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Jennifer Friedlander

Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, Volume 8,  
Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 99-108 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psy.2003.0007>



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## “How Should a Woman Look?: Scopic Strategies for Sexuated Subjects”

Jennifer Friedlander

This paper draws upon Lacan's schema of objects and his formulae for sexuation, as he develops them in *Encore*, with a view to elaborating a feminist strategy for spectatorship. I take up the question of “how should a woman look” in the sense of what it means to look *as* Woman rather than *at* Woman—a shift from the focus of most feminist film theory. In other words, my interest is to move away from discussions of how a woman is looked at (how she is seen) and to think instead about how a woman looks, (not as she appears, but how she sees as woman). In this sense, my project extends Parveen Adams' claim that “it is not the image of woman as such that is crucial, but how the image organizes the way in which [it] is looked at” (Adams 2).

Laura Mulvey, in her highly influential polemical 1975 article “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,” argues that “woman is an indispensable element of spectacle . . . displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men” (Mulvey 11, 13). If under the male gaze, woman is the object of what Mulvey calls “fetishistic scopophilia,” the political question then becomes: how should *women* look in order to avoid both the masochism of taking up the viewing position of man as well as the narcissism of identifying too closely with the fetishized image of woman on-screen?<sup>1</sup> Subsequent feminist media studies scholars have often advocated a strategy for female spectatorship that involves a “distance” from the image as a means of opposing the voyeurism of the male gaze. Griselda Pollock, for example, calls for a Brechtian strategy of “distanciation” developed along psychoanalytic, feminist lines as a technique for reading a text against its patriarchal inscriptions. Pollock contends that the practice of “‘distanciation’ disrupt[s] the ‘dance of ideology’ which engages us on behalf of oppressive regimes of sexist classifications” (Pollock 163, 158).

Yet, if one follows Slavoj Žižek, rather than “disrupt” the “dance of ideology,” the practice of “distanciation” contributes to its success. By neglecting to account for the ways in which viewers are trapped by the hidden pleasures produced by “seeing through” the “dance of ideology,” one overlooks the way that “this very distance *is* ideology” (Žižek *PoF* 20). As Žižek argues, “distance, . . . far from signaling the limitation of the ideological machine, functions as its positive *condition of possibility*” (20). By neglecting the constitutive role of the ideological fantasy, ideology critique fails to make any real impact. Ideology, as Renata Salecl claims, is “the way society deals with the fundamental impossibility of it being a closed, harmonious totality. . . . Behind every ideology lies a kernel of enjoyment (*jouissance*) that resists being fully integrated into the ideological universe” (Salecl 6). The ideological fantasy works to conceal this kernel by providing a scenario which disguises inconsistencies, excesses, and antagonisms in the social order.

Mary Ann Doane's position differs from Pollock's. Doane argues for what she calls, following Joan Riviere's 1929 essay, the “feminine masquerade” (the “flaunting” of signifiers of femininity) as a strategy for spectatorship that resists “patriarchal positioning [through its] denial of the production of femininity as closeness” (Doane 78). According to Doane, female viewers can occupy the masquerade in order to resist identifying with the fetishized on-screen representation of woman. The masquerade institutes a critical distance for the female spectator since, by “producing herself as an excess of femininity, . . . [the female spectator] acknowledge[s] that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—. . . which conceals a non-identity” (81). As Jacqueline Rose describes, the masquerade's “very artificiality [indicates] that something [is] being forced” (Rose 92–93).

The strategy of masquerade, Doane claims, avoids the problems (and pleasures) of “masochism” which results from the position of “transvestism,” where woman takes up the viewing position of man. Doane warns against the temptations of transvestism since, for the female spectator, it is only from this position that she can “get’ the joke, . . . it can give her pleasure only in masochism” (87). Doane contends that by donning the mask, the spectator will be able to, as she describes, “see in a different way;” the mask will enable the viewer to “manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic from within which the image is manipulable, producible” (87).

For Doane, the subversive effect of reading from within the mask emerges in part from its foreclosure of pleasure. But just as Žižek finds pleasure hidden in the strategy of ideological critique, one might argue that pleasure lurks within the mask. And if this is so, does it rob masquerade of its subversive potential? This is the question which situates this paper. More generally, I pose the question: can there be a subversive, feminist viewing practice that accounts for pleasure?

I suggest that feminist media studies must take seriously the dimension of enjoyment (*jouissance*) as a way of working toward “traversing the [ideological] fantasy” which conceals the contradictions and incompleteness of the social system.<sup>2</sup> I take my approach from the logic of what Jacques Lacan calls the signifier of lack in the Other, the position with which the female subject identifies and also the point where *jouissance* breaks through and disrupts the ideological fantasy. I argue that the approaches advocated by Pollock and Doane, by contrast, derive their logic from the phallic signifier, the position with which the masculine subject identifies. In brief, from a Lacanian point of view, I argue that the strategy suggested by Doane, Pollock, and Mulvey unintentionally follows the masculine logic of the phallic signifier by focusing on points of consolidation of the symbolic. By contrast, the strategy that I suggest proceeds from the feminine logic of the signifier of lack in the Other with its emphasis on moments of symbolic disruption and the eruption of pleasure.

In order to explain my strategy better, I turn to a discussion of the relation between Lacan and Roland Barthes in their respective accounts of points of disruption in visual images. I start with Barthes’ description

of the *punctum* as a concrete, seemingly ordinary detail within a photographic image, which due to contingent metonymic associations, takes on unexplained resonances. The presence of this accidental detail gestures towards an aleatory meaning which overreaches the image. Although unintentional, unplanned, unpredictable and uncoded, the *punctum* does not exist on the side of nature. The *punctum*, rather, “*de-naturalizes*” the image, making what seemed ordinary appear suddenly strange or uncanny, *unheimlich* in the Freudian sense. Nor does the *punctum* link the photograph to culture. Rather, the *punctum* disrupts, indeed *violates*, the culturally coded and expected reading, what Barthes calls the *studium*. The *punctum* points “beyond” both nature and culture and signals their limitations. In short, the *punctum*, which cannot be expressed in language, embodies the failure of the symbolic, and thus belongs to what Lacan calls the domain of the “Real,” which, as he describes, “can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization” (Lacan 93). In Žižek’s words, the Real functions as an “unfathomable X which, although nowhere present, curves/distorts any symbolic representation and condemns it to ultimate failure” (Žižek 98). Or, as Elizabeth Wright puts it, whereas reality is what “exists (the everyday reality of familiar objects),” the Real refers to what “*ex-ists*, stands outside” (Wright).

Lacan theorizes visual disruptions of the symbolic field differently than Barthes through his concept of the gaze—as the “stain of the Real” which violates the image’s symbolic consistency. Thus the gaze, like the *punctum*, arises from eruptions of the Real, but whereas the *punctum*’s uncanny quality emanates from the sense of the referent’s concreteness, from its “over-presence,” the gaze emerges as a vague, indeterminate, enigmatic blur in the viewers’ visual field. In trying to make sense of the image, viewers are provoked to question not only what they see, but to also respond to what Lacan calls the *che vuoi*, the question of one’s desire. Thus the gaze, by interrupting the image’s symbolic coherence, becomes the place where the viewer becomes “inscribed in the observed scene” (Žižek, *LA* 91). It is from this point of uncertainty that “the picture itself looks back at us,” confronting the viewer with the question of her/his investment in viewing the image (91).

Confusion between Barthes' concept of the *punctum* and Lacan's notion of the gaze persists in spite of Barthes' not so veiled reference to the distinctiveness of the two phenomena. Barthes, somewhat mockingly, distances his idea from Lacan's by making clear that "this photograph which I pick out and which I love has nothing in common with the shiny point which sways before your eyes and makes your head swim" (Barthes, *CL* 18–19). Rather than simply amuse us as another occurrence of French post-structuralist rivalry, the confusion between gaze and *punctum* interests us for deeper, structural reasons. As I will explain, the gaze and the *punctum* partake differently in Lacan's economy of "objects." Whereas the gaze is an instantiation of the most famous Lacanian object, the *objet petit a*, I contend that the *punctum* corresponds to the object that Lacan calls "the signifier of lack in the Other."

In explicating his formulae of sexuation in *Encore*, Lacan alerts us that under the masculine regime (of the phallic signifier) a confusion occurs that is analogous to confusing the gaze with the *punctum*. The error described by Lacan involves "coalesc[ing] the *a* with the  $\bar{A}$ " (Lacan 73). Man, according to Lacan, mistakes the signifier of lack in the Other (the place where woman locates herself) with the *objet a* (the place of man's phantasy of woman). As will be explained later, this means that man confuses the masquerade associated with the  $\bar{A}$ , through which woman conceals that there is really nothing—no "true" feminine essence—to conceal, with the ineffability associated with the *objet a*, that which gives the misleading impression that there is an inexpressible essence to woman. In other words, man mistakes the masquerade through which woman conceals her lack as a sign of her mystery, her "feminine mystique." (The lack to which Lacan refers here is common to both sexes—the difference between them, as will be discussed, lies only in the ways that they conceal it.) The analogy between the two mistakes—mistaking the *punctum* for the gaze and mistaking woman's masquerade for mystery—(which recapitulates mistaking a "coalescence" of  $\bar{A}$  with *a*) further compels an examination of the interrelationship of the scopic and the sexual through the Lacanian economy of objects.

## VISUAL OBJECTS

To explicate the notion of the Lacanian object, I turn to Žižek, who characteristically offers us a joke, one appropriately about a visual image: A Moscow art exhibit displayed a picture of Lenin's wife in bed with "a young member of the Komsomol" entitled "Lenin in Warsaw." A confused visitor, after closely examining the image, asked the guide, "but where is Lenin?" As Žižek tells it, "the guide, quietly and with dignity, replied, 'Lenin is in Warsaw'" (Žižek, *SOI* 159). The visitor's mistake occurs because he presumes a Saussurian relationship between the image and its title—as if between sign and referent. In the case of the picture described by Žižek, however, rather than commenting metalinguistically on what is *in* the picture from "outside" as a Saussurian title would, the title "Lenin in Warsaw" functions as what Lacan (following Freud) calls "the *vorstellungsrepräsentanz*." The title embodies what is *missing* from the picture from "inside" the same signifying plane as the picture itself occupies. In particular, it functions as a part of the picture rather than as an explanation external to it. In other words, the picture becomes the materialization of Lenin's absence, while conversely, Lenin's absence constitutes the positive condition for the image's existence (since as Žižek points out, "if Lenin were not in Warsaw . . .," his wife would not be. . .) (160).

Whereas the Saussurian signifier evokes a concept, the Lacanian object (as *vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) materializes "its lack...this hole in the Other" (160). For Lacan, therefore, the object is in "no way in the same register or made of the same stuff . . . as the signifier" (Lacan 29). The "object," by embodying the lack in the symbolic order, functions both as "the hole *and* that which stops it" (Adams 104). In *Encore*, Lacan details his economy of objects, each of which represents a different way to avoid "the abyss of lethal *Jouissance*" around which it circles (Žižek 184). The three Lacanian objects each function as a special form of *vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, palliating our encounter with eruptions of the Real. In particular, the three objects—each, as Lacan says, designated by a "different letter . . . because they do not have the same function"—tame the threat of the Real by filling out its place according to its specific modality (Lacan 29). The Real can neither be "occupied" nor "attained" nor "avoided" nor

“escaped,” so the subject must devise a way to cope with life within its shadow (Zizek *SOI* 156).

Although themselves disturbing remnants of the Real, each object nonetheless offers a psychic structure enabling us to produce pleasure in the face of brushes with the Real.

1. First, the *objet petit a*, a little piece of the Real that resists symbolization, can be thought of as both the privileged object around which the drive circulates and the object-cause of the subject's desire. Located across from the Imaginary register in the Lacanian diagram of objects, it takes the appearance of what Lacan describes as an “imaginary envelope,” a concrete but imaginary appearance which acts as a lure for the gaze. Evanescent, upon approach or inspection the lure gives way to a void. Although it lacks ontological consistency, it appears in the form of a *semblant* (a pure semblance), a partial object that both fascinates and repels, yet “dis-sembles” under our scrutiny. In Lacan's words, the *objet a* “would have us take it for being. . . . But it only dissolves in the final analysis, owing to its failure, unable, as it is, to sustain itself in approaching the real” (Lacan 95).

The gaze, a “meaningless stain”—which threatens the image's symbolic coherence, belongs to the order of the *objet a* as the object of the scopic drive. As Henry Krips explains, through the gaze, the dual needs of the scopic drive—to see and to be seen—are...engaged, bringing pleasure to the viewer “by stabilizing the libidinal flux associated with such paired needs, neither of which fully fixes upon its object” (25). By provoking anxiety from the viewer who is unable to master her visual field, the gaze seduces viewers to “look back at what they have seen, thus scrutinizing themselves, and specifically their own role as viewers . . . ; they feel themselves to be the object of a ‘look’ coming from the object's vicinity” (Krips 27).

The way a subject responds to the encounter with the gaze depends upon her or his libidinal economy. The obsessive, for example, threatened by the question of the Other's desire, struggles to understand this object, attempting to integrate it back into the symbolic framework. The hysteric, by contrast, engages the question of the Other's desire; she perceives the lack in the Other and wonders what type of an object she can be for the Other. Both the obsessive and the hysterical

structures emerge as a response to the drive initiated by the gaze.

In addition to functioning as the object around which the drive circles, the *objet a*, “through the very gesture of its loss or withdrawal,” emerges as the object-cause of desire (Zizek “TFIS” 246). Man, according to Lacan, relates to Woman through the function of the *objet a*. As Lacan explains, Man “is unable to attain his sexual partner . . . except inasmuch as his partner is the cause of his desire, . . . [thus rendering the sexual relationship] nothing other than fantasy” (Lacan 80). In part, the sexual relationship can never exist, since, as Zizek describes, “the feminine mystery beneath the provocative masquerade forever eludes the male grasp” (Zizek, *FORT* 91).

Here one should avoid confusing the *objet a* (the object-cause of desire) with the object of desire (the desired object). As Adams describes, the *objet a* “comes before desire. Desire . . . misrecognizes the object because when it pursues the object, it fails to recognize that the object is not in front of desire, but before it” (Adams 78). Man, while desiring Woman (the object of his desire), nevertheless tends to focus his energies around the elusive “feminine mystique” (the object-cause of his desire). Woman's mystery thus fascinates man, sparking his desire, while at the same time standing in his way of relating to the true Woman whom he desires. Through Krips' fertile example of the elderly chaperone in seduction, we can better understand how, the *objet a*, while appearing as an obstacle to attaining the true object of one's desire, turns out also to be the cause of that desire. Although officially the barrier to the suitor in his quest for the beloved, the chaperone “becomes part of what causes his desire”: “without her, the whole economy would collapse” (Krips 9; Salecl, *S* 5). The figure of the chaperone emerges at “the center of the evasive activities through which [the suitor] produces his pleasure” (28).

Through this example, we can see how a perverse subject, “afraid of getting what he wants,” can identify with the position of the *objet a* as a way of regulating his *jouissance* by taking on the desire of the Other. By identifying with the *objet a*, the subject, as Krips puts it, “‘gives up on his own desire’ and dedicates himself ‘perversely’ (as we say) to abetting the *objet a* in its function as impediment to desire” (Krips 29).

Although (as I will develop in more detail in the next segment) the “True Woman” refuses to identify herself within the perverse structure offered by the *objet a*, I suggest that there exists a “fake” woman who is indeed perverse (and in this sense I sustain the standard Freudian reading that real women are not perverts; the perverted woman here, turns out to be a “fake”). The woman to whom Jacques-Alain Miller, reworking Lacan, refers as the “postiche,” or “fake woman,” conspires with Man to support the illusion of symbolic closure. She refuses recognition of her lack by “placing [her]self in the real [as *objet a*], the only place where nothing is lacking, where knowledge is certain” (Copjec 109). The “postiche” woman asserts herself as the impossible archetype of true womanliness, (fulfilling expectations as wife and mother) giving the impression of “a firmly anchored being,” around which “her man has to run . . . wildly” (Zizek “TFOS” 232).

The perverse “fake” Woman (who gives herself completely to her husband and children, putting their desires ahead of her own) trades in her desire for the desire of the Other. As Miller, following Freud and Lacan, puts it, “to become a mother, to become the Other of demand, is to become ‘she who has’ par excellence” (Miller 16). Zizek, too, emphasizes that for Lacan, “there is an ultimate antagonism between Woman and Mother: in contrast to woman who does not exist, mother definitely *does* exist” (Zizek, “TFIS” 232). Yet, as Zizek emphasizes, one must be cautious of viewing this putting of oneself aside as sacrificial. Not only is the subject rewarded by the pleasure produced by her perverse activity, it is also, for Zizek, a “false” sacrifice in the sense that it serves to “dupe the Other” (Zizek, “TFIS” 246). By engaging in the structure of what seems to be a sacrifice, the subject in effect stages “confirmation” that s/he indeed possesses, or rather would possess, what s/he is giving up. For example, the woman who “sacrifices” career, other lovers, etc., for “good of her family” “demonstrates” that she would indeed have these things if not for commitment to her family.

2. Second, the signifier of lack in the Other is an ordinary object which, due to mere contingency, comes to occupy the place of the “impossible real object of desire” (Zizek 194). According to Lacan, the signifier of lack in the Other is the object with which the

feminine subject identifies. The connection of the signifier of lack in the Other to the opposing realm of the Real in the Lacanian diagram characterizes it as an excess of the symbolic function. Woman, as Bruce Fink explains, “is not altogether subject to the symbolic order. . . . [She is] *not* . . . wholly hemmed in” (Fink 107). This feminine libidinal economy operates beyond “the reign of the phallus” (Zizek, *MoE* 151). One must be careful, however, when interpreting the sense in which Woman is “beyond” the symbolic function. As Jacqueline Rose cautions, it would be a mistake to say “woman is excluded *from* the nature of words, . . . [that she is] outside language. [Rather,] woman is excluded *by* the nature of words, meaning that the definition poses her as exclusion” (Rose 73). Both Zizek and Salecl pose an even more radical interpretation, contending that because there is no “ineffable feminine secret, . . . there is nothing in her which is *not* caught in the symbolic order” (Salecl 8; Zizek 92).

Woman distinguishes herself in relationship to the symbolic, particularly in terms of how she conceals the lack in the symbolic. Drawing upon Miller’s distinction between the “true woman” and the “postiche (or fake) woman,” one should specify that only the “true” Woman identifies herself with the signifier of lack in the Other. The true Woman, unlike the postiche woman, “flaunts her lack” rather than disavowing it. In this sense, like the signifier of lack in the Other (as well as its particular instantiation of the *punctum*), the True Woman emerges as a “*tuche* of the Real, . . . a jolt of surprise” (Miller 17). The “True Woman,” paradoxically, renounces the expectations usually associated with being a “true woman”: she does not seek refuge in the stability of maternity and domesticity, but rather embraces “a hysterical composite of semblances” (Zizek, “TFIS” 231).

The “True Woman” rejects her association with the *objet a* as staged by Man’s fantasy. Here we encounter an instance of what Salecl describes as “the major problem of the male and the female subjects . . . : that they do not relate to what their partner relates to in them” (Salecl *S* 304). The incongruity between aligning oneself with the *A*, but being related to by Man through the structure of *objet a*, leads the True Woman to enact a structure of hysteria in which she continually questions what it is about her that Man de-

sires. Her fundamental question, therefore, becomes, “What is the desire of the Other?” Or “What does the Other want from me?” Or “Why am I what the Other desires?” In asking these questions, the hysteric both occupies and foregrounds the abyss(m)al place that the symbolic order falls short of integrating. As Žižek explains, “the hysterical question articulates the experience of a fissure, of an irreducible gap between the signifier that represents me . . . and the nonsymbolized surplus of my being-there” (Žižek, *LA* 131).

True Woman, in the position of the signifier of lack in the Other, “assumes her nonexistence, her constitutive lack . . . that is, the void of subjectivity in her very heart” (Žižek, “TFIS” 231). The “true” (hysterized) Woman, in brandishing and interrogating her lack, “poses the serious threat to . . . the firm male substantial self-identity” (232). Woman’s incessant questioning challenges Man as an affront to the symbolic system on which he stakes his identity. Yet for Woman, the hysterical response offers her a way to regulate her distance to the *jouissance* that swirls around her. In flourishing the signifiers of femininity (and here think of Marilyn Monroe), the True Woman exposes their very artificiality, thus “reveal[ing] to man the absurdity of having” the phallus (Miller 22). In this sense, Miller claims that a “true woman . . . is man’s ruination” (22). By contrast to the “true Woman,” who unsettles Man, the Postiche Woman, by putting herself in the position of the *objet a*, props up Man’s fantasmatic structure. “Not only,” as Žižek contends, “does [she] not pose any threat to the patriarchal male identity, but [she] even serves as its protective shield and support” (Žižek, 232 “TFIS”).

While the Postiche Woman, like the set of cultural conventions Barthes terms the *studium*, supports the illusion of a symbolic whole, the True Woman, like the disruptive *punctum*, pokes at the symbolic’s holes. The *punctum*-detail unleashes itself from its banal symbolic existence and circulates as a fascinating source of *jouissance*. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek identifies a similar structure in what, following Lacan, he calls “this One of ‘*jouis-sence*,” the signifier which does not “partake of the articulation proper to the order of the Other . . . insofar as it is not . . . enchained, but rather freely floating, permeated with enjoyment. It is this enjoyment that prevents it from being articulated into [the

symbolic] chain” (Žižek, *LA* 132). According to Žižek’s analysis, this persistent “leftover of enjoyment beyond meaning, resisting symbolization” shares the dimension of what Lacan calls the *sinthome*. The *sinthome*, as Žižek tells us, is more radical than both the symptom (“the coded message to be deciphered by interpretation”) and the fantasy (“the imaginary scenario that . . . curtains the lack in the Other”) (Žižek 128, 132). The *sinthome* cannot be “traversed,” (like the fantasy) nor interpreted (like the symptom). Rather, the subject, in reaching the cure, is to identify with the *sinthome* as what Žižek describes as “the pathological ‘tic’ structuring the real kernel of our enjoyment” (139).

In Miller’s description, the end of analysis occurs when analysands “attest to the fact that psychoanalysis has cured them of their lack of being” (Miller 26). In the *sinthome*, as the persistent bodily residues of the unsheathed symptom, the subject recognizes “the element that guarantees [her] consistency” (Žižek, *LA* 137). By identifying with the *sinthome*, the subject accepts that these “formations with no meaning guaranteed by the big Other, ‘tics’ and repetitive features, . . . merely cipher a certain mode of *jouissance*” (Žižek, *FORT* 98). According to Miller, “it is the revelation of this *jouissance* which eliminates their lack of being” (Miller 26). In this sense, Miller reminds us that “Lacan privileged the end of analysis on the feminine side” (27).

3. The Phallic Signifier is an object with a fascinating material presence that represents the Real. The phallic signifier, located across from the Symbolic register in the Lacanian diagram (and therefore governed by the signifier), interrupts the endless unfolding of signification by imposing a “stopping point . . . that puts an end to association” (Fink 135). The phallic signifier thus provides the illusion that the symbolic is really complete after all. The pretence of the fullness of meaning associates the phallic signifier with what Barthes calls the *studium*. The *studium*, in contrast to the *punctum*, is the level of the photograph, that whether shocking or banal, can always be named, is “ultimately always coded”—that exists completely under the reigns of language (Barthes *CL* 51). For Barthes, even the most sensationalist journalistic photograph belongs to the register of the *studium*. As he describes, “in these images, no *punctum*: a certain

shock—the literal can traumatize—but no disturbance, the photograph can ‘shout,’ not wound” (41).

According to Lacan, although both men and women are “free to situate themselves [under the phallic signifier] if it gives them pleasure to do so,” the phallic signifier is nonetheless “the pole where Man is situated” (Lacan 71). Man’s libidinal economy is structured according to the logic of the phallic signifier in that, as Lacan puts it, “it helps men situate themselves as men and approach woman” (71). Although Man may “approach” Woman, in a Lacanian sense, they may never come together. Again we encounter, in a slightly altered form, the “major problem” of the sexes to which Salecl draws our attention: that men and women do not relate to what their partners relate to in them. The phallic signifier, although located under Man’s pole (so to speak), is, in Salecl’s words, “nothing a man can be happy about. Although a woman relates precisely to this phallus, the man is not at all in control of it” (Salecl *S* 304). By committing himself obsessively to upholding the symbolic function (often by taking great care to establish routine and order), Man attempts to stave off encounters with the desire of the Other that might destroy his fantasy of wholeness. Man fears, as Salecl describes, that he “will . . . be stripped naked, exposed in his essential impotence and powerlessness” (306).

Whereas Woman’s response to lack manifests in a hysterical structure, Man’s response, to avoid the desire of the Other, takes on the characteristics of obsession. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan describes, “the feminine masquerade automatically poses a question, while masculine identification with law, logos, or authority tries to stop the question” (Ragland-Sullivan 75). As I will discuss, Man’s efforts are not unjustified, are not without reason, since there is great risk involved in staking one’s identity on the rigidity of the phallic signifier. The phallus, marked by its “pretence to meaning and false consistency,” turns to the Other to “seek authority [but] is refused” (Rose 75). “The hitch,” as Lacan puts it, “is that the Other, the locus, knows nothing” (Lacan 98).

### SEX OBJECTS

By Woman and Man I refer not to biological categories, nor to their cultural overlays, but instead to the

two positions that a subject can take in response to the failure of the symbolic system to confer an identity. For Freud and Lacan, sex, like the visual disturbances of the gaze and the *punctum*, emerges from this limit of representation. As Joan Copjec puts it, sex comes into being “only where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning” (Copjec 204). The two sexes mark the two logically possible ways in which the symbolic fails; they represent its two “modalities of misfire<sup>3</sup>” (Copjec 213). In Lacan’s words, “there is a male way of botching the sexual relationship, and then another, . . . the female way” (Lacan 58, 57). “This botching,” Lacan claims, “is the only way of realizing that relationship if, as I posit, there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship” (Lacan 58).

In this Lacanian sense, both “masculinity” and “femininity,” in different ways, involve elements of deception: as Copjec tells us, “all pretensions of masculinity are . . . sheer imposture [since there really are no men who can be the “real Man”]; just as every display of femininity is sheer masquerade,” since woman recognizes there is, in fact, no feminine essence (234). These strategies of imposture and masquerade do not correspond directly to the subjects we identify as biological men or women, but rather are taken up by both men and women in different discursive situations.

An asymmetry exists between the masculine side and the feminine side, however. The excessive “display” of masculinity often appears feminine. As Žižek explains, “in order to ‘feminize’ a masculine discourse it is enough to change—sometimes almost imperceptibly—its specific ‘tonality’” (Žižek, *MoE* 160). Lacan himself observes that “virile display itself appears as feminine” (qtd. in Cowie 245). We may want to think here about men’s professional body-building, in which a man displays extreme attention to his appearance, intently watching his shaven and oiled body in the mirror while he flexes his muscles. An excessively feminine display, by contrast, does not risk shading over into the side of the masculine. Here I oppose Emily Apter’s claim that strategies of femininity are more “tenuous” than strategies of masculinity by arguing that this asymmetry suggests a precariousness within the masculine strategy of imposture which is unparalleled by the more flexible, and thus more stable, strategy of masquerade, a distinction that I will elaborate further.

Elizabeth Cowie links the differences between masquerade and imposture to the role the phallus plays in each strategy. The phallus, in Lacan's reworking of the Freudian architectonic, does not refer to the penis but instead signifies the desire of the (M)Other—which can be thought of as what the (M)Other desires beyond the child. Both Man's and Woman's desire relates to the phallus, as the third term which intervenes to break up the (M)Other/Child dyad. Although the phallus gives the impression of power, it is after all, as Lacan reminds us, "a signifier that has no signified" (Lacan 81). The phallus's status, according to Rose, "is a fraud; . . . any male privilege erected upon [it] is an imposture" (Rose 75). As another critic puts it, "if the penis was the phallus, men would have no need of feathers, or ties or medals. . . . [Imposture], just like the masquerade, thus betrays a flaw: no one has the phallus" (qtd. in Cowie 245). Since "no one has the phallus" (the privileged object of the Other's desire), imposture can be thought of as the strategy man employs to hide this "flaw." As Stephen Heath explains, man demonstrates "all the trappings of authority, hierarchy, order, position," but according to Cowie, this fools no one, since "what is signified in a making present of something is in fact a statement of what is absent" (Heath, qtd. in Cowie 244; Cowie 245).

One can liken this masculine modality of imposture to one of the two strategies Erving Goffman offers as ways to cover over a balding head.<sup>4</sup> The response of wearing a toupee follows the logic of imposture; it functions as an attempt to hide "the flaw," but if its presence becomes apparent, it works instead to draw attention to what is absent. In that respect, then, rather than mask one's lack of hair, a toupee functions as a signifier of that very lack. In short, imposture is a precarious strategy that carries high stakes: the claim to possession is complete, but if it goes awry (and there are endless ways that it can and does), everything is lost. In contrast to Apter's insistence on the stability of masculinity, I follow Kaja Silverman in suggesting that "masculinity is particularly vulnerable to . . . unbinding . . . because of its ideological alignment with mastery" (Silverman 46–7). Or as Ragland-Sullivan points out, "paradoxically [Man's very] effort at mastery shows a lack—a lie as the basis of the symbolic" (75–76).

The feminine strategy of "masquerade," by contrast, retains an ambiguity concerning the nature of the deception; through a strategy of masquerade, woman keeps us guessing. Where, exactly, does her dissimulation lie? Cowie follows Riviere in considering masquerade as a "mask of womanliness...[to be] assumed...both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods" (Riviere 176). Rather than follow Apter in indicting the masquerade because it carries the danger for woman "to get caught in her own act," I suggest that the strength of the strategy of the masquerade emerges precisely from this ambiguity.

Thus, the feminine modality of masquerade functions analogously to Goffman's second strategy for covering baldness: wearing a hat. A hat does not carry the pretence of hair. Thus it functions enigmatically in relation to the balding head: does one don the hat to conceal the lack, or could it be worn simply for fashion or to keep warm? In masquerade, it is never certain what exactly is being claimed and what, if anything, is being concealed. Thus, unlike a toupee, a hat could fall off at very little cost to its wearer. Masquerade thus emerges as a far more stable strategy than imposture. Whereas imposture carries the burden of accomplishing an identity based on the illusion of knowledge, masquerade accepts the knowledge that identity is itself an illusion.

## CONCLUSION

I return to the question with which I began: can there be a feminist spectatorship which, while avoiding viewer identification with the fetishized on-screen image of woman, preserves the possibility of pleasure? I argued that psychoanalytic, feminist film theory, exemplified by the work of Mulvey, Doane, and Pollock, has approached the question of subversive female spectatorship through the masculine logic of the phallic signifier. They structure their concerns around "un-pleasure," distance, and realism (as associated with the cultural inscription of meaning characteristic of the *studium*). Thus, like the obsessive masculine impostor, followers of this approach, in looking for answers, work hard to prevent questions from being asked. By

contrast, I have suggested a feminist approach to female spectatorship, one that derives from the feminine logic of the  $\mathcal{A}$  in that it takes seriously moments of enjoyment, focuses on points of identification, and seeks out eruptions of the Lacanian Real (as glimpsed through the *punctum's* disruption of meaning) and thus entices viewers to take seriously the question of his or her desire.

Doane's suggestion that feminine spectators should inhabit the masquerade sends us in the right direction. But whereas Doane suggests the mask as a way to foreclose pleasure and forge a critical distance between spectator and image, I want to recognize and embrace the pleasure afforded by identifying with the mask. In particular, I follow Žižek in seeking to supplement the purely interpretative projects of the sort envisaged by Mulvey, Doane, and Pollock with a procedure for articulating the "kernel of *enjoyment*" which resists incorporation into the ideological field (125). Whereas Mulvey, Doane, and Pollock concentrate on the consolidation of the ideological fantasy, my suggestion focuses, also, on its points of inconsistency, which are made "palpable" through the "eruption of enjoyment in the social field" (126).

The fantasy, as Žižek explains, "is not to be interpreted, only 'traversed:' . . . we have to . . . experience how there is nothing 'behind' it, and how fantasy masks precisely this 'nothing'" (126). I suggest that feminist media studies take seriously what Žižek credits as "Marx's great achievement": the demonstration that "all phenomena which appear [as] contingent deformations and degenerations of the 'normal' functioning of society [such as the "accident" of the *punctum*] . . . [as] necessary products of the system itself—the points at which the 'truth,' the immanent antagonistic character of the system erupts" (Žižek 128). This view converges with Freud's contention that rather than study an analysand's coherent narrative, the analyst must look instead to "dreams, slips of the tongue, and similar 'abnormal' phenomena" (128). In short, phenomena that exceed the symbolic integration of the phallic economy, "accidents" that embody its failure, are marked by the production of *jouissance*. This approach involves a commitment to what Richard Howard describes as "instanc[ing] our ecstasy, our bliss . . . against the prudery of ideological analysis"

in order to severely undermine the fantasy which lends ideology its support.<sup>5</sup>

I want to end by clarifying that although the approach I develop takes its form from the feminine structure of the  $\mathcal{A}$  and the *punctum*, I do not take *this* as the basis of its appeal. In particular, it is not the "feminine" nature of the strategy that makes it advantageous for feminism. On the contrary, to emphasize its "feminine" nature runs the risk of reproducing the essentialism and the valorization of the "feminine" associated with difference theory feminism. Rather, my interest in this particular scopic strategy lies precisely in its potential as a *strategy* for a subversive politics. Following Miller and Žižek, I read the Lacanian structure of the feminine pole as the province of the subversive, of the political, of the cure—Although it must immediately be stated that, from a feminist perspective, any politics based on the categories of feminine and masculine (woman and man) must attempt to displace the ideological and fantasmatic structures which ground these very distinctions. The true challenge, then, is how to keep these distinctions in play while avoiding the risk of essentialism. This is a problem not just for feminist film theory, but for feminist projects more generally.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to Kaja Silverman, the on-screen image carries the task of screening the male lack, and thus itself takes on the role of a fetish.

<sup>2</sup>The pleasure of *jouissance* differs from the pleasure derived from what Roland Barthes calls "plaisir" (the pleasure that "contents . . . that comes from culture and does not break with it" (Barthes *PoT* 14). The pleasure that Mulvey and others wish to destroy is of this second kind.

<sup>3</sup>If, as Žižek explains, it was possible "to symbolize sexual difference, we would have not two sexes but only one" (Žižek *MoE* 160).

<sup>4</sup>I use baldness here deliberately in order to evoke Adams' and Apter's (and others') observation that hair and baldness share a complex relationship to the phallus. Hair, conceived often as both fetish and phallus, serves both to satisfy an "exuberant exhibitionism" as well as the "function of covering over something in modesty" (Adams 137). As Adams suggests, baldness, in exposing the scalp, "corresponds to the moment which in respect of the phallus is equally revelation and castration: . . . it evokes that 'moment of turning the light on' that which must always be shrouded" (137). The phallus, therefore, as Žižek tells us, should be understood as an "element in which excess and lack coincide; . . . the impossible full-

ness at the level of meaning (signified) is sustained by the void (the castrating dimension)—(signifier)” (Žižek, *FORT* 60).

<sup>5</sup>Quoted from Howard’s introduction to Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* (vii).

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