which automatically positions Vicente as the only person alive able to conclusively confirm or deny the accusation, Vicente’s drug use the night of the party nevertheless prevents him from exerting any authority over an experience that he has lived first-hand.

Thus, at a pivotal point in the film, when the newly-operated Vicente, who has just been informed of his vaginoplasty, asks Robert what he has done to merit such a horrific retribution, Robert responds in turn by revealing his own identity:

ROBERT. ¿Te acuerdas de la boda de Doña Casilda Efraíz? ¿En el pazo tan espectacular? Soy el padre de Norma. La niña que violaste.

VICENTE. Creo que no llegué a violarla...

ROBERT. ¿Cómo que “no llegué a violarla”? ¿Has perdido la memoria?

VICENTE. Aquella noche había tomado muchas pastillas y... lo recuerdo todo muy mal.

ROBERT. Pues yo no tomé nada, y no lo olvidaré jamás.

VICENTE. Why are you doing this?

ROBERT. Do you remember Casilda Efraíz’s wedding? In that spectacular house? I’m Norma’s father. She was the child you raped.

VICENTE. I don’t think I actually raped her...

ROBERT. You “don’t think”? Have you lost your memory?

VICENTE. I’d taken a lot of pills and I can hardly remember it.

ROBERT. Well, I didn’t take anything, and I’ll never forget it.

However, as the conversation between them explicitly reveals, due to Vicente’s drug use, even the exchange between the purported rapist and the father of the injured party is incapable of conclusively producing any semblance of objective narrative “truth.”

Moreover, because the film takes special care to portray Vicente’s behavior as a consequence of his impaired judgment—stemming from his use of drugs, for example, as

opposed to a “real” lack of character—Vicente is given the benefit of the doubt and his reputation survives the calumny of rape—or attempted rape—unscathed.

Flashbacks as Representations of Subjective Truth

In *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1987), David Bordwell distinguishes between two ideas commonly denoted by the word ‘narrative’: *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Building on the work of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, Bordwell makes the following distinction: whereas the *fabula* (often translated as ‘story’) “embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field” (49), in contrast, “the *syuzhet* (usually translated as ‘plot’) is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film” (50). In other words, whereas *fabula* refers to the chronological sequence of events in a narrative, *syuzhet* refers to the order in which they are presented to the viewer—the way that the events in the story unfold. As Bordwell remarks of the process of *fabula* in relation to spectatorship: “putting the *fabula* together requires us to construct the story of the ongoing inquiry while at the same time framing and testing hypotheses about past events” (49).

Similarly, Robert Stam, drawing on the work of Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman, distinguishes ‘story,’ which he characterizes as “the time sequence of plot events”—from ‘discourse,’ which he delineates as “the time of their textual presentation” (140). In other words, the principal difference between story and discourse can be neatly summed up as “the time of the telling and the time of the told” (Stam 140). Thus, whereas “story time, or the imagined events of the fiction, might cover an entire lifetime, while discourse time is constituted by the time it takes to read the novel, attend the play, or see the film” (Stam 140).

A close analysis of the film's narrative structure reveals that that even at the level of the text, there is not one, but two different versions of Norma's rape—Robert's and Vicente's—and that the two versions not only challenge the coherence of the text, they also infinitely defer the possibility of arriving at objective narrative truth. Instead, the way that the film is organized highlights its own elisions, inconsistencies, and contradictions in a way that proliferates ambiguity and deconstructs narrative truth.

The issue is first exemplified through the use of flashbacks to *represent* the night of Norma's rape. Because "flashbacks are a cinematic representation of memory and of history," what this ultimately means is that they are thus filmic representations of "subjective truth" (Hayward 153). In other words, because flashbacks are used to portray something that *has already taken place*, the first representation of the event that the film undertakes is one that has already passed through a distinct subjectivity.

Moreover, because the film presents Robert's version *first*, despite the fact that Robert's account is immediately followed by Vicente's, the viewer nevertheless witnesses the night of the party for the first time through Robert's perspective. As a result, although the incident has already taken place, Robert's (subjective) account serves as the prototype of the viewer's first knowledge of the event. This, which runs consonant with the viewer's formal positioning to identify with Robert for the first part of the film, is further confirmed by the shot/reverse shots aligning the gaze of the camera with Robert's perspective.

However, because in neither account is the ambiguity of the rape definitively solved, what this suggests that there is no "ultimate version" provided by the narrative, only the subjective truths of Robert and Vicente, which are both proven to be unreliable for different reasons. On the one hand, Robert's version is unreliable because in contrast to what he suggests,

he himself was not present to witness the event. On the other, Vicente's account proves to be equally suspect, because despite his direct involvement, due to the drugs taken the night of the party, he, also, is unable to ascertain with any confidence that his version accurately represents the truth.

As a result, the film, which works in favor of narrative, provides an originating action that moves the story forward without ever having to conclusively verify what happened. At the same time, narrative ambiguity splits the viewer between identification with Robert, on the one hand—which is explicitly corroborated by film form—and empathy for Vicente, whose importance as a narrative character is foregrounded by the fact that the movie dedicates more screen time to reproducing *his* memory of the party (as opposed to Robert's), and in the process also provides a feel for the importance of the account to the resolution of the story as a whole. In other words, the fact that Vicente's version is explicitly represented onscreen, immediately after the viewer witnesses Robert's nearly-identical version of the same party, together with the before and after of it, and that it takes more screen time and detail to do so—provides the spectator with a clue as to the utility and importance of Vicente's version to the film's eventual resolution. Consequently, toward the end of the movie, when a shift in the availability of existing subject positions suddenly disallows the viewer's identification with Robert, it creates the conditions necessary to effect a transfer from Robert to Vera, and it does so through the transformation of Vicente's physical embodiment, which is imaginatively corroborated by the fact that the narrative has provided all the conditions for Vicente to occupy the full physical embodiment of female sexuality.

Internal Chronology

Meanwhile, the plot continues to skip, creating questions about its own internal chronology. Situated in the present day, the film focuses on Robert and Vera's relationship and follows a chronological sequence up until Vera's rape (by Zeca) and Zeca's death at Robert's hands. However, shortly thereafter, *fabula* and *syuzhet* diverge as Marilia reveals to Vera the true story of Robert's identity. Through Marilia's account, Vera learns that Robert and Zeca are half-brothers (although neither knows it) and that Robert was conceived as a result of a relationship between Marilia and her then-employer, Robert's father. Given Mrs. Ledgard's inability to have children, however, Robert is appropriated by Mr. and Mrs. Ledgard immediately after birth. The irony is that although Robert grows up thinking Mrs. Ledgard is his mother, it is in fact his real mother, Marilia, who raises him. As a result, although *Zeca* knows Marilia is his mother, to the present day, Robert remains completely ignorant of the fact that he is Marilia's son.

Through Marilia's story, Vera (and thus, the viewer) learns of Zeca's origins (fathered by a passing servant), Zeca and Gal's affair, their unsuccessful attempt to run away together, the ensuing car accident in which Gal sustains massive burns while Zeca escapes unscathed and disappears, Robert's attempt to nurse his wife back to health, and Gal's consequent suicide, all of which unfold in the present of the image as Marilia provides the extra-diegetic narration that situates the images in the past. Following this digression, the image again returns to Marilia and Vera in the present, upon which the viewer witnesses Robert return to the house after burying Zeca's body. But after only a brief interval of linearity, in which the second rape of the film takes place—Robert's rape of Vera—the plot takes another chronological turn.

As the camera focuses on Robert's face as he sleeps, the scene cuts to the night of the party as the words "Seis años antes" are superimposed across the image. In what follows,

through the use of two separate flashbacks—first Robert’s, then Vicente’s, each of which presents a slightly different version of the same event—the viewer is presented with the dilemma of conflicting narrative truths presented via interpenetrating temporal strands.

But given that Robert’s account is immediately followed by another, slightly different version of the same event, the differences, elisions, and asymmetries between the two are all the more striking. Significantly, in Robert’s version, which omits any depiction of the assault, he is shown arriving on the scene only after the incident has taken place to find an unconscious Norma lying on the ground.

But the way the film engages this process by anchoring the same phenomena to two very different contexts consequently enables subjectivity to be *represented* as the perpetual process of unveiling, of imposing subjective meaning on an ultimately meaningless set of events, mirrored in the fact that both flashbacks present each individual’s subjective account of the same night. For example, in Robert’s version, the way he first comes upon Norma’s abandoned shoe, then sweater, in the garden, lends a sinister tone to the whole sequence which, in turn, portends his ominous discovery of Norma lying unconscious on the ground. However, in the account that immediately follows, the viewer is made privy to the fact that although the way that Robert discovers such articles of Norma’s clothing points ominously to the way that they got there, the second flashback shows that: A) Norma takes these articles of clothing off of her own volition; and that B) in contrast to what Robert’s version would suggest, the context in which the clothing is abandoned is not sinister at all, but playful.

Moreover, that Robert’s and Vera’s flashbacks occur as dreams, while they are asleep, add another layer of instability to an already-uncertain story. For, as Annie Rogers explains, dreams work through “condensation and displacement” (137); likewise, Bordwell observes:

“dreams are spatially and temporally discontinuous” (69). More specifically, *La piel* accomplishes this by anchoring the circumstances of Norma’s rape to two very different subjective interpretations.

As Robert tries to rouse Norma, she regains consciousness believing that the attack is still taking place and starts to scream uncontrollably, whereupon the scene cuts back to Robert’s sleeping face, interrupting the immediacy of the illusion and reminding the viewer that the present of the image, which unfolds for the viewer as a dream, is nevertheless incongruous with the film’s internal time.

Immediately thereafter, the camera shifts to focus on Vera’s sleeping face, from which the scene cuts to a second, slightly different version of the same event: one that, as the viewer soon discovers, belongs not to Robert, but to Vicente.

In contrast to Robert’s version, however, Vicente’s flashback begins not at the party, but shortly before, providing the viewer with important context leading up to the rape. In this sequence, which takes place in his mother’s clothing shop, we are given an interesting look into Vicente’s everyday life before the party in a way that allows the spectator a glimpse at his behavior *before* the catastrophic turn of events that will ultimately result in the loss of his genital sex.

This scene, which opens to an image of Vicente working in his mother’s shop, he is seen dressing a mannequin in the window. What is noteworthy is that due to the frame of the shop window, Vicente and the female mannequin are pictured within an explicit frame in a way that connects them to the women in the paintings. However, no sooner does the narrative formally establish this outer frame the camera moves closer, leaving the outer frame behind as it zooms in on Vicente. As he attends to the final touches of the task by pulling the dress up over the

mannequin's breasts and fastening the straps behind its neck, he pauses to fondle the mannequin's breast in a way that formally links this gesture to the way he later adjusts Norma's bra and caresses her breast immediately following the assault, as she lies unconscious on the ground.

At the same time, however, the sequence provides an important point of reference for a circumstance to which the narrative soon returns, for in the same way that Vicente's aggressive heterosexism makes Cristina an unwilling female object to his subject position, the sequence likewise anticipates the way that an unexpected shift in circumstance will soon compel Vicente to occupy the same position of object to which he has subjected others.

In this sequence, Vicente is shown propositioning his lesbian coworker, Cristina, who is clearly uninterested in his advances. Nevertheless, Vicente persists, imposing his "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 140) on an entity whose sexual identity leaves him completely outside of the realm of romantic possibility. In the same way, as he hands Cristina a dress, the way he insists that she put it on is dismissive of *her* sexual subjectivity while emphasizing, instead, the benefit that seeing her in the dress will offer *him*:

VICENTE. Cristina... Toma. [Dándole un vestido] Regalo de la casa. Póntelo y nos vamos de fiesta.

CRISTINA. He quedado con mi novia, gracias.

VICENTE. Póntelo de todos modos. Me gustaría verte con él. Seguro que te sienta de maravilla.

CRISTINA. Pues si tanto te gusta, póntelo tú.

VICENTE. Cómo te equivocas, tía.

CRISTINA. ¿Porque no me gustan los hombres?

VICENTE. Porque no te guste *yo*.

VICENTE. Cristina... Here. [Handing her a dress]. On the house. Put it on and we'll go partying.

CRISTINA. I'm meeting my girlfriend.

VICENTE. Put it on anyway. I'd like to see you in it. It'll look great on you.

CRISTINA. If you like it so much, wear it yourself.

VICENTE. You're so mistaken!

CRISTINA. Because I don't like men?
VICENTE. Because you don't like *me*.

What's more, the way that Vicente looks Cristina up and down, sexually appraising someone whose sexual identity means that she is completely uninterested in his advances, is something that repeats itself later in the film—with Vicente on the opposing side of the same subjective relationship. In this way, the film foreshadows that in the same way Vicente's behavior compels others to act as unwilling object to his subject position, he will be made to live the opposing end of his own subjective behavior a second time, from the distinct perspective of its female object.

But it is precisely this scenario that repeats itself at the end of the film when Vicente, now embodied as Vera, returns to his mother's shop in the same dress that he once insisted Cristina wear for the benefit of *his* sexual gratification. In other words, a shift in narrative circumstances returns Vicente, as female object, to the same subjective experience previously lived from the vantage point of its male subject.

The dress symbolizes his transformation from male subject to female object, which works on multiple levels. It is in this dress that Vicente/Vera first sees Cristina for the first time in six years and in this dress in which Cristina, not knowing that the person whom she is addressing is Vicente, looks Vera up and down, sexually appraising her. The irony is multilayered. In other words, the end of the film doubles back on itself to return Vicente to a situation that he has lived once from the vantage point of its male subject to relive again from the distinct physical embodiment of its female object. As such, he is forced to occupy the same position of sexual object to which he subjected Cristina. As Vera/Vicente enters the shop, the camera focuses on Cristina's face, and we see Cristina look Vera up and down once, whereupon the shot cuts away to Vera (Vicente), then to Vicente's mother, who looks briefly at Vera and tells Cristina to attend

to her, then again to Cristina, who is shown looking Vera up and down two more times before the camera cuts away. Moreover, as Vera leads Cristina from the back room to the front of the store, Vera moves toward the camera with Cristina following behind her and as viewers, we see Cristina's eyes drop once again from eye level in order to check Vera out from behind.

But as Vera/Vicente's words show, he now realizes that he is living the same experience to which he subjected Cristina:

VERA. No sé por dónde empezar, Cristina.

CRISTINA. ¿Me conoce?

VERA. Soy Vicente. Acabo de fugarme. Me raptaron. Me cambiaron de sexo. Para huir he tenido que matar a dos personas. Tienes que ayudarme. Mira. [Quitándose la chaqueta] ¿Te acuerdas de este vestido? Antes de la boda de Doña Casilda, hace seis años, yo te dije que te regalaba solo para ver cuán que te quedaba. Tú me dijiste que si tanto me gustaba que me lo pusiese yo. En ese momento, estábamos aquí solos, tú y yo, ¿te acuerdas?

VERA. I don't know where to begin, Cristina.

CRISTINA. Do you know me?

VERA. I'm Vicente. I've just escaped. I was kidnapped. They gave me a sex change. I had to kill two people to get away. You have to help me. Look. [Taking off her jacket] Do you remember this dress? Before Casilda's wedding, six years ago, I said I'd give it to you just to see how it looked. You said if I liked it so much, I should wear it myself. At that moment we were alone, remember?

However, Vicente's flashback only further confuses the sequence of narrative time. In short, Vicente's version of the events, which begins with him and Cristina working in his mother's shop and continues through the party and Norma's subsequent attack, then skips to another memory that takes place a week later, again in his mother's shop, for which the viewer is given no extra-textual indication.

In this part of Vicente's flashback, the scene opens to a wire figure of a woman's head through which Vicente is seen, foreshadowing that although Vicente will soon be housed in a radically different body, the core of who he is remains the same. Or, as Alessandra Lemma

writes: “Vicente’s true masculine self, we might say, is protected in his mind even if his actual body now *looks like* that of a woman” (1298).

However, the only reason that the spectator knows that a week has passed is because Vicente, in an act of repentance that further secures the viewer’s sympathy for him, tells Cristina that it has been a week since he has taken any pills—“Hace una semana que no me meto nada.” Given that the scene immediately preceding it begins with the party, where Vicente explicitly tells Norma that he is high, the viewer is thus able to discern that a week of diegetic time has passed. Moreover, regardless of what happened, Vicente is shown to have taken responsibility for his behavior and taken steps to ensure that it will not happen again.

Immediately following the sequence in the shop, the viewer witnesses Vicente’s kidnapping and imprisonment by Robert, which is then followed by Vicente’s involuntary sex change. Just as interesting, however, is that the sequences from Vicente’s imprisonment, which both precede and follow an entire sequence from Norma’s funeral, curiously reveal Vicente’s kidnapping to take place even before Norma’s death. In other words, according to the internal chronology of events, Robert is shown to have initiated the first part of his revenge even before the event that supposedly motivates the retaliation—Norma’s death—takes place.

Without resolving this incongruence, the plot continues to skip, creating further confusion about its own internal chronology. For instance, in another scene, which is marked by Marilia’s return to the house, Marilia comments to Robert that it has been four years since she has last been there, during which time we understand from Marilia’s words (and Robert’s affirmation of them) that Norma’s suicide has taken place. However, between this scene and the one immediately preceding it, the viewer is given no indication other than the internal dialogue that such time has passed. Instead, the narrative continues to skip as it brings the viewer up to the

present, and the scene cuts to an image of Vera in the kitchen the morning following her rape (by Zeca and Robert) as the words “vuelta al presente” (“return to the present”) are superimposed across the image.

In all this time, however, the narrative takes care to portray Vicente as a sympathetic character, thus encourages the viewer’s empathy and identification, which is formally reinforced by the shot/reverse shots extending from the beginning of Vicente’s flashback until the backstory catches up to the film’s internal present aligning the look of the camera—and consequently, that of the spectator—with Vicente’s point of view. In this way, film form places the viewer in Vicente’s subject position, making a structural and affective case for the viewer’s identification.

In the same way, the narrative takes care to emphasize Vicente’s humanity, which stands out all the more in contrast to Robert’s animalization of him. For example, following his abduction, when Vicente is chained up like an animal in Robert’s basement, we see him drink water from the floor on all fours, and like an animal, Robert deals with the problem of his soiled underwear by turning a hose on him full blast. Notably, this sequence, which foreshadows Vicente’s eventual transformation into object of (Robert’s and the viewer’s) desire, is marked by a distinctly queer gaze, seen most concretely when the look of the camera, which is formally fused to Robert’s point of view, moves up Vicente’s wet backside while Robert hoses him down, lingering on the transparent white fabric of his white underwear stretched across backside. Given that this gaze prefigures Vicente’s eventual transformation into a woman, the gaze imbues the viewer with a distinctly queer desire.

Despite such treatment, however, Vicente continues to mind his manners, not once forgetting to say “please” and “thank you.” Regardless of whether Vicente’s attention to detail is understood as a consequence of his good upbringing or as an artful attempt to ingratiate himself

to his captor, Vicente's emphasis on such courtesy—particularly in such extreme circumstances—stands out all the more in contrast to Robert's animalization of him. For instance, when Robert brings Vicente food, even in famished condition, the first word that comes out of his mouth is “gracias,” which he lets loose almost instinctively even before he takes his first bite. This demonstration of etiquette and good manners is all the more prominent due to the contrasting urgency with which we see Vicente grab the food and shovel it into his mouth with his fingers, without the benefit of a utensil in sight. In the process, however, the narrative endows Vicente with an element of humanity that allows him to transcend the squalor of his circumstances. Furthermore, as Robert turns to leave, the viewer witnesses Vicente's multiple entreaties for Robert to stay, each markedly beginning “por favor.”

The overall effect of such narrative positioning is that despite the reprehensibility of his actions, the narrative still enables Vicente to be a sympathetic character and as such, remains in the viewer's favor, suffering only marginal culpability, so that when the viewer finally witnesses his unwanted sex change, rather than deeming the punishment as fitting of the crime, due to the horror of the circumstances, the spectator is structured to sympathize with Vicente and to feel, as he feels, the magnitude of his loss.

Specularizing Visions of Violence

In the same way that the ambiguity surrounding Norma's rape enables a sympathetic portrayal of Vicente by negating Norma a subject position, the way the two additional rapes are portrayed in the film likewise elide, diminish, or efface the embodied experience of the *subject* on whom the sexual violence is enacted—Vera—by shifting the focus to not only the *spectacle*, as it takes place, but the *spectator* for whom the violence unfolds.

In particular, Vera's rape by Zeca presents an especially acute critique of how rape has traditionally been used—as fetishistic spectacle, or to titillate the sexual sensibilities of the viewer, for example—while at once using rape to uphold the same structure that it critiques. In other words, although the movie criticizes the use of gender-based violence, it does so while using gender-based violence to criticize it.

Applying Berger's analysis of the nude to the idea of Vera as (a moving) image, a close examination of Vera's rape by Zeca shows that everything about the way that the rape unfolds points reflexively to the fact that 1) it has been explicitly created as a spectacle of sexual provocation for the viewer while 2) laying bare the literal and figurative seams of that process.

While the metacinematic cues that intersect the representation create anxiety about the spectator and his own complicity in the consumption of such images, the event is nevertheless clearly intended to provoke, eliciting a dual response.

In his essay, "On Watching and Turning Away" (2010), Scott MacKenzie identifies a feeling of unease and instability that the act of watching rape on-screen evokes in the spectator: "on the one hand, the spectator is properly repelled by what is on the screen, feeling it is in many ways unwatchable. On the other hand, the spectator worries that not all viewers will be repulsed in the same manner" (162).

MacKenzie's subject treats the convergent aesthetics of *cinéma direct* and *cinéma brut*, or New French Extremism, in a genre that has been referred to somewhat tongue-in-cheek as "pornartgraphy" (159). The idea that MacKenzie works around, but stops short of explicitly stating, is that for male spectators, one of the problems in watching rape is that the spectator is positioned to feel repulsed by a spectacle that is just as often intended to arouse. Or, to use Judith Mayne's idiom, one of the "paradoxes of spectatorship" in watching rape is that the viewer's

“intellectual” response would appear to be quite different (or function quite independently of) the same spectator’s visceral reaction.

When Zeca enters the house, he first learns of Vera’s existence upon seeing her on one of the dual TV monitors in the kitchen—which, in turn, due to the screen-within-a-screen, enables her to be explicitly represented *as an image*. Moreover, the fact that the diegetic footage is black and white only further heightens the distinction. But from the moment Zeca fixes on this in-film screen, the camera—which frames the cinematic image so that the diegetic TV screen, with Vera on it, is seen to the left, while Zeca, positioned to its right, looks left toward it—then pans left to reveal the *other* diegetic screen as Zeca walks toward both, in this way reproducing *his* fascination. As Zeca moves toward the first screen and puts down the bottle of wine that he is drinking, demonstrating his interest, the camera slowly zooms toward the first diegetic screen on which Zeca has fixed his gaze until it takes up nearly all of the cinematic frame. Notably, however, the larger frame of the movie still explicitly includes the frame of the diegetic TV within its boundaries, with the result that Zeca, at the far right of the frame, is explicitly represented *as a spectator*. Thus, in a reflexive acknowledgement of the film, when Zeca asks Marilia about what he is watching (¿Qué es esto?), she tries to confuse him by telling him what he is watching is just a movie: “¡Es una película!” (“It’s a movie!”) she declares.

But the way that this sequence is staged means that when Vera, who exists in the frame-within-the-frame as a diegetic image, gets up from her yoga mat and looks directly into *her* diegetic surveillance camera, the way that the *mise-en-scène* is positioned—with Zeca at the far right of the diegetic screen, facing it—means that it is unclear from the angle whether Vera is returning *his* look or the that of the extra-diegetic spectator without, watching the movie take

place. The result of this ambiguity, however, is that the look that *Vera* returns to the spectator thus conflates Zeca with that of the actual viewer watching the movie take place.

Although the reflexive cues intersecting the representation disallow complete immersion in the illusion, however, the anticipation created by the narrative from the moment that Zeca enters the house and sees Vera, to the way he interacts with the image, licking Vera onscreen, to the way that his multiple attempts to locate her are initially thwarted, mean that the resolution of such narrative setbacks and complications are all the more desired. In other words, if “sadism demands a story” (Mulvey 844), the build-up of cinematic desire likewise demands cathartic release.

Indeed, Marilia’s attempts to dissuade Zeca only heighten his desire to get to the bottom of the mystery. This tension then comes to a decisive point when Marilia takes out a gun, shoots, misses, and Zeca ends up tying Marilia up in front of the two TVs while he embarks on an exploration of the house. The narrative continues to build as it follows Zeca through the house and shows him opening seven different doors before he finally finds Vera behind the eighth. Furthermore, in the middle of this sequence, while Zeca is upstairs, he hears Vera through a closed door and talks to her—whereupon she informs him that the door is locked and she doesn’t know who has the key. Zeca then goes downstairs again, ungags Marilia, has an entire exchange with her about where the key is located, finds the key, stuffs the gag back in Marilia’s mouth, then goes back upstairs to Vera’s room. Throughout the sequence, narrative momentum builds, thus “naturally” suturing the viewer, for all its anticipation, to the satiation of Zeca’s curiosity which, in turn, is fused to *narrative* desire.

In addition, Zeca is posited as all animal—pure phallus—as indicated by the tiger costume he wears, which includes a mask, cape, black acrylic “claws” (fingernails), and a tail—

the last of which a close-up during the rape shows to be in the explicit shape of a penis. But there are other clues as well. For example, Zeca's skintight tiger costume features a prominent phallic bulge, which sticks out all the more due to the picture of a tiger's face printed directly on it.

Following formulaic tropes that depict men with large penises to be lacking in intellect, Zeca's construction as pure phallus is corroborated by a similar deficiency in mental capacity, as indicated by his halting use of (Portuguese-inflected) Spanish, not so much because it is Portuguese-inflected, but because he stutters and likewise appears to genuinely struggle to express himself, for example, or his inability to understand the subtleties of misdirection, as demonstrated when his own mother calls him an "idiot" because he is unable to understand that the key to Vera's room could be an envelope marked "clips."

But because Zeca is constructed as pure phallus, everything about the way the narrative builds, from Zeca's initial discovery of Vera (the emergence of desire), to the various setbacks he encounters (narrative foreplay), to the dramatic music accompanying the sequence, to the way that Zeca, upon finding Vera, subjects her to all manner of sex-like gestures and pantomimes before he finally rapes her—means that the subsequent act of penetration, for all its narrative build-up, is all the more anticipated.

In *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture* (2014), Gilad Padva and Nurit Buchweitz make the comparison between the camera and phallus in what they identify as the "phallic eye":

In prevalent, formulaic cinemas, which are mostly patriarchal and heterocentric, the penetrative phallus is symbolically demonstrated by the very act of the camera zoom. The zoom is a useful instrument for creating sensational pleasures based on voyeurism, enabling the viewer to examine the forbidden, the *transgressive* and the *extraordinary*. The act of zooming is carried out on a linear, fixed route that is been worked back and forth. *Zooming is significantly a phallic practice*. Through his identification with the spasms of zooming in and out of the objectified body, the (male) spectator imitates sexual intercourse. It is an optical mechanism of

penetrating, staring and entering, breaking and moving in and out of the forcefully exposed body, scene, scenery, sin and *obscene*. In this manner, zooming is a masculinistic script that is being constantly written and overwritten, a structured exposure with its own particular satisfactions and climaxes. It is a sadistic, invasive act of subordination, dominance, surveillance and obscenity, a spectacular bacchanalia centered on the extended, erected gaze. (4, emphasis original)

As the authors point out, the phallic eye not only has to do with the camera, it can also be used for the pleasure of the spectator: thus, “the mechanical act of zooming in and out can also be perceived as a masturbatory practice, simulating (and stimulating) the consuming Phallic Eye of the beholder” (Padva and Buchweitz 4).

An examination of the formal mechanics of Zeca’s rape of Vera reveal that it is designed in every way as a scene of sexual provocation with *the spectator* at the center of its phallic eye. For example, when Zeca, following the aforementioned setbacks, finally breaks into Vera’s room, the metaphor of penetration is made explicit in the way that when he puts the key in the lock, the action is likewise formally reproduced by the camera’s sudden phallic zoom. The irony of the keyhole as the symbol par excellence of voyeurism, and thus with obvious connections to cinema and spectatorship, is also layered in a Lacanian sense in that the keyhole is also a means by which the child is able to first witness the primal scene.

The camera/viewer as phallic eye is also demonstrated in the way that Vera’s sex takes center stage as the focal point in the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, as Zeca enters the room, Vera kicks in the door and knocks him over, pushing him out of the way as she makes a dash toward freedom. But as she does, Zeca catches her by the leg and pulls her to the ground, whereupon a struggle ensues. However, the way that Vera is positioned in this skirmish—on her back, with her legs spread, wearing a nude bodysuit with visible seams at the crotch—means that Vera’s sex takes center stage within the image, ready for the phallic eye to penetrate.

When Zeca *does* finally catch Vera, the sexual pantomime that precedes the act of penetration functions as scopophilic foreplay that further augments the desire for narrative release. Pinning her on the ground directly in front of the enormous Titian painting directly outside Vera's door, Zeca dry humps Vera fully clothed, then with much fanfare, proceeds to unzip a strategic zipper on her bodysuit, revealing a single fetishistic breast. He sucks on the breast as soon as it appears. Zeca then grabs the bodysuit and rips the *other* side, in turn revealing the other breast. Significantly, only Vera's breasts are exposed, whereas the skintight bodysuit covers the rest of her body, thus fueling imagination and desire.



Figure 2.5. *La piel que habito* (2011). Zeca's violent rape of Vera with the Tiziano painting in the background foregrounds the *constructedness* of the image and as such, creates anxiety about the spectator's own participation in the consumption of such violent images.

Moreover, after overpowering Vera under the painting, Zeca slings her over his shoulder and turns away from the camera, bringing Vera's sex squarely to eye level. In the process, the film makes *woman*, embodied as sexual difference, both the focus and the vanishing point of the

cinematic image, and it does so by foregrounding her embodied difference. Moreover, that Vera's sex occupies the focal center of the image means that the phallic eye is positioned to penetrate her.

The ambivalence in such gratuitous and excessive representations of rape, which Shana MacDonald compares to "the customary striptease in cinematic sex scenes," is the alarming fact that "the act becomes both titillating and horrifying" (59).

Thus, when Zeca finally possesses the naked woman, despite the distaste of the fact that he uses rape to do it, the spectator is likewise placed in a position to possess her as well.³³ Moreover, that the first part of the rape starts out directly beneath an enormous Titan painting brings reflexivity to the spectator's own complicity in the act of looking.

However, the critical representation of rape, which is portrayed *as a representation* via the surveillance mechanisms incorporated into the narrative, also brings self-conscious awareness to the problems created by such portrayals, "form[ing] part of a politicized esthetic in which discontinuity breaks the charm of spectacle in order to awaken the spectator's critical intelligence" (Stam 9). In other words, by staging rape as an erotic spectacle which is explicitly consumed by another within the space of the film, the film also creates a space for contemplation about the spectator's own complicity in the consumption of such images.

But in doing so, the film divides the viewer's consciousness. On the one hand, it creates reflexivity and disallows complete immersion in the illusion. On the other hand, the conflict created by watching such images is countered by the difficult cognition (or conscious sublimation or disavowal) that despite such problematic sites of identification, regardless of the

³³ It is of note how positions of rape, subjectivity, and desire approach questions that have direct relations to pornography. For further reading, see Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981); *Feminism and Pornography* (2000) and *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (2013).

spectator's cerebral complicity in the matter, the embodied experience of watching violent erotic images is nevertheless designed to arouse.

Thus MacDonald writes of the dichotomy between cerebral disgust and bodily engagement:

The visceral responses to sexual violence on-screen are arguably ubiquitous, but rarely articulated in a critical frame. If woman and men experience a heightened awareness of their bodies in their processes of identification when viewing rape, then it stands as an important site for investigating the intricacies of embodied spectatorship. (67-68)

Moreover, notwithstanding the anxiety created by such ambivalence, the rape sequence is clearly designed to flatter the viewer. For example, at one point during the rape, a close-up of Vera face, whose tormented expression demonstrates that she is experiencing a tremendous amount of pain, comments to Zeca that it is specifically the size of his penis that is the problem: "Me haces daño. La tienes muy grande" ("You're hurting me. It's very big"). In other words, Vera's comment functions as an affirmation designed to soothe what Susan Bordo identifies as *the* pervasive male anxiety in contemporary society: "men's insecurities about penis size" (70).

In other words, despite the look of anguish on her face and the aural signifiers illustrating that the violence she is experiencing is unbearable, Vera's comment is designed to flatter, seducing the viewer into a pleasurable, if problematic, identification.

In short, the way that Vera's rape occurs means that when Zeca finally possesses the beautiful woman, narrative and film form converge to provide a means through which the spectator is able to possess her as well.

At the same time, Zeca is also the narrative trope that allows rape to be represented on an in-film screen, which consequently enables Robert, who stands in the film as the spectator's diegetic surrogate, to be seen *as a spectator*. In other words, Zeca is the narrative means that

enables rape to be represented on the diegetic screen while Robert is explicitly represented *watching it happen*, in turn bringing reflexivity to the act of looking. Or, as Samuel Amago observes, “this kind of film shows itself showing—or images itself imaging—in order to force the viewer to reevaluate his or her position vis-à-vis the film image” (33).

But because Vera’s rape by Zeca is *represented* on the in-film screen, it allows for a dual positioning of the viewer: while on the one hand, it allows the spectator to regard the film’s “specularizing visions of excess” (Lev 205) and to enjoy the fetishizing spectacle of violence; on the other, it creates an equally unsettling and troubling anxiety about his complicity in the process.

In short, *La piel que habito* positions the viewer, at different times, to occupy opposing ends of the same subjective experience, which it accomplishes in a heteropatriarchal way—but with a twist. By using heteronormative defaults to incite desire and to direct the gaze, the film enables the viewer, through the distinctly gendered violence of rape, to possess the beautiful woman. And it does so by suturing Zeca’s quest to possess Vera to the libidinal investments of the viewer’s own desire.

However, a shift in psychic and libidinal investments ensures that what the spectator experiences for the first time from the sexual parameters of his distinctly male embodiment likewise sutures him, following the reveal, to occupy the same subjective experience from the embodied position of female object on whom the violence is enacted.

Whereas the spectator is positioned to enjoy, albeit conflictedly, the spectacle of Vera’s rape as it unfolds in the present, the epiphany that Vera is Vicente compels the same viewer to assimilate the new information in the light of past events: by retrospectively imagining the same experience that the narrative positions him to experience from his male subject position from the

object position of its female victim. In other words, a radical shift in subject positions demonstrates that what first appears to an unfortunate and imaginary violence enacted on the *other* is nevertheless a real and embodied violence enacted on the *self*. Moreover, it accomplishes this by structuring the (male) viewer, at different times, to occupy opposing ends of the same subjective experience of rape.

In short, the reality of rape, as it exists in the world, is that it is an embodied violence: more specifically, that it is a distinctly *male* violence enacted against the *female* body. This is not to dismiss other configurations of sexual violence or to suggest that female rape does not exist. However, given that rape is always an embodied experience, what this means is that the embodied violence of rape is almost exclusively lived from the sexual embodiment of female subjectivity.

Which leads to a natural corollary: what is at stake when male and female spectators view images of rape? In other words, if rape is always an embodied violence, how do the distinct physical boundaries of one's genital embodiment affect the subjective position that the viewer occupies when regarding images of rape? For example, when we see a breast touched onscreen, how does the physical embodiment of having a breast or *not* having a breast affect whether the spectator imagines inhabiting that touch as its subject or its object? In the same way, when we see rape portrayed onscreen, how do the physical boundaries of one's genital embodiment—that is, the physical materiality of having the sexual organ *getting fucked* or the one *doing the fucking*—affect whether or not the person imaginatively occupies that investment of the person watching it onscreen?

Although rape is a violence that is repeatedly staged throughout the course of the film, it may be argued that for the male viewer, the real horror comes not from witnessing the rape as it

is happening, but from the retroactive horror caused by the realization that Vera is a man. In the same way that to experience castration is a violence that a woman may empathize with, but which the parameters of her female body leave outside of her imaginative capacity to fully understand, rape is also an embodied violence from which the physical parameters of the male body exclude him. Put differently, although a man may be raped, it is outside his imaginative capacity to imagine being raped *as a woman*—that is, fucked in the vagina—due to the distinct physical embodiment of his genital sex.

By passing the distinctly female violence of rape through the distinctly male violence of castration, however, Almodóvar transposes the unfathomable violence necessarily barred the imaginative capacity of one subjectivity to the embodied violence of the other. By positing Vicente as an intermediary step that sutures the viewer into the *embodiment* of sexual difference, Vicente functions as the link enabling the male spectator, from the specificity of his distinctly male body, to fully occupy the physical embodiment of female subjectivity.

Conclusion

In short, *La piel que habito* presents an especially exciting possibility for othered representation because it works from within the conventions of classical narrative cinema in order to ultimately subvert them. By using heteronormative assumptions in order to invite desire and to direct the gaze, it harnesses hegemonic bias in a productive way: first, by using these defaults to interpellate a heterosexual male viewer; and second, by violating these assumptions, calling attention how “naturalized” and pervasive these biases can be.

By using heteronormative practices to invite the viewer’s desire for the female protagonist only to ultimately reveal that “she” is actually a “he,” the film manipulates the terms

of the viewer's desire and obliges him to occupy a subjectivity other to his own. At the same time, Vera and Vicente, who at first appear to uphold hegemonic ideologies of male subject, female object ways of looking, are later narratively united and shown to be different physical manifestations of the very same person. As a result of having lived the other's experience, the viewer is able to come away with a new understanding of the invisible power that such structures exert as well as a similar appreciation of how automatic and instinctive such processes may be. In so doing, the film uses hegemonic defaults in order to effectively "other" the main.

By turning the tables on the viewer and obliging him to imaginatively occupy two different ends of the same subjective experience, the spectator is presented with a renewed understanding that sameness and otherness are two sides of the same coin and that in particular, the privilege of one's own subject position often comes at the other's expense. In designing a circumstance that structures the viewer to relive the same event from two opposing subjectivities, the film creates a space for reflection about the invisible norms that structure the processes of spectatorship by transposing the distinctly female violence of rape into the distinctly male violence of castration.

In short, *La piel que habito* presents a particularly innovative use of hegemonic ways of looking in order to subvert the subject interpellated by the gaze and it does so by productively harnessing the forces already at work in society, in counter-cinema's favor. In so doing, however, the film opens up entirely new possibilities for othered representation by presenting a challenge to a famous adage which, in another context, has been expressed as simply: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 13).

CHAPTER 3: SEEING IN CIRCLES: NARRATIVE CIRCULARITY, CRAZY, AND THE COSMETIC GAZE IN KIM KI-DUK'S *TIME / SIGAN* (2006)

Whereas in Chapters 1 and 2, the films discussed challenge the self/other dichotomy through ambiguous or dissonant configurations of sex, gender, and embodiment, Chapter 3 examines the same dichotomy through a lens that turns from questions of gender and sexuality to innovations in science and technology that modify the conditions of the gaze. In this chapter, which analyzes *Time / Sigan*, a 2006 film by South Korean filmmaker Kim Ki-duk, I examine 1) the presence of what Bernadette Wegenstein has identified as the cosmetic gaze and argue that 2) the looping circularity of the film reflects the cosmetic gaze within, which is in turn reinforced on a formal and narrative level through 3) the interchangeability of the film's male and female protagonists, Seh-hee and Ji-woo, and consequently, the deliberate confusion between self and other, subject and object that this approach effects. Together with the use of 4) "crazy" as a cinematic strategy, I argue that the practices employed in *Time* effectively disperses the coherence of the spectator and productively disrupts the pleasure of the hegemonic spectator positioned at the heart of the male-dominant gaze. Following this strategy, I conclude by proposing various avenues of inquiry which may prove useful to film studies by asking what empirical studies can bring to our understanding of film and spectatorship—and how these, in turn, may be used to effect a more equitable representation of subjectivities onscreen—not only for women, but for sexual minorities and non-dominant racial and ethnic individuals as well.

In contrast to *XXY*, which works at the self/other dichotomy through a dual and simultaneous embodiment; and *La piel que habito*, which works at the issue by passing the

spectator through a narrative structure that enables the viewer to live the same subjective experience twice, through two distinct embodiments; *Time* focuses on the interbeing of self and other by showing that the same violence enacted on the physical *self* is returned in like and equal and measure on the *other*; and that furthermore, the same psychic and emotional trauma to which one subjects other as *object* must also be re-lived through the distinct vantage point of self as *subject*.

The film, which is presented as a psychologically harrowing love story of one woman's attempt to safeguard her love, at any cost, from the ravages of time, *Time* tells the story of a young man—Ji-woo (Ha Jung-woo)—and woman, Seh-hee (Sung Hyun-ah / Park Ji-Yeon)—locked in a relationship that on account of Seh-hee's uncontrollable jealousy is beginning to unravel. One day, after an explosive argument in which Seh-hee irrationally accuses Ji-woo of having feelings for a woman he has just only met, Seh-hee apologizes to her boyfriend for having the “same boring face” and vanishes the following day without a trace.

In the period of time that follows, as the dazed and bewildered Ji-woo stumbles through a number of romantic encounters while struggling to make sense of his inexplicable abandonment, he meets another woman for whom he feels a strange attraction—*See*-hee—one with a nearly identical name.³⁴ However, as the film unfolds, what the viewer begins to suspect but Ji-woo has yet to realize is that Ji-woo's *new* girlfriend, *See*-hee, is none other than his *old* girlfriend, *Seh*-hee—but with a completely different face. For in an incredible attempt to preserve their love at inception, to re-live it into an alternate ending, or perhaps to capture the intensity of that first

³⁴ In Korean, although the names Seh-hee (세희) and See-hee (세희) are spelled differently, owing to the position of a single vowel, they are *pronounced* identically, bringing aural continuity to a physically fluctuating entity. Critically, the first syllable of the protagonist's second name (세) also means “new,” thus bringing an added layer of meaning to the female protagonist's multiple physical embodiments and palimpsestic identities.

spark once more, the viewer finds that Seh-hee has undergone extreme plastic surgery to render herself completely unrecognizable to Ji-woo, and in this way, begin their relationship anew.

As their relationship develops, however, See-hee discovers that contrary to now having secured Ji-woo's exclusive affections, as she had anticipated, Ji-woo's real feelings seem to be more accurately divided between her—See-hee—and his ex (*also* her)—a situation which only fuels her increasing jealousy. Deciding to settle once and for all the question of who Ji-woo loves more, See-hee secretly writes Ji-woo a letter as *Seh-hee* asking him to meet her on a certain day at their old café for him to take her back; meanwhile, upon “discovering” the letter, a crazed and maniacal *See-hee* begs Ji-woo to stay.

When finally, despite See-hee's best efforts to dissuade him, Ji-woo arrives at the meeting place on the appointed day, instead of finding his *ex*-girlfriend as expected, he discovers his *new* girlfriend, *See-hee*, wearing a blown-up photograph of his ex's face—*her* former face—over her own face like a mask, in this way revealing to him the horrifying truth that the woman he has been dating is not a different person at all, but rather the same individual as before... just with an entirely different face.

However, to understand the unique narrative structure of the film, which circles back in time, it is first necessary to understand how it begins. In a seemingly insignificant sequence at the beginning of the film, situated almost immediately after the opening credits, the scene opens to a mysterious woman, wearing sunglasses and a mask, as she exits a plastic surgery clinic: in her hands, a framed photograph. In the next instant, a second woman, apparently in a hurry and oblivious to her surroundings, crashes into the first, causing the first woman to drop the picture frame and break the glass. As the woman responsible for the accident apologizes to the first, offering to have the glass replaced, a close-up of the photograph in question reveals a picture of a

third woman altogether. The third woman's disheveled hair, her rough physical appearance, which includes several prominent scratches on her face—and her unsettling expression momentarily arouse the viewer's curiosity as to the identity of this woman and how she figures into the narrative.

However, the moment is brief and after the second woman charges the first with waiting there for a moment while she goes to get the picture frame fixed, we see the former scoop up the photograph and quickly make her way to a nearby café, where her boyfriend awaits. As she does, the narrative focus abandons the first woman altogether and follows the second woman to the café, and in the sequence that follows, the viewer is thus introduced to protagonists Seh-hee, the woman responsible for the accident—and her lover, Ji-woo—the man awaiting her arrival in the café.

In contrast to the puzzling and seemingly insignificant exchange shown between Seh-hee and the unidentified woman at the beginning of the film, which is reabsorbed into the story when the narrative doesn't immediately connect the incident to anything else, the consequences stemming from Seh-hee and Ji-woo's encounter in the café form the structural mass that propels the remainder of the plot.

Following See-hee's disclosure as to her "real" identity, it is now Ji-woo who vanishes without explanation. In a reversal of the same situation to which Seh-hee/See-hee, as subject, once subjected Ji-woo as object, the viewer is led through a montage that mimics key circumstances seen earlier in the film, but with the narrative positions reversed. For example, following Ji-woo's disappearance, See-hee looks for Ji-woo at his apartment, but he's not home. In desperation, she kicks at the same tree that the viewer has previously seen Ji-woo kicking at earlier in the film, after her own disappearance. Shortly thereafter, See-hee finds herself seated in

front of the same plastic surgeon who performed her original transformative surgery. However, this time, the tables have turned, because the surgeon, after showing her a number of graphic photographs of Ji-woo on the operating table, in this way informing her that he has *already operated* on him, thus granting Ji-woo his wish for an entirely different face—he tells her that in five months, once the scars have mended, Ji-woo will appear in renewed form back in See-hee’s life, in this way enabling them both to wipe the slate and begin the relationship anew.

In the indeterminate period of time that follows, as the shocked and devastated See-hee continues to frequent the same places that she used to visit with Ji-woo—the same sculpture park, their favorite café—she meets man after man who points to the possibility that *he* could be the “new” Ji-woo. An unidentified man wearing sunglasses and a mask who she follows to the sculpture park exhibits bandages suggestive of cosmetic surgery. A man who she meets at their old café approaches and engages her in conversation with a familiarity that suggests a prior history. A stranger who shows up at her apartment looking for someone else inexplicably returns and asks to be invited in. Yet despite all the clues that appear at first to corroborate each of these men’s identities as Ji-woo, one after another, each possibility is displaced or rejected and See-hee only ends up searching for Ji-woo all the more desperately.

When finally, however, in contrast to Ji-woo’s intended plan of post-operative reunion, the culmination of the narrative finds a despondent See-hee alone, in front of the same plastic surgery clinic where she and Ji-woo’s surgeries were both performed—the hopelessness of her situation propels her to make another impromptu decision and she enters the clinic to undergo yet another complete and transformative surgery. Thus, as the *post-operative See-hee*—that is, the protagonist in her *third* physical manifestation, the mysterious sunglassesed and masked ‘*lady-who-is-no-longer-See-hee*’—exits the clinic, photograph of her former self—*See-hee*—in

hand—she collides with *Seh-hee*, the original, *pre-operative* protagonist, in this way bringing the uncanny narrative to a hallucinatory close.

In what follows, I present an overview of the cosmetic gaze seen in *Time* and discuss how the looping circularity of the film mirrors the cosmetic gaze seen within while presenting both a critique and an illustration of how the female body has quite literally *embodied* the burdens of the patriarchal gaze. At the same time, I show that the film also disperses the centrality of the male subject by formally and narratively illustrating the interbeing of self and other in a way that successfully destabilizes the hegemony of subject interpellated by the male-dominant gaze.

The Cosmetic Gaze

In *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (2012), Bernadette Wegenstein identifies a new type of gaze, called the cosmetic gaze, seen in television and film, and establishes a crucial point of difference between the male gaze and the cosmetic gaze. Her research, which outlines the social and historical development of body modification attitudes and strategies seen in contemporary media culture, traces the origins of the cosmetic gaze back to a notion which finds root in classical Greece: namely, “the concept of *kalókatheia*—from *kalós* (beautiful), *kai* (and), and *agathós* (good),” or the belief that assumes “a correspondence between beauty of bodily form and a beautiful disposition in the soul” (Wegenstein 5).

As Wegenstein explains, it is from this notion of *kalókatheia*—the idea of one’s *physical* beauty as an outward manifestation of one’s *inner* beauty—from which contemporary body modification attitudes have emerged. However, whereas historically, *kalókatheia* was accepted as a one-directional process that assumed one’s *outer* beauty to be a physical

manifestation of the beauty existing *inside*, Wegenstein maintains that the technologies of body modification available today have enabled the subject to renegotiate the terms of the process. In its present manifestation, Wegenstein contends that the narratives surrounding contemporary body modification attitudes and strategies show it to be a way for the subject to reverse the direction of *kalókatheia*'s original course by modifying one's *exterior* in order to conform to the beauty felt *inside*.

In this context, Wegenstein describes the cosmetic gaze as a historically specific gaze, borne of modernity and made possible by contemporary technologies of body modification, in which the self contemplates the corporeal reality of the present body as a *screen* against which the possibility of a future self is contrasted. Defining the cosmetic gaze to be one in which “the act of looking at our bodies and those of others is informed by the techniques, expectations, and strategies of bodily modification” (2), Wegenstein explains, however, that although this gaze is “deployed in individuals,” it is nevertheless “nurtured and evolves in the media of culture” (x). As a result, whereas one part of this gaze involves looking at oneself for “maintenance,” or small and routine interventions undertaken as a part of a regular beauty regimen, “another part involves looking at others” (Wegenstein 115). As such, she argues that “the commodification of an act like going under the knife is linked with the consumption of the images and stories of magical transformations that the media economy slingshots at us” (114).

Like Lacan's mirror, in which the conception of the self is occasioned by the image of the other as well as the subject's own reflection, the cosmetic gaze works in a similar way, with the actual TV or movie screen functioning like a mirror. In turn, the images of the people reflected within dictate the way we view ourselves and what kind of modifications we desire for our own bodies. Or, as Wegenstein puts it, “the more we see ‘it,’ the more we see ourselves in it” (114).

Engendered by the very technologies that render its fulfillment a possibility, the cosmetic gaze thus enables a very different way of looking, one in which the physical reality of one's *present* self—who I am in the *present* moment as circumscribed by the finite materiality of my body—is contrasted against the physical materiality of a *future* self—the possibility of *who I could be* or what *I could look like*, having submitted to the desires of bodily modification.

However, despite an excellent account of the origins, development, and manifestations of the cosmetic gaze in contemporary media culture, including a brief analysis of the cosmetic gaze in *Time*, Wegenstein stops short of offering any definitive judgments as to the further implications of this gaze. Although Wegenstein does conclude by acknowledging that the cosmetic gaze reveals “another potential in cinema that parallels and undermines what has been called the male gaze” (184), she neither explains *how* she imagines the cosmetic gaze to undermine the male gaze nor does she offer any insights as how the potential of the cosmetic gaze might be deployed. Instead, her analysis focuses almost entirely on the identification and description of the cosmetic gaze in a variety of media and how, in the variety of these contexts, the cosmetic gaze works.

In the wake of the dual and opposing binaries constructed by the male gaze, however, the identification of the cosmetic gaze is significant for several reasons. First, in contrast to the linear structure of the male gaze, which constructs male “selves” and female “others,” Wegenstein identifies a gaze in which the controlling *subject* of the gaze serves as the *object* of its self-same look. In this framework, the gaze that is traditionally located within the self, looking out—that is to say, emanating from subject to object in a conventional linear fashion—loops back to consider itself as the *object* of its own circular gaze. In contrast to the linearity of the male gaze, the circular nature of the cosmetic gaze enables the self to exist as *both* self and other; *both* subject

and object—simultaneously invalidating hierarchical binaries and consequently upending any assumptions about the “true” nature of the self.³⁵

Second, if the nature of patriarchal ideology has created a “basic opposition which places man inside history” while presenting woman as “eternal and unchanging” (Johnston 23), a concern which has also been expressed by thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, I suggest that the cosmetic gaze permits a more fluid conception of the subject, representing the subject as neither fixed nor static, but involved in as a continual process of *arriving*.

Finally, if the complaint of the male gaze is that it constructs male subjects and female objects—that is, male “selves” and female “others”—then by eroding the distinction between self and other, the cosmetic gaze razes the central binary on which difference is built.

As such, the cosmetic gaze, which makes clear that “the ‘authentic’ self is not a given but lies out there to be discovered” (Wegenstein 131), productively challenges historical conceptions that take as an assumption the inherent wholeness of the subject. Emphasizing instead that the subject is *created*, the cosmetic gaze attempts to level hierarchical binaries by wresting the act of creation from the realm of “other” and returning it to the subject itself. In this regard, the circular nature of the cosmetic gaze is useful because it takes the issue of sexual difference completely out of the equation: in this schema, self *is* other, subject *is* object—and by inextricably fusing the two, the film illustrates that the same violence that is visited upon the other is returned in like and equal measure upon the self.

³⁵ The structure of both gazes, linear (male) and circular (female), each representing a different sex, recalls Luce Irigaray’s essay, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” (1977) in which the author observes the linear, phallic nature of male genitals and male orgasm, which she contrasts with the duality and multiplicity of the female genitals, autoeroticism, and female orgasm.

Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Dilemma

While some might argue that the cosmetic surgery is decidedly un-feminist because it cannot be extricated from the overarching context of male gaze in which it exists, I propose a more ambivalent reading of cosmetic surgery as a whole. Moving away from whether or not technologically mediated strategies of body modification are “good” or “bad,” which, as Kathy Davis has pointed out, is ultimately unproductive because in addition to shaming women who choose to undergo such procedures, it also unilaterally reduces women who decide to modify their bodies as uncritical “cultural dopes” instead of “agents who negotiate their bodies and their lives within the cultural and structural constraints of a gendered social order” (5).

Instead, like Davis, I propose an examination of cosmetic surgery as a way of exploring “how women actually experience and negotiate their bodies in a context of many promises and few options” (49) while simultaneously capitalizing on the possibilities offered by the cosmetic gaze for decentering hegemonic modes of representation. In other words, it is important to examine *what* the cosmetic gaze does and *how* it does it while simultaneously maintaining a critical attitude toward the overarching structures that engender it.

At the same time, however, from the beginning of the film, *Time* makes clear that Seh-hee’s decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is motivated not necessarily by a wish to become more beautiful, but a desire to renew the relationship—to be (mis)recognized as another in order to (re)capture that which has been lost. For example, in an exchange between Seh-hee and the plastic surgeon that takes place prior to her (first) surgery, when the doctor asks her what she wants to look like, instead of naming any specific qualities that she wants changed, Seh-hee expresses that she only wants to look *different*. Hence, when the surgeon says: “I don’t know if I

can make you any prettier than now,” Seh-hee responds in turn by saying: “I don’t want to be prettier. Just different. A new face.”



Figure 3.1 *Time* (2006). An example of the cosmetic gaze in *Time*. The “before” and “after” poster on the wall behind the surgeon is seen multiple times in the mise-en-scène throughout the film, such as on the door of the aesthetic clinic, on the streets outside the clinic, and in the subway. The two faces on the computer screen likewise simulate the circular subject/object nature of the cosmetic gaze.

On the other hand, however, although Seh-hee’s personal motivations for undergoing plastic surgery are quite different from the reasons typically expressed by women who undergo body modification, on the other, her reasons for wanting transformative surgery—in order to become *other* to herself in order to win Ji-woo back—nevertheless keeps the issue planted squarely in the realm of male subject/female object heteronormative desire. At the same time, however, whereas the film thus distances *Seh-hee* from the typical circumstances that engender the desire for body modification, it nevertheless maintains a critical attitude toward cosmetic surgery as a whole. Indeed, from the opening sequence of the film, which consists of a montage of different aesthetic interventions ranging from the minute (laser mole removal) to the

downright invasive (nose, cheek, and forehead implants), *Time* presents both a critique and an illustration of how the female body has literally *embodied* the physical burdens of the male gaze.

This concern is one that is expressed from the opening sequence of the film. For example, the first image of the film is an extreme close-up of an eye which, although initially closed, shortly opens to reveal a reflection from the surgical lights above imposed across the iris. Significantly, this is an image that repeats itself in a similar way when See-hee goes under the knife for her second transformative surgery. The image then cuts briefly to an IV drip, then back to the eye, whereupon we see the hand of a plastic surgeon inking a dotted line across the eyelid, followed by a depiction of the actual cut, then another image of the same eye being stitched back up. Like the razor slicing the eye in the opening sequence of *Un chien andalou* (1929), it is the violence of the *image* that assaults the viewer.

In the sequence that follows, the viewer is presented with a montage of different cosmetic procedures which grow increasingly graphic in nature, including (what appears to be) a vaginal “rejuvenation” surgery, nose surgery (including the insertion of a nasal implant), a facelift, as well as several truly cringe-worthy cuts of the scalpel followed by images of various chin, cheek, and forehead implants being inserted into gaping orifices. Then, an image of a breast slowly inflating as it is pumped full of saline is then followed by another image of the same breast being stitched back up. The final image of the sequence, which focuses on the feet of a patient lying motionless on an operating table surrounded by a sea of blue-green surgical cloth, reveals a variety of medical instruments and bloodied gauze scattered about.

The very next shot, a continuation of the plastic surgery theme seen in the preceding sequence, cuts to the double doors of what is explicitly marked as an “aesthetic clinic” across which the contrasting “before” and “after” halves of a single face are seen. On the left, the

“before” image depicts a female face without any makeup, which looks all the more plain in comparison to the right, which features the post-operative “after” image of the same face, complete with the chromatic depth and contrast of foundation, blush, eye shadow, mascara, lipstick, and good lighting, making the second image much more attractive. As the camera focuses on the double doors, a patient wearing sunglasses and a mask emerges, and as the camera focuses on *this* woman, a second woman (whom the viewer later learns is Seh-hee) interrupts the first woman by abruptly crashing into *her*.



Figure 3.2. Time (2006). The contrasting “before” and “after” halves of the same face on the clinic door also mirror the two bodily manifestations of the same individual who collide outside of it. Moreover, the way that each time Seh-hee enters the clinic she is physically transformed leads the comparison of the aesthetic clinic as a kind of womb that imbues the subject with the powers of self-creation.

In short, the centrality of the issue of cosmetic surgery seen at the beginning of the film reiterates the fact that although Seh-hee’s decision to undergo plastic surgery is not necessarily motivated by a desire to become more beautiful, the context in which the cosmetic gaze exists is nevertheless directly influenced by the male gaze. More specifically, without a word, the film offers a visual commentary on the prevalence of cosmetic surgery in South Korea and provides

an illustration of the circular structure of the mirror/screen that engenders, perpetuates, and reflects the desire for body modification.³⁶

Moreover, it is no coincidence that the film, whose opening image consists of an image of blepharoplasty, or what is more commonly known as “Asian eyelid surgery,” portrays “the most popular of all facial cosmetic surgery procedures” not only for subjects in South Korea, but for “patients of Asian descent in the East and the West” (Asian Plastic Surgery). Moreover, in addition to organizing the narrative so that this procedure is the first image seen in the film, the ubiquitous presence of the society-screen that at once engenders, promotes, and naturalizes what some have argued is a western ideal of beauty (Maliangkay and Song 164), is concretely exemplified in the physical manifestation of the double eyelid (*sangapul*) seen in the film throughout. It is seen, for example, in the “after” picture of the model on the clinic door; in the software program on the computer in the surgeon’s office (*Figure 3.1*) equipped to virtually simulate four different types of eye surgery, such as “epicanthoplasty” and “canthoplasty” and hence, four different ways that the (Asian) eye can be modified; it is demonstrated in the advertisement displayed immediately behind the surgeon in his office and in the side-by-side “before” and “after” images of patients’ faces on medical charts, in advertisements, and on the computer in the doctor’s office; as well as in the fact that eyelid surgery is the first in a list of surgical interventions that the doctor, when given free reign of Seh-hee’s transformation, indicates that he will perform. Hence the surgeon’s response after Seh-hee communicates her desire for a completely different face:

SURGEON: The eyelids need to be a bit deeper. Just the tip of the nose needs to be raised. And smaller lips. It won’t be difficult. One moment.

³⁶ The issue of body modification in South Korea, which is intimately connected to its capitalist economy, the digital connectedness of South Korean society as a whole, the ubiquitous presence of the image due to the proliferation of internet technologies, and the communist North against which the democratic South defines itself, is a complex and multifaceted and phenomenon that merits its own study.

[Taking Seh-hee's face into his hands] I'll make your jaw and chin look softer. Your face will be smaller. It takes six months to fully recover. It will be painful. Can you take it?

SEH-HEE: I'll have to if I want to look new.

Although Seh-hee is clear that she only wants to look different, the film illustrates that it is nevertheless the demand for specific cosmetic procedures that dictates the types of procedures that are actually offered by surgeons and also those that are in fact literally performed. Kathy Davis thus observes of the connections between cosmetic surgery and modernity, noting that: “cosmetic surgery belongs to the cultural landscape of late modernity: consumer capitalism, technological development, liberal individualism, and the belief in the makeability of the human body” (28-29).³⁷

What's more, later in the film, when Ji-woo and his friends are out drinking following Seh-hee's disappearance, we are presented with another brief, if ultimately uncertain, comment on the pervasiveness of cosmetic surgery in the context of contemporary Korean society. In the following dialogue, which begins with Ji-woo's friend questioning the feelings Ji-woo has for Seh-hee despite her abrupt disappearance, the conversation abruptly shifts to whether or not one of the hostesses accompanying the group has had any plastic surgery:

FRIEND 1: Why are you waiting for her after she disappears like that? Forget about her.

FRIEND 2: You went out for two years.

FRIEND 1: Two years are enough. I can't even last six months. Aren't you sick of the same body?

³⁷ In her essay, “All Cosmetic Surgery is ‘Ethnic’: Asian Eyelids, Feminist Indignation, and the Politics of Whiteness” (2009), Cressida Heyes points out that although dominant readings of cosmetic surgery adopt a rhetoric of personal choice for *white* women who opt to undergo cosmetic procedures, affirming individual agency and personal choice, there is a blatant double standard that assumes cosmetic surgery to be the result of internalized racism when sought by ethnic minorities. Her essay stems from a desire “to show how some of the most widely cited literature on ethnic cosmetic surgery starts from an example—Asian blepharoplasty—that supports a particularly blunt-edged reading of women recipients as dupes of internalized racism” (193). She suggests that “the dominant reading of this case study leads to an inability to take seriously the very ethnographic results that purport to motivate it, by repeatedly countermanding the self-interpretations of the women interviewed” (Heyes 193).

FRIEND 2: Yeah, when it hits two years, you start checking out other girls. But it's not because there's no love. It's because there's no more thrills and turn-ons. [To the hostess] You got a nose job and a face lift, huh?

HOSTESS: No.

FRIEND 2: Come on, you got your eyes, nose and jaw done.

HOSTESS: I said I didn't.

FRIEND 2: You did. Let me see your tits.

Significantly, because the woman denies the allegation, the issue is only brought up, not verified, and thus the question persists, permanently unanswered.

Nevertheless, the violence of cosmetic surgery, like all the violence in Kim Ki-duk's films, may be understood as both a critique and an illustration of existing social hierarchies in which women and animals, as entities occupying the lowest rungs of the social ladder, have no choice but to absorb the violence that the whole of society passes down to them. It is in this context that Cédric Lagandré observes:

The invisible cruelty of human relationships, the dominations and servitudes, normally concealed by their symbolic character, are expressed here [in Kim's oeuvre] in their real shape, material, physically mutilating and painful . . . Each, in whatever group he/she is, ends up being the object of the gratuitous violence of the strongest and each passes on those blows to the weakest, down as far as women and animals who, at the bottom of the ladder, have no-one to beat in return and who die for the whole world, having absorbed all the social violence passed hand to hand . . . It is toward women and animals that the flux of violence produced by social relationships are directed. It is women and animals who, through their powerlessness to pass them on, through their death, torture or servitude, allow the flux to be evacuated. Their annihilation is the price of survival of the whole. (70)

Or, as Capdeville-Zeng affirms of the simultaneously local *and* universal themes demonstrated throughout Kim's work: "truth is undoubtedly universal, but the way it is expressed in Kim Ki-duk's films is specifically Korean" (105).

Notwithstanding the film's critique of cosmetic surgery, however, the cosmetic gaze in *Time*—evidenced in the multiple side-by-side "before" and "after" images in the surgeon's

office, on the door of the aesthetic clinic, in the street outside the café, and in the advertisements in the subway, as well as in the *mise-en-scène* throughout—challenges and displaces the centrality of the male subject in several ways.

First, the cosmetic gaze, which “perceives all bodies in light of some potentially transformative completion,” (Wegenstein x), exchanges historical notions of stasis and fixity that inscribe and reproduce the cinematic practice of woman as object of the gaze for an entirely different understanding of the self—one that embraces continuous change, renewal, and transformation as an inherent condition of the subject. Thus, following postmodern, poststructuralist, and posthuman thinkers such as Lacan, Foucault, Irigaray, Kristeva, Haraway, Braidotti, Deleuze, and Guattari, among others, the cosmetic gaze understands “the subject is a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire” (Braidotti 18).

Second, by fusing self and other, the cosmetic gaze makes it possible to depart from the traditional binaries that have governed human classification. For if “self” is always defined in reference to the “other” it is not, then the melding of self and other presents a powerful and explosive way of thinking about gender, sexuality, and subjectivity in a way that negates traditional dichotomies and enables with it a pivotal shift in approaching difference. In contrast to the denial, suppression, or emphasis of sexual difference which has dominated feminist thought since its inception, engendering opposing dualities such as male/female, subject/object, wholeness/lack in order to limit and define the parameters of the self, *Time*’s contribution is that it blurs the boundaries between self and other, razing with it the fundamental base on which all other binaries of difference rest.

Just like See-hee is neither an entirely new self, completely independent of her past, nor is she able, in assuming a new face, to escape the psyche of her former self, *Time* transforms irreconcilable dualities into inextricable wholes that permit no clear distinctions as to where one begins and the other ends.

Moreover, by fashioning the narrative as an endless narrative loop, the film not only aligns its content to mirror its narrative structure, it formally and narratively enacts the interconnectedness of self and other through the repetitive interchange of Seh-hee and Ji-woo, subject and object, self and other.

Indeed, *Time* illustrates this interconnectedness by demonstrating that every act of violence enacted on the *self* is returned in like and equal measure on the *other*—and vice versa. For example, Seh-hee’s initial decision to undergo extreme cosmetic surgery is mirrored at a later point in the film by Ji-woo’s like decision to undergo an extreme physical transformation. Moreover, Ji-woo’s transformation means that See-hee is now positioned to live the same emotional trauma as *object* that at a prior point in the film we see her exert on Ji-woo as *subject*.

Furthermore, in contrast to *La piel que habito*, in which the dramatic “reveal” compels the viewer to retroactively *imagine* the same subjective experience from the object position of the person on whom the violence is enacted, in *Time*, the narrative formally takes the viewer through key situations with subject and object roles reversed, in this way making the case for the interbeing of both. For example, after Seh-hee’s disappearance, Ji-woo goes to her apartment, but she’s not there; after a thwarted romantic encounter with another woman, Ji-woo kicks at an enormous tree. But the same key situations repeat later in the film with the roles reversed. Thus, in a nearly-identical set of repetitions suggestive of Freud’s uncanny, after Ji-woo’s disappearance, See-hee looks for him at his apartment, but he’s not there; in frustration, she also

kicks at the same enormous tree. Indeed, the repetition of nearly identical circumstances at different points in the film with Seh-hee and Ji-woo's roles reversed formally and narratively demonstrates the interchangeability of self and other.

But this repetition is also seen in the two different backdrops against which the same stories play out—the sculpture park and the café—with the variation provided by the characters themselves at different times in their different physical manifestations. Notably, the sculpture park, a seaside locale with a number of surreal sculptures, many of them sexual in nature, sits on an island that can only be accessed by ferry. It is on this ferry that Ji-woo meets Seh-hee after her first surgery, but at the time, neither Ji-woo nor the viewer knows who the woman is because of the mask and sunglasses that she wears. It is this unknown woman whom Ji-woo asks to photograph at the park, mirroring the way that the first “Ji-woo surrogate” introduced into the text later in the film will ask to photograph *See*-hee. Thus, the same situations repeat at different times with the characters in different bodily manifestations. However, unlike Seh-hee/*See*-hee, who later admits that she was the mysterious woman at the sculpture park, the identity of the first “Ji-woo possibility” that *See*-hee meets after his disappearance is never revealed. Adding further to the narrative ambiguity is the fact that this first Ji-woo surrogate *also* wears sunglasses and a mask, meaning that even if he *is* Ji-woo (which the narrative never discloses), neither *See*-hee nor the viewer is able to look unobstructed at his face.

Moreover, it is on one of the sculptures at this park—a life-size metal sculpture of two giant hands between which a staircase spirals upward toward infinity—where *Seh*-hee and Ji-woo's photograph is first taken. Interestingly enough, this is same photograph that the viewer sees in *Seh*-hee's apartment immediately after her and Ji-woo's originating fight as well as later in the film, in Ji-woo's apartment. Moreover, it is this original picture of *Seh*-hee and Ji-woo

taken on the statue that *See-hee* attempts to repeat. For example, when Ji-woo and *See-hee* first start dating, they go to the same sculpture park and take the same picture from the same angle on the same statue. Moreover, it is this second photograph (of Ji-woo and *See-hee*) that *See-hee* secretly slips into Ji-woo's picture frame *over* the nearly identical one of *Seh-hee* and Ji-woo, thus mimicking the palimpsestic nature of the identity that is literally etched into her skin.

The Destruction of Pleasure Is a Radical Weapon

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey identifies two contradictory mechanisms on which pleasurable looking in the cinema revolves: *identification* and *objectification*, which she demonstrates to be intricately linked to the spectator's sensations of *mastery* and *desire*, respectively.

As seen in Mulvey's analysis, a key component of the male gaze is that it functions, in part, through identification: by providing the viewer with a clear filmic surrogate, or an in-film character who inhabits the center of the movie in such a way that makes evident that it is he (she) with whom the viewer is structured to identify. In contrast, however, *Time* problematizes the mastery of identification by demonstrating that the two sites avenues of identification offered by the text are intimately connected and that *other* is likewise merely an extension of *self*.

For example, in the first half of the film, Ji-woo functions as *object* to *Seh-hee*'s *subject*, which is corroborated by the fact that he is the *other* at whom *Seh-hee* directs her surgery; it is *she*, not *he*, who decides to undergo the operation in the first place; it is *she* who, under false pretenses, singles *him* out for a relationship after the operation has taken place; and finally, it is *she*, not *he*, who, upon discerning the divided nature of Ji-woo's true feelings, thus introduces the disappeared *Seh-hee* back into Ji-woo's life. At every step of the process, *Seh-hee* wields

decidedly more narrative power than Ji-woo, and as a result, in terms of narrative weight and importance, Seh-hee appears to be imbued with significantly more personal agency and narrative clout than Ji-woo, making her a much more desirable character with whom to identify.

Moreover, in terms of film form and camera positioning, the first part of the film likewise upholds Seh-hee's construction as narrative subject. For example, after Seh-hee's surgery and subsequent disappearance, Ji-woo continues to meet with other women and goes on several dates. However, per Meera Lee's observation, "as this part of the narrative develops, the camera angle is changed, so that now it follows him [Ji-woo] from behind and creates a sense that he is being watched and menaced" (94). Indeed, many of the shots seen during this period are voyeuristic in nature, such as the shot of Ji-woo standing in the lighted window of his apartment taken from an anonymous vantage point outside; or a similar image of the motel window where Ji-woo takes the hostess following a night out drinking with his friends during which a mysterious rock comes flying through the window right when the two are about to have sex; or yet another situation in which he and another woman are on a date and the shot, which is taken from outside the restaurant window, places the viewer in Seh-hee's implied subject position.

But if the attraction of identifying with the image is due, in part, to the pleasure of surrogate power that it provides, Seh-hee as a pleasurable site of identification is problematized in that the circularity of the narrative returns her, as *object*, to the same circumstance to which she enacts on Ji-woo as *subject*.

Moreover, the shifting reality of Seh-hee's physical face makes identification difficult, maintaining the achievability of such a feat at a perpetual remove. Throughout the course of the film, Seh-hee is seen in three distinct physical manifestations—first as *Seh-hee*, then as *See-hee*, then as yet *another* woman in a third and final physical embodiment. In addition, she also

appears in the film in situations of uncertain identity, such as shortly after her disappearance when Ji-woo meets a masked woman on the ferry—but due to the mask covering her face, the viewer is ultimately left unsure of whether or not the woman is her. At the first and second stages of her physical embodiment, she is played by different actresses, while in the third, due to the sunglasses and mask obscuring her entire face, it is simply difficult to tell. The result, however, is that each added transformation places the image at an additional remove. Unlike the reflection in the mirror, which is anchored to a constant—the subject’s own specular image or, in the viewer’s case, the image of the protagonist onscreen—the shifting features of the female protagonist’s face create a compelling detachment, alienating the viewer from identifying with the image even as the narrative offers no preferable alternatives.

Furthermore, in the same way that the inconstancy of the image disrupts the viewer’s ease of identification with Seh-hee/See-hee *visually*, the ambiguity of the narrative and the refusal to “fix” a conclusive post-operative form to Ji-woo likewise inhibits the viewer’s identification with the only alternative site of identification offered by the text.

Instead, after Ji-woo’s surgery, the narrative is designed in a way as to continually transfer the *possibility* of identification from one “Ji-woo surrogate” to another, a possibility which remains crucially unfulfilled due to the movie’s narrative structure. As a result, the ambiguity not only inhibits the possibility of closure, it repeats each new possibility in a way that makes Seh-hee/See-hee live the trauma of indeterminacy over and over, without resolution, much like the looping narrative circularity of the film.

For example, in the months following Ji-woo’s disappearance, as See-hee continues to visit the same sculpture park and café, she meets man after man who invites the compelling possibility that *he* could be the new Ji-woo. A mysterious man whom she approaches at the park

wears sunglasses and a mask reminiscent of the way she first appears to the viewer at the beginning of the film. Curiously, it is this man who approaches *her* and inexplicably asks if she would like to see a photograph of his former face. Underneath the man's disguise, the viewer glimpses bandages suggestive of cosmetic surgery. Notably, this man carries the same kind of camera as her ex.

But the way that the narrative repeats itself in uncanny similarities and coincidences from this first Ji-woo-possibility until the last—and the narrative presents the viewer with at least five more—means that there is no ultimate answer provided by the film. For example, when See-hee meets the second surrogate “Ji-woo,” the scene opens to a shot of her sitting at her and Ji-woo's old table in the café. Significantly, See-hee now sits in Ji-woo's seat, illustrating how the film has narratively returned her to the same situation as subject to which she once subjected Ji-woo as object.

A man enters, appears to wave at her, then walks past her to another table as See-hee follows him with her gaze. As he does, See-hee's facial expressions, head movement, and body language take the viewer through a wordless illustration of hope, uncertainty, and finally disappointment as the man approaches another table and sits down with another woman who has been waiting for him.

Almost immediately thereafter, we hear the sound of a door opening and another man enters the frame from the left, moving toward See-hee with his back facing the camera. As he approaches her, he slows his pace, and the camera zooms in on the two characters as the man first approaches See-hee's table, walks past, and then sits down at another table directly behind her so that they are seated back-to-back at different tables separated by a partition. The next shot, taken from immediately in front of him, shows his blurry face in the foreground to the right

peering over the partition, while See-hee, looking back at him, appears in clear focus to the left. The subsequent shot, taken from See-hee's perspective, is the mirror opposite of the first. In it, See-hee is seen blurry in the foreground at the left of the frame while the man appears in clear focus to the right. Then, a repeat sound of the door opening and another man enters the café. As See-hee perks up again thinking that *this* man could be the new Ji-woo, a woman in a different corner of the café waves to him he walks over to *her*. A subsequent shot of See-hee shows her putting her water glass back down on the table, looking disappointed.

As she does, however, the first man abandons his seat at the table behind See-hee, turns around, walks toward her, and asks if he can sit down. Notably, the seat that he is asking about is the same seat where she once sat as *Seh*-hee in the film's first sequence in the café, meaning that if the man is Ji-woo, their positions have likewise changed. However, the film leaves this question deliberately unanswered. The image then cuts to a medium shot of See-hee, then to another shot that formally returns the viewer to an image nearly identical in content, perspective, and angle to a shot seen at an earlier point in the film: the one in which Ji-woo, sitting where See-hee now sits, receives a call from a woman on the street who has run into his car—the same woman who inadvertently causes *Seh*-hee and Ji-woo's initial fight.

Significantly, the first words out of this man's mouth are: "Aren't you curious about me?" When he encourages See-hee to guess who he is, See-hee asks if she can hold his hand. As she takes his hand in hers and closes her eyes, he remarks: "my hand is warm, isn't it?" See-hee, for her part, remains immobile for a moment with her eyes closed as if comparing the feel of his hand to a memory. Then, just as abruptly, she opens her eyes and drops his hand, saying: "your hand is too big." Immediately after, See-hee leaves the café.

But the looping circularity that organizes the overarching narrative structure can also be seen in the way that key phrases and uncanny coincidences repeat across different sequences or even *within* a single sequence, as seen in Seh-hee's interaction with *Time*'s third narrative "Ji-woo."

The first image of this sequence opens to a shot of See-hee lying on her bed. The doorbell rings. See-hee gets up, walks to the door, and opens it to find an unknown man standing outside. When she asks him who he is, the man says that he must have gotten the wrong address, apologizes, and then leaves. See-hee closes the door, walks back to her bed, climbs in, and gets comfortable. The instant that she closes her eyes, however, the doorbell rings again. Again, See-hee gets up, walks to the door, and opens it to find the same man standing outside. He asks if she will invite him in for a cup of tea. When See-hee doesn't immediately answer, he apologizes again, in the same way, using the exact same words, and then leaves. At the very last moment, however, See-hee calls after him.

In the next shot, the camera moves along a shelf inside See-hee's apartment and stops at a framed photograph of her and Ji-woo sitting atop the same hand sculpture with stairs leading to infinity of which the viewer has now seen two different versions in Ji-woo's apartment. Notably, this photograph is nearly identical to the first picture of Ji-woo and *Seh-hee* that the viewer sees at *Seh-hee's* apartment at beginning of the film. The man then picks up the photograph and briefly smiles before putting it back down. Later, he asks See-hee if the picture was taken at the sculpture park, and when See-hee answers yes, he then mentions that he and his girlfriend used to go there. Then, just as suddenly, he becomes overwhelmed with emotion and begins to cry, "thinking of old memories."

See-hee then grabs the man's hand and asks this third "Ji-woo" a question about the way her hand feels that is similar to a question that we have already seen her as, the second "Ji-woo" in the café just moments before. His response is similar to that of the second. She then grabs the man, reaches into his coat pocket, takes out his wallet, and then pulls out the man's ID. A subsequent close-up of the ID reveals an entirely different name—Jung Seh-jun—and See-hee is again visibly disappointed.

In the end, however, despite being presented with five different characters, all after Ji-woo's disappearance, and consequently, five different sites where the viewer *might* direct identification—the ambiguity of the narrative in definitively "closing" each possibility by either confirming or denying See-hee's implicit question only multiplies the uncertainty of meaning. Indeed, shortly after each stranger is identified as a plausible Ji-woo, another man is subsequently introduced, thus propelling the narrative forward without definitively resolving the identity of the previous character. As a result, the continual forward movement of the plot leaves the viewer merely transferring the possibility of identification from one character to another.

What's more, because the filmic eye never attributes a definitive post-operative form to Ji-woo following his disappearance, apart from a vague understanding that Ji-woo will be so completely transformed so that See-hee will no longer recognize him, the narrative gives no further clues as to how See-hee might successfully identify this person as Ji-woo in the event that he *does* appear. This is important because it leaves the anticipated image open to *all* physical manifestations and hence, all possibilities, including the possibility that *none* of the subsequent Ji-woo surrogates are him, in the process also problematizing closure.

Thus, as each of the five subsequent "Ji-woo possibilities" appears in the text, the potential for the viewer's identification *of* and *with* the image as Ji-woo immediately activates. In

each case, however, after luring the viewer into a tentative confirmation by presenting a variety of uncanny coincidences that appear to corroborate the stranger's identity, the narrative goes on to let loose a final clue that (sometimes) conclusively destroys the same possibility established moments before. Following each denial, the possibility of identification is then transferred, through the strategic placement of further clues, onto the subsequent character—a character who again, following the structure of the narrative, transfers it onto the next.

Thus, after obliging the viewer to transfer Ji-woo's identification from each of five characters to the one who immediately follows, the narrative further defers mastery of identification with even the sixth and final "Ji-woo" by denying the spectator the opportunity to gaze unobstructed at the stranger's face.

In this dramatic sequence, in which See-hee appears to have caught a glimpse of Ji-woo in a stranger whose face is never actually revealed to the viewer, she darts after him into the street only to witness him being hit by a car and suffer fatal injury. However, immediately following the accident, as the camera zooms in on stranger's face, because the man's features have been so badly mangled and because there is so much blood obscuring his face, See-hee (and thus, the viewer) is still denied access to "Ji-woo's" face, even as the camera rests its gaze squarely on it. In other words, if, in cinematic terms, seeing means to know, then insofar as any kind of certainty as to the stranger's identity, the viewer is given none.

Thus, by infinitely deferring the possibility of "fixing" the image, the film suppresses the possibility of the viewer's identification with Ji-woo while at the same time, the physical reality of Seh-hee's shifting face likewise problematizes the spectator's ability to identify with *her*. In short, by employing various formal and narrative strategies to problematize *both* avenues of identification, that is, with Seh-hee *or* Ji-woo—*Time* effectively invalidates half of the

mechanisms on which the male gaze rests. As a result, it also problematizes the pleasure engendered by the default of the cinematic gaze.

Narrative Circularity

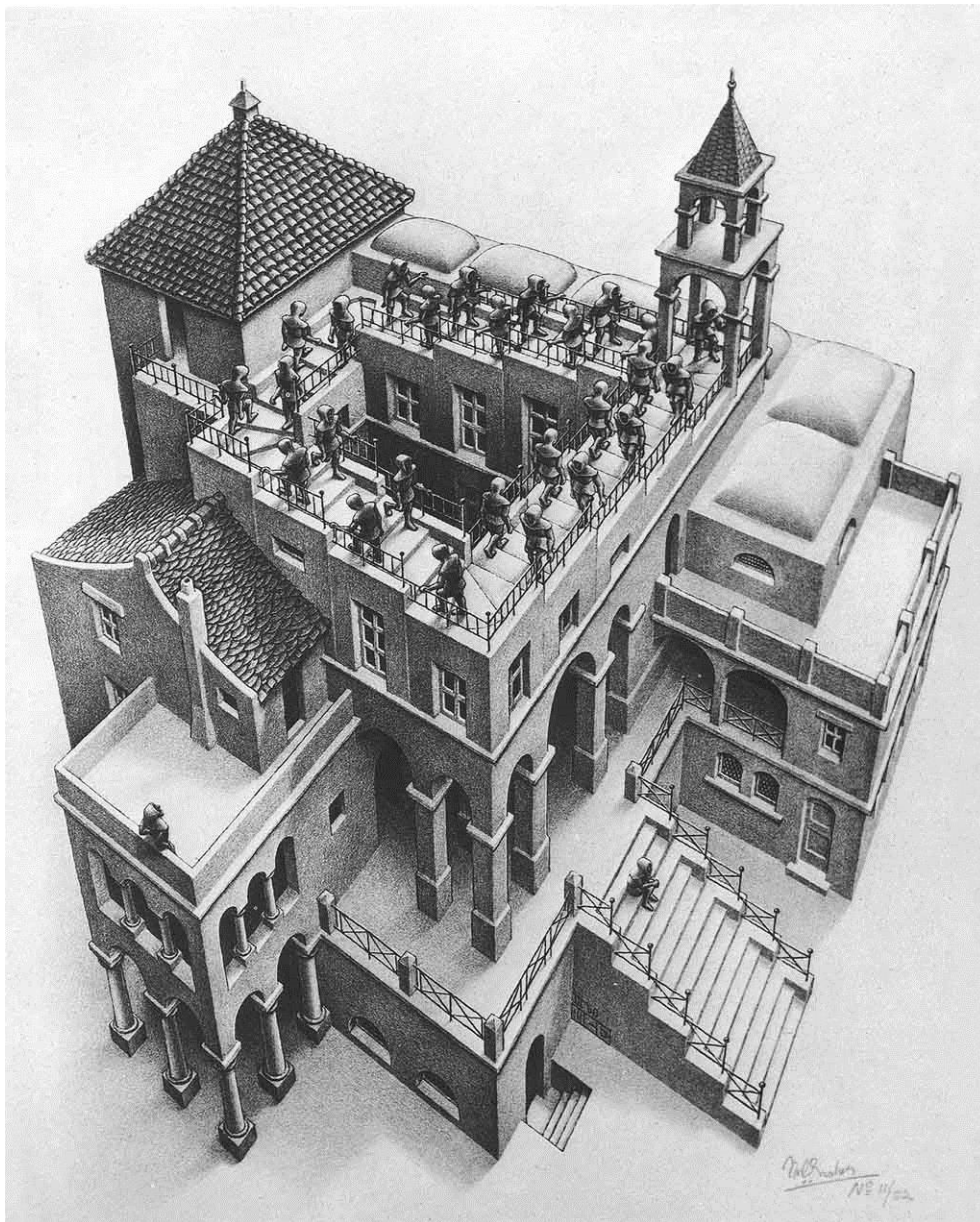


Figure 3.3. M. C. Escher's *Ascending and Descending* (1960) provides an apt visual illustration of the narrative and chronological circularity of *Time*.

The illusion in M. C. Escher's *Ascending and Descending* (1960), above, is an apt representation of the looping circularity of *Time*'s narrative structure. However, whereas Escher's lithograph gives form to this concept in the static present of an unchanging image, *Time* transposes the same looping circularity into a temporal realm with the added chronological dimension of time. Like the lithograph, which leads the eye in a series of progressions that makes possible the impossible, *Time* guides the viewer through a sequence of events that makes possible, according to the film's internal logic, its own uncanny ending. Consequently, like Escher's illusion, the film sets into place a structure in which time passes from a linear notion of temporality to a circular and infinite one "without any visible joins" (Ernst 5).

In so doing, however, the looping circularity of the film, following the self-sustaining loop of the cosmetic gaze, displaces the centrality of the male subject in three different ways: first, by blurring the distinction between self and other, thus diffusing the unity and coherence of the subject; second, by enabling three different manifestations of the same image (as in Seh-hee's case) to exist simultaneously, dispersing the coherence of the subject *across three different temporalities*; and third, by obstructing the fulfillment of the male Oedipal trajectory, consequently problematizing pleasure. In other words, by structuring the narrative as an infinite loop, *Time* displaces the concept of the male gaze with that of the cosmetic gaze, and in doing so, razes the notion of center and the subject on which the male gaze rests.

At the same time, by allowing the story to progress in a seemingly linear fashion, narratively elucidating the protagonist's journey from Seh-hee to *See*-hee to the same protagonist in her third and final bodily manifestation, *Time* establishes a logical sequence of events and guides the viewer through the progression every step of the way. Thus, the film is especially powerful because it works both with, and against, the pervasiveness of the male Oedipal

trajectory, using the lack of “narrative closure” to impede “the fulfillment of the male’s desire” (de Lauretis 142), while at the same time enacting “a continued and sustained work with and against narrative” (de Lauretis 156).

In this way, *Time* also fulfills the same objective that Teresa de Lauretis imagines for future directions of feminist cinema when she writes:

The most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is not anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the opposite. It is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it, the contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus. (157)

Put differently, time passes and the narrative appears to take place in a linear temporality, but in the end, we find that Seh-hee, See-hee and the third and final woman are only discrete points on a looping continuum and that all loop together endlessly.

Crazy as Boner-Shrinking Strategy

In addition to problematizing the process of identification, *Time* goes a step further and inhibits the viewer’s *desire* to objectify the image by depicting the only site where heterosexual male desire may be directed as *crazy*, a term which I locate at the intersection of formal and colloquial definitions of the word, including mentally ill, psychologically unstable, emotionally unpredictable, possessive, and/or driven by extreme and inordinate amounts of intense sexual jealousy. In other words, the film problematizes the viewer’s objectification of the image by specifically targeting the spectator’s *ability* and *desire* to do so.

In the final part of the chapter, I turn to a framework that derives from a combination of evolutionary psychology, neurobiology, and cognitive neuroscience to explain the processes by which desire in the male spectator may be invited or repelled in order to show that *crazy* is

indeed a potent semiotic marker that in *Time* is successfully employed to repel spectatorial desire.

Notwithstanding that the most obvious proof of Seh-hee's mental instability is the fact that she undergoes extreme plastic surgery with the sole purpose of rendering herself unrecognizable to her ex *in order to date him again*, from the beginning, the narrative provides other telling clues as to Seh-hee's mental instability. However, what is interesting about the film is that from the very beginning, the impulse to objectify the image is contained in a very specific way: first, through the rapid pace and misdirection set by the narrative, which initially directs the viewer's focus elsewhere; and second, by using restricted shots that strategically frame the protagonist in a way that denies, for a time, the possibility of looking unobstructed at her body.

On a formal level, this misdirection is seen in the type of shots that are used to introduce Seh-hee as a character. For instance, the first scene in which Seh-hee appears opens to a shot of the aesthetic clinic door (*Figure 3.2*). In the next moment, the door opens, and a post-operative patient—the protagonist in her *third* bodily manifestation—exits the clinic. Thus, as the camera focuses on *this* woman, it is *Seh-hee* who interrupts the shot by colliding into *her*.

Moreover, everything about the way this sequence unfolds suggests that the movie is about the mysterious lady exiting the clinic, which, in addition to the way Seh-hee is formally introduced, misdirects the viewer and momentarily holds the sexualizing impulse at bay. Thus, at the beginning of the movie when Seh-hee runs into *her*, the camera cuts to the first woman's face as if gauging *her* reaction, and after Seh-hee apologizes for the having broken the picture frame and runs off to get it fixed, the camera returns again to the first woman as she stands there watching Seh-hee leave before she herself turns and walks away. Notably, the only shot in this sequence that centers on *Seh-hee* (as opposed to the mysterious woman) is a medium shot

framing her head and shoulders immediately after she breaks the other woman's picture frame, one that draws pointed attention to her angst while at once keeping the decidedly "female" parts of her body, such her breasts, strategically outside the spectator's view.

Thus, despite having introduced Seh-hee as a character, the circumstances under which she is presented nevertheless deny the viewer the opportunity to consider her as object of desire until the following sequence in the café, at which point Seh-hee's semiotic construction as *crazy* is so clearly established as to *repel* spectatorial desire.

At the same time, however, the way that Seh-hee first enters the frame in this initial sequence, without permitting the viewer any possibility of looking at her body, contrasts sharply with the way that the waitress in the scene that immediately follows is portrayed. This sequence, which opens to a tracking shot in which a young woman, shot from the waist up with her breasts clearly in the frame, delivers a cup of coffee to Ji-woo, who watches her as she makes her way across the room. As the waitress sets down her tray and begins to unload its contents, we see Ji-woo look directly at the waitress, whereupon the image immediately cuts to a close-up of her face, then back to Ji-woo looking at her, in this way suturing the gaze of the camera (and consequently, that of the viewer) to that of the man looking at the woman.

The close-up of the woman's face then cuts back to Ji-woo as he attends to his coffee while continuing to watch the waitress from across the room, in apparent fascination. The subsequent shot shows the viewer exactly what Ji-woo sees: the waitress leaning over a table, wiping it off, the front of her shirt gaping just enough to allow a peek down the front and at the top of her breasts. In the meantime, a reverse shot reveals an even closer image of Ji-woo's face, mesmerized, as he continues to watch.

As the camera, thus reproducing Ji-woo's gaze, focuses on the waitress going about her duties in the café, Ji-woo's wishful reveries are brought to a screeching halt as the shot, which focuses on the waitress, is disrupted by a clearly displeased Seh-hee as she steps into the frame. In contrast to the waitress, who is smiling and agreeable, making a case for her sexual desirability, Seh-hee is seen as angry, castrating, and jealous, inspiring just the opposite response.

Indeed, the displeasure hinted at in the scene only grows progressively worse, escalating from discomfort to aggression to full-blown crazy in a matter of moments. Following Seh-hee's abrupt appearance onto the scene, the distasteful nature of which appropriately colors the spectator's first impression of her, Seh-hee's first words to Ji-woo as she approaches his table and sits down is to ask if Ji-woo has grown tired of her, showing her to be uncomfortably clingy and dependent. "After two years you're sick of me, huh?" she says. When Ji-woo rejects this assertion as silly and unfounded, Seh-hee nevertheless insists on pursuing the subject, pointing out: "you even gave away your dog after you got sick of it."

Clearly uncomfortable with the topic and hoping to change the subject to a more lighthearted one, Ji-woo responds by grabbing the frame that Seh-hee is holding out of her hands—the one dropped by the woman outside the clinic—and asks about the woman in the photograph. As he does, Seh-hee's obsessive focus immediately shifts from the waitress that she has just caught Ji-woo eyeing to the woman in the photograph and she responds by asking Ji-woo if he is interested in *her*. Moreover, when the waitress approaches the table to take her order, Seh-hee raises her voice for no apparent reason, and makes a point to ask: "what's with your attitude?" in an extremely aggressive and confrontational way. When Ji-woo looks surprised,

Seh-hee makes her jealousy even more evident by retorting, “Why? Feel bad that I got mad at a girl you’re interested in?”

However, the culmination of this sequence—and of Seh-hee’s all-out subsequent rage—occurs immediately following Seh-hee’s exchange with the waitress. While they are still in the café, even before the two have resolved the issue, Ji-woo receives a call from a stranger informing him that she has accidentally hit his car. The shot, which frames the couple’s usual table at the café where the majority of the movie takes place, shows Ji-woo sitting at the table, answering his cell phone with the window in the background. As he answers, the focus shifts from Ji-woo, who appears in the foreground, to reveal that the woman calling him is standing immediately outside, by his car, which is parked in the street. Interestingly, the content, angle, and composition of this shot is repeated in a nearly identical way at a later point in the film. After going outside to check the damage, Ji-woo re-parks the car and he and the woman exchange contact information, after which Ji-woo, re-entering the café, holds the door open for the woman and her female friend, who enter the café and sit down in a different part of the café at a different table. The viewer thus witnesses the following exchange as the three enter the café:

JI-WOO: [To woman] I’ll call you if there’s a problem.
WOMAN: Okay.
JI-WOO: [Returning to Seh-hee] Did you see that? My license plate got bent.
SEH-HEE: Why’d you take her card?
JI-WOO: Just in case there’s a problem later.
SEH-HEE: But why’d you give her yours?
JI-WOO: Just because.
SEH-HEE: Just because? And why’d you open the door for her? Didn’t they have hands? Do you work here?
JI-WOO: Are you jealous?
SEH-HEE: Give me the card.
JI-WOO: [Handing it to her, whereupon Seh-hee grabs it and rips it into pieces] What are you doing?
SEH-HEE: You said your car was okay! Why do you need her card?
JI-WOO: Aren’t you being too much?

SEH-HEE: What? What's too much? Those girls talk to you smiling, and you take it like an idiot. And why'd you park for them? Are you their friend? Aren't you the one who's too much? You should've said the insurance would cover it and hurry back. But why'd you give in so easily?

JI-WOO: You're overreacting. It was nothing.

SEH-HEE: What? It was nothing? [Turning to the two women, who are seated at a different table in another part of the café]

JI-WOO: Seh-hee!

SEH-HEE: [Walking over to the other table and violently throwing the other woman's crumpled phone number onto the table] You should've just apologized. But why'd you give him your card?

WOMAN: Who are you to yell at me?

SEH-HEE: Who are you to give your card to my boyfriend? Did you expect he'd call a slut like you?

JI-WOO: Hey! [To the women] I'm sorry.

SEH-HEE: Sorry about what? They're sluts anyway.

FRIEND: You crazy bitch!

SEH-HEE: Crazy bitch? Yeah, I'm crazy. So what?

The situation, which starts out as simply an uncomfortably loud argument between lovers in a public space, gets progressively louder and more animated until it escalates into an all-out yelling match in which Seh-hee rushes over to the other woman's table, throws the woman's crumpled card down on the table and calls her and her friend "sluts" in front of all the other patrons. Meanwhile, Ji-woo, who has gotten up from his seat in an attempt to diffuse the situation, tells Seh-hee: "Stop. This is embarrassing." To which a furious and nearly hysterical Seh-hee responds by screaming: "Embarassing? You're ashamed of me?" before storming out of the café.

In short, the way that Seh-hee is first formally introduced to the viewer at the beginning of the film, along with the added element of narrative misdirection, prevents her from being looked at as an object of spectatorial desire until the following sequence in the café, at which point her extreme and illogical sexual jealousy problematizes the viewer's desire to do so.

Moreover, the use of the word “crazy,” whether explicitly or in variation, is repeated extensively throughout the film. For example, when Seh-hee shows Ji-woo the photograph of the woman in the picture frame—a woman who the viewer later learns is *her*—Ji-woo says that she “looks like a lunatic.” Toward the end of the same sequence, as seen, she is not only called “crazy” by the friend of the woman who hit Ji-woo’s car, she also appropriates the description in her own response: “Yeah I’m crazy. So what?”

Furthermore, Seh-hee’s extreme sexual jealousy and erratic emotional instability is reiterated throughout, thus “fixing” the protagonist in word as well as by behavior. For example, later in bed on the same day of their fight, Seh-hee uses the same word uttered by the woman in the café to describe herself when she says: “I’m crazy, aren’t I? I wanna poke out girls’ eyes when they just look at you.” But this idea is also repeatedly illustrated in her behavior as well. Later that night, Seh-hee fellates Ji-woo, who, due to the events of the day, is unable to get an erection. After instructing him to “think of that other woman” and imagine that she is her, Ji-woo is able to get an erection and the two make love. Almost immediately contradicting herself, however, right after they have sex, Seh-hee asks Ji-woo if he thought of the other woman while they were having sex. When Ji-woo points out that this is exactly what she told him to do, Seh-hee again becomes uncontrollably angry and jealous, at one point covering her face with a sheet like a shroud—a gesture that is repeated later in the film by the *fifth* Ji-woo surrogate, who the narrative suggests is the same as the *first* Ji-woo surrogate, yet never conclusively corroborates.

But the repetition of the word “crazy” to describe the protagonist is seen throughout the film, bringing this description to the forefront of the spectator’s consciousness and in the process exerting a negative toll on the spectator’s desire to view the protagonist as self and on the same viewer’s desire to objectify her as sexual other. For example, in the exchange that takes place

between See-hee and Ji-woo the day of her dramatic “reveal,” when the former appears at their café wearing blown-up photograph of her former face over her actual face like a mask, the word “crazy” is explicitly repeated four different times in the exchange that ensues:

SEE-HEE: How have you been? I missed you so much.
JI-WOO: What is this? It was you on that island?
SEE-HEE: I wanted to see you somehow.
JI-WOO: How could you do that? What kind of *crazy* act is this?
SEE-HEE: I was afraid of time. Time that makes everything change.
JI-WOO: So what the hell is this? Were you happy playing with me? Then what the hell am I? What am I?
SEE-HEE: I thought if I changed my face, you’d love me longer. But you couldn’t forget your girl of the past. And I couldn’t stand being so jealous.
JI-WOO: That doesn’t make sense. Both of them are you!
SEE-HEE: No. I’m not your woman of the past. I’m a new woman.
JI-WOO: You’re *crazy*! Who are you? Who are you?

[After an interruption from another patron]:

JI-WOO: What the hell is this? Why’d you fix your face? Are you *crazy*?
SEE-HEE: I was too nervous. I thought you’d get sick of me and find a new woman.
JI-WOO: Think I’m some meathead who chases after women’s bodies?
SEE-HEE: I love you.
JI-WOO: You’re scary. You’re really scary.
SEE-HEE: Don’t be like this. Just take off my mask and see my new face.
JI-WOO: No. [Yelling] You’re *crazy*! (emphasis added)

Moreover, the *crazy* as commented on by Ji-woo about the protagonist *within* the space of the film offers a clue as to how the *crazy* might inhibit the process of objectification in regards to Seh-hee/See-hee’s relationship to the viewer without.

In short, in examining *Time*, which has as its center a *crazy* female protagonist—one that encompasses both formal and colloquial definitions of the word, including mentally ill, psychologically unstable, possessive, and/or exhibiting signs of extreme sexual jealousy—I was struck by the realization that there is *nothing* that curbs sexual desire like crazy, and I was intrigued at the effect that such representation might have on the spectator’s sexual response.

In the final section of this chapter, I suggest that a closer look at the sex-specific processes by which heterosexual male sexual desire is invited or repelled points favorably to the development of future film strategies, grounded in biology and supported by empirical research, on how to more effectively understand, manipulate, and productively harness the default assumptions of the male gaze in a way that creates enough distance between the female image and the habit of sexual objectification in a way that allows the spectator to examine ‘woman’ as a complex and autonomous psychological subject, apart from the objectifying defaults of the hegemonic gaze.

The Science of Desire

In *The Female Brain* (2006), and its later companion, *The Male Brain* (2010), neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine asserts that new developments in brain science, such as positron-emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), have utterly transformed previously held ideas about the most fundamental aspects of the human brain—including sex-specific differences. Due to such advances in imaging technologies, which allow us to see inside the brain as it works in real time, scientists have found that not only are male and female brains different, but that there are in fact an astonishing array of *structural, chemical, genetic, hormonal, and functional* differences between the male and female brain (*The Female Brain* 4, emphasis added).

While Brizendine points out that “more than 99 percent of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same,” she also argues that this less-than-one-percent difference between the sexes, this seemingly negligible less-than-one-percent of the thirty thousand genes in the human genome—nevertheless “influences every single cell in our bodies—from the nerves that

register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions” (*TFB* 1). Thus, Brizendine’s research, which draws from an array of empirical studies focusing on sex-specific differences between the male and female brain, supports the idea that not only does our distinct genetic wiring affect the way that we see, hear, smell, and taste, it also profoundly affects the way we perceive, understand, engage, and react to the world around us.

Not surprisingly, one of the most prominent differences in the human brain has to do with the way men and women are wired for sex.³⁸ On a physiological level, the sex-related centers in the male brain are about two times larger than those in the female brain, while men have roughly two and a half times the brain space devoted to sexual drive in their hypothalamus when compared to women (*TFB* 91, *TMB* 4). Indeed, Brizendine asserts that: “sexual thoughts flicker in the background of a man’s visual cortex all day and night, making him always at the ready for seizing sexual opportunity” (*TMB* 4). In short, she explains that: “just as women have an eight-lane superhighway for processing emotion while men have a small country road, men have O’Hare Airport as a hub for processing thoughts about sex whereas women have the airfield nearby that lands small and private planes” (*TFB* 91). In contrast, however, Brizendine observes that females simply devote less mental space to sexual pursuits (*TFB* 91).

While it must be noted that broad generalizations that are generally true for one group, whether male or female, can likewise be untrue for a particular individual, it is nevertheless important to think about these generalizations as averages. In *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (1993), another science book explaining how sex has shaped humans as a species, Matt Ridley suggests that when considering general statements involving sex-specific differences, it helps to frame them in the following way:

³⁸ Although Brizendine does make reference to studies involving gay and lesbian subjects, the majority of her research, following the wider trend of neurological studies available today, focuses primarily on heterosexual subjects.

Although it is a fair generalization to say that men are taller than women, nonetheless the tallest woman in a large group of people is usually taller than the shortest man. In the same way, even if the average woman is better at some mental task than the average man, there are many women who are worse at the task than the best man, or vice versa. But the evidence for the average male brain differing in certain ways from the average female brain is now all but undeniable. (248)

In brief, Brizendine asserts that the differences between male and female brain structures and chemistry may also be responsible for *perceptual* differences between males and females. In one study, men and women were shown neutral pictures of a man and woman having a conversation while researchers scanned their brains. Significantly, while the women in the study perceived the encounter as an ordinary conversation, the men, in contrast, saw it as a potential sexual rendezvous—appropriately, the corresponding brain areas for sexual response immediately activated (*TFB* 5).

Evolutionary psychology offers a plausible explanation for differences in male and female attitudes toward sex. In sum, the field of evolutionary psychology, which draws on the Darwinian concept of fitness premised in evolutionary *biology*, is best summarized by David P. Barash and Nanelle R. Barash's explanation that "people are strongly inclined to behave in ways that enhance their fitness" (4). By fitness, however, the authors make clear that they mean not *physical* fitness, but rather *reproductive* fitness—in other words, the measure of an individual's success in "projecting genes into the future" (Barash and Barash 4).

But as the authors also clarify:

This does not mean that everyone is desperately seeking to have as many children as possible, or even necessarily to survive. But since we have inherited the genes of men and women who *did* reproduce and survive, we unconsciously behave in ways designed to enhance our success in doing so, that is, to benefit what biologists call our fitness. (Barash and Barash 4)

As a result, human psychology, which scientists argue has evolved over many years to cope with the problems faced by our evolutionary predecessors, still retains the mindset of our ancestors, even though particular circumstances have changed. Evolutionary psychology thus suggests that men are more open and responsive to sex because in the past, nature conferred an advantage to ancestral men best able to seize sexual opportunity. Those exhibiting the quickest sexual response were able to mate first, consequently transmitting their genes to future generations, over time transforming the trajectory of the species.

On the other hand, females, for whom a single sexual encounter can result in a nine-month investment, tend to be more selective about sex. On the whole, women are much less given to sexual incitement than their male counterparts, and the differing circumstances surrounding the evolution of each suggest that men and women's differing responses to sex have been shaped by our distinct male and female biology.

Similarly, according to the findings of evolutionary psychologist David Buss, who has studied mate preferences in over ten thousand individuals from thirty-seven cultures around the world, biology exerts a marked influence not only over our unconscious inclinations, but our conscious preferences as well. For example, Buss's research on mate selection shows that the qualities that men look for in a mate are remarkably consistent, even across cultures:

“worldwide, men prefer physically attractive wives between ages twenty and forty, who are an average of two and a half years younger than they are. They also want potential long-term mates to have clear skin, bright eyes, full lips, shiny hair, and curvy, hourglass figures” (*TFB* 63).

While at first glance, one might wonder at the surprising uniformity of such qualities, a closer look puts these preferences in a whole new light. Although the conventional adage places beauty in the eye of the beholder, studies have found that the characteristics identified by Buss to

be associated with feminine beauty—traits such as youth, clear skin, shiny hair, large breasts, slim waist, and the low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) associated with a feminine hourglass figure—all in fact serve as “strong visual markers” of a woman’s health and reproductive fertility (*TFB* 63).

Moreover, the fact that these qualities hold true even in societies with little or no exposure to western media indicate that these preferences are not culturally determined, but rather biologically ingrained (Buss 149). Although youth is by far the most prominent indicator of a woman’s reproductive capacity—e.g., younger women have more children than older women—studies have drawn surprising relationships linking other commonly sought after female traits to a woman’s fertility and health. For example, in one study, which interviewed 230 women, researchers found strong correlations between a woman’s age and the length and quality of her hair. Not only were the younger women surveyed found to have more and better quality hair than the older subjects, researchers also found that independent assessments provided by third-party observers about the women’s hair also positively correlated to the women’s subjective assessments about their own health (Buss 148).

Likewise, skin quality, another prized factor in mate selection, can also provide important visual cues as to a woman’s age and health. As Buss explains, clear, unblemished skin—a trait deemed universally desirable in both males and females—indicates an absence of parasites, advertises the bearer’s resistance to skin-damaging diseases during development, and can further function as a partial record of a potential mate’s lifetime health (148). Moreover, studies have also shown that smooth skin and full lips, which are regularly cited as among the most desirable characteristics in a female mate, to be positively linked to the presence of collagen, a naturally occurring substance in the body that decreases with age (*TFB* 63).

The most interesting of these studies, however, show that although men's preferences for actual body size may vary across cultures, one characteristic remains the same: that is, "the preference for a particular ratio between the size of a woman's waist and the size of her hips" (Buss 150). Appropriately, studies have found that women with a lower waist-to-hip ratio (WHR)—in other words, the slender waist and large hips associated with a typical hourglass figure, or what might be thought of in more concrete terms as the Nicki Minaj or Kim Kardashian effect—are perceived as not only more attractive than women with a higher WHR, but that these women are, in fact, *more fertile*. Indeed, as Buss unequivocally states: "abundant evidence now shows that the WHR is an accurate indicator of women's reproductive status" (150).

Surprisingly enough, however, low WHR has also proven to be a good indicator of a woman's long-term health. Given the fact that diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart attack, stroke, and gallbladder disorders are usually associated with an unequal distribution of fat, particularly around the waist and abdomen, instead of total fat per se—from an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense that such outward indicators of a woman's health and fertility would factor into her perceived attractiveness.

Evolutionary psychology thus corroborates the idea that the universal standards of feminine beauty, such as youth, full lips, lustrous hair, large hips, buxom breasts, and slender waists—are informed by biology, and that biology, in turn, has played, and continues to play, an unequivocal role in the molding of human desire.

In sum, Buss asserts that our ancestral predecessors had two observable means with which to gauge the reproductive viability of potential mates: *physical appearance* and *behavior* (147). As the data clearly show, the most desirable physical characteristics, which are positively

linked to youth and fertility, are likely to have been valued in the past for their ability to provide tangible cues as to a woman's reproductive potential. So what about the role of behavior?

Extrapolating from studies in which male subjects who were shown a series of manipulated images, all of the same woman with varying WHR, consistently indicated preference for the woman with the *lowest* WHR—an indicator, as we have seen, of a woman's overall health and fertility—I propose that *undesirable* behavior, such as those signifying madness, such as psychological instability, emotional volatility, irrational and erratic behavior and/or extreme sexual jealousy—all characteristics which point to a *lack* of psychological health—might be deliberately used to complicate the desire produced by the male gaze.

Conclusion

As observed in *Time*, by problematizing the image as object of spectatorial desire—a strange curiosity is born. By first organizing the film's narrative structure to reflect the circular nature of the cosmetic gaze reflected within; then by using film form and narrative to illustrate the interconnectedness of self and other; and lastly, by using the female protagonist's erratic behavior and extreme sexual jealousy to complicate the viewer's desire, *Time* brings about a renewed interest in the psychic qualities of the female subject—perhaps with increased fear or trepidation, and certainly within the larger order of patriarchal constraints—but a deliberate consideration of woman as a complex thinking subject nonetheless. In other words, the film creates just enough distance between the habit of desire and conventional representational practices in order for the spectator to consider the psychological complexities of woman as a thinking, feeling subject – as *crazy*, but as a complex thinking subject nonetheless, extricated

from her conventional place as the “other” against which the *I* of androcentric heteronormative cinema is traditionally defined.

In short, I propose that a systematic study of the biological triggers by which heterosexual male sexual desire is both invited and repelled promises to lend entirely new directions to the study of film. By deploying specific cinematic strategies in order to complicate desire, whether through the fusion of self and other, gender-bending, questions of embodiment, or through repulsion, abjection, and/or displeasure, we can start building a new *type* of cinema—one that represents as wide a variety of subject positions as embodied differences and complexities in the spectators that watch.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined formal and narrative subversions of the male gaze in contemporary films from Argentina (2007), Spain (2011), and South Korea (2006). My long-term goal for this project is to add three chapters complementing the thematic concerns discussed here with three additional films from the United States (2013), Iran (2008), and China (2010). Continuing along the lines of the self/other dichotomy discussed in the previous chapters, each of the following films presents an innovative approach to female representation that destabilizes, challenges, or problematizes conventional spectatorial relationships of subjectivity and desire.

The first chapter proposes an analysis of *Her* (2013), a U.S. science fiction drama by Spike Jonze that centers on one man's relationship with Samantha, a highly intelligent and self-evolving operating system personified by a female voice (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). What is interesting about this film, however, is that despite the movie ultimately being about Samantha, the latter exists in the film as only a series of aural signifiers and never once appears onscreen. At the same time, in the absence of a body, the film directs the viewer's desire to look at Samantha to other female characters in the text, dispersing desire between aurally and visually constructed entities that sometimes intersect—as when Samantha finds a body surrogate so that she and her love interest (Joaquin Phoenix) can be together—but never quite match up. Moreover, I am especially interested in the ways that a purely technological entity with no basis in biology is constructed as female—as well as the role that aural signifiers, the spectator's imagination, and the star qualities of the actress play in this construction.

My second chapter proposes an examination of *Shirin* (2008), a film by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami that presents a completely unheard of innovation in the history of filmmaking: a film composed solely of close-ups of female spectators watching a movie that takes place entirely off-screen. As a result, the extradiegetic spectator only *hears* the soundtrack of the movie-within-a-movie whereas the cinematic picture of which *Shirin* is composed consists only of images of the women's faces watching it. In short, the unique aesthetics of the film present a particularly compelling study of the connections between image, sound, and female spectatorship. Furthermore, given that more than a hundred actresses take part in the film, *Shirin* successfully *represents* the multiplicity of subject positions and the variety of individual spectator response while maintaining mastery of the image at an impossible remove. In addition, due to the practice of veiling, I am particularly interested in the unique aesthetic that Iranian cinema has created around ways of looking and how this practice lends entirely new directions to feminist analyses of the gaze.

The third and final chapter of my long-term project will examine *A Beautiful Mistake* (2010), a film by Chinese filmmaker Lu Hui Zhou that tells the story of a voyeuristic scandal set during the Cultural Revolution involving a young boy, an old man, and two beautiful twin sisters. More specifically, the film presents a practical illustration that answers the following question: what happens when the spectator's object of desire is split into two equal, identical, and indistinguishable entities? Moreover, because the film never assigns a concrete identity to either twin, choosing instead to blur and confuse the boundaries between one and the other, it exerts an extremely destabilizing effect on the viewer. What's more, in the middle of the movie, the viewer is made privy to an additional twist that adds yet another layer of complexity to the issue at hand: when happens when two equal and identical objects of desire are shown to descend

from a third, equally indistinguishable antecedent that precedes the twins in time? In other words, what happens when two equal and interchangeable objects of desire are dispersed into three and none of it follows a chronological logic?

This project, which continues along the current lines of inquiry proposed in this dissertation, seeks to bring together a number of films from different cultural, linguistic, and geographic areas that have yet to be studied together in such context. By pointing not only to such novel and innovative cinematic practices, but also to the gaps, elisions, and contradictions created by films from conventional narrative traditions, I hope to draw attention to a truth that many have already begun to intuit but which nevertheless is rarely articulated onscreen: that there are, indeed, many ways of being in the world.

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