feminine **look**

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subversion

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Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion

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Cover image: André Kertész, "Elizabeth and I," Paris, 1931 © 2007 Estate of André Kertész Higher Pictures.

Feminine Look

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Introduction

T hroughout my first undergraduate media studies course, I was continu-
ally exhilarated by the explanatory power and interventionist potential
of cultural studies. However, the most memorable moment occurred on
the last day. In my memory, the scene plays as follows. The professor, speaking
rather informally to the few remaining die hards, offered an analysis of the way
the only male detective of color on a prime-time series was disempowered. In
the course of discussing the subtle mechanisms by which texts carry traces of
oppression and prejudice, Professor X pointed out that the detective of color
wore formal, professional suits, while the white detectives wore casual clothes.
This incongruity, he claimed, revealed the way minorities have to work harder
to be regarded equally as capable as their colleagues. One observant student
challenged the significance of this textual evidence by pointing out that the
professor would have reached the same conclusion had the clothing styles been
reversed. If the detective of color had been worse dressed than his colleagues,
she argued, the professor would have just as easily used *this* to demonstrate that
the character was an outsider: either ignorant of/ resistant to/ or too lazy to
care about "appropriate" (i.e., white) professional behaviors. Professor X, a
sharply dressed man from Southasia among a largely blue-jeaned white faculty,
was famous for inviting students to challenge him to intellectual spars (in
which he exhibited incisive wit), and I eagerly awaited his riposte.

Professor X could have quite justifiably reinforced his point by calling
upon the structural significance of the opposing dress of the minority charac-
ter to his white counterparts, regardless of the specific content of this differ-
ence. Similarly, an appeal to the polysemic nature of the text would have
enabled him to explain how texts implicitly contain a variety of signs that
work to reinforce a dominant reading, to sustain negotiated readings, and to
act as resources from which to construct oppositional readings. Nor would it
have been unprecedented for Professor X to make the reflexive move and
candidly discuss how the complexities of his own subject position influenced

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his critical judgments. But Professor X did none of these. In fact, he did nothing at all. A quick collection of our essays and some abbreviated farewells were all that ensued.

Riveted by the professor's silence, I lingered in my seat, sensing the dire inadequacy of language to grasp what had happened, an inadequacy that seemed to match the professor's own silence. I sat and wondered how the symbolic could so profoundly elude Professor X, a scholar of representation, widely admired for his deft use of language, and how it also eluded the moment in which I confronted that elusiveness. In that moment I groped for what I have since come to encounter in the work of Jacques Lacan: a notion of psychoanalytic "truth," which exists precisely where knowledge fails. As Paul Verhaeghe describes, there is a "difference between knowledge and something beyond knowledge, something that belongs to another register, other than the symbolic order.... [T]here is something that cannot be put into words, something for which words are lacking" (Verhaeghe 38). For Lacan, such "truth" differs from "mere knowledge" in that "the essential characteristic of truth is that it confronts us with the ultimate point where knowledge about desire...can no longer be put into words.... This dimension beyond the signifier is the Lacanian real" (39).

Although we may traditionally associate such points of failure in the symbolic with trauma, more often than not (and this will be important to the ensuing arguments) seemingly trivial or insignificant events and objects inexplicably trigger these flashes of the Real. We are often struck, not so much by events or objects themselves, but rather by a palpable sense of their hauntingly indistinct threat. As Verhaeghe describes, the Real can be thought of as what is "just waiting around the corner, unseen, unnamed, but very present. Lacan calls this the imminence of the object (just think of the nightmare: we are awakened a split second before we would see or experience 'it')" (12).

My interest here lies not in trying to understand why the interchange with Professor X triggered the responses that it did. Rather, this book takes as its task the exploration of how what I will call these psychic "accidents" or "surprises" may be compatible with the critical, politically interventionist goals of cultural studies. In particular, I consider ways in which they might contribute to new understandings regarding relationships among subjects, cultural products, and ideology.

The book will take visuality (both practice and object) as the primary field through which to explore such relationships. In particular, I will be concerned with "moving images" in at least three senses: First, the way in which images move in the sense of circulating physically among geographical loca-

tions, time periods, genre, and medium. The often unpredictable effects of these movements on reception, I will argue, provide possibilities for rich insights into relationships among an image's formal characteristics, its contexts of production, and its contexts of reception. These relationships also offer us a sense of how images "move" in a second way—namely, how they emotionally resonate with certain viewers at particular times or places, and for seemingly unanticipated reasons. In order to investigate these first two issues, I shall draw upon the historical and cultural contexts, as well as theories of compositional form of the images and psychic mechanisms that accompany the act of looking.

Last, behind all of the images I explore lurks the question of how images may "move" viewers in a third, political sense. In answering this question, I will not only examine ways in which images respond to or mobilize social action but also discuss a possible political strategy for spectatorship that enables viewers to view images subversively. The strategy that I offer will involve being moved by images, while resisting the comfortable options of explaining their significance, ignoring their effects, or refusing their pleasures. This, in the words of Samuel Weber, "means relearning how to be *struck* by the signifier.... In the theatre of the unconscious, one never gets over being stage-struck" (Weber 151).

Through a focus upon such a "politics of the image," this book engages one of the most enduring debates in the area of cultural studies, concerning the nature of ideology and in particular the struggle to articulate the connections between the ideological sphere of cultural production and the material/social relations of a society. Theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall have focused on the relationship of popular culture to politics and economics. They have argued that culture and ideology are neither directly emergent from material relations, nor independent from them but instead are capable of producing their own material effects. In contemporary media and cultural studies, these arguments have been further elaborated in the light of Louis Althusser's insight that ideology itself is material, existing as a "lived representation" structuring everyday practices. It follows that not only do cultural practices such as art constitute sites of ideological struggle, but also art today constitutes its own mode of production, the "culture industry." As Hal Foster emphasizes, "culture is not merely superstructural... it is now an industry of its own, one that is crucial to our consumerist economy as a whole" (Foster 24). It is at this juncture that I situate this book's intervention. But my concern will be not only to explore ways in which cultural productions create and embody social and economic practices, but also, through investigations of controversial art images, to show

how culture may precipitate viewer anxieties and pleasures. In so doing, I bring together the basic premises of cultural studies with Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to bridge the traditional divide between the cultural and the psychic. Specifically, this book aims to construct a psychoanalytically based feminist theory of spectatorship, which brings together key insights from the postrstructuralist work of Roland Barthes and the psychoanalytic work of Lacan.

❖

The first half of the book explicates foundational concepts, beginning with Lacan's notion of the Real and Barthes' concept of the 'punctum' (chapter 1). For Lacan, the Real, elaborated most originally and extensively in *Seminar XI*, refers to "that which lies beyond the automaton [of the symbolic order]" (Lacan *Sem XI* 54). Like the elusive "it" that escapes the dreamer, the Real can never be symbolically represented or directly encountered, but only felt or sensed through its anxiety-provoking effects. The "real," Lacan explains, "has to be sought beyond the dream: . . . hidden from us behind the lack of representation" (60). It can only appear as a "missed encounter [which] present[s] itself in the . . . form of a trauma" (55).

Barthes' *punctum* similarly refers to a photographic "element," which for reasons that appear inaccessible to the viewer, unexpectedly "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces" the viewer (Barthes *CL* 26). It, too, takes the form of trauma, by evoking a "sense of ineffable loss [through] the missed encounter" (Lury 103). The *punctum*, Barthes describes, gestures toward a "subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see" (Barthes *CL* 59). I contend that reading these concepts together suggests a new understanding of Barthes' influential work on photography, *Camera Lucida*, which opposes most critical interpretations. *Camera Lucida*, I argue, has been largely misread as Barthes' recantation of the poststructuralist project in favor of realism, a misreading that has foreclosed alternate approaches to understanding the relationships among visual texts, viewers, and ideology. In particular I argue that, rather than espousing a realist view of the photograph, Barthes offers a compelling and poignant account of the photograph's uncanny power to evoke the Lacanian Real. In my account, Barthes' highly contested concept of the *punctum* finds a place within the Lacanian architectionic, as a scopic manifestation of what Lacan describes as the signifier of lack in the Other, the sexuated pole of Woman.

Then I explore further the question of the photograph's relationship to realism and the Real by looking at a set of "photographic accidents" in the work of Hungarian expatriot photographer André Kertész (chapter 2). Here I

provide an in-depth account of the way in which the *punctum* may operate in relation to the Lacanian Real. In exploring issues of photographic realism, I focus particularly on intersections between ways photographs function as apparently transparent representations of realities and as formal aesthetic productions. This chapter explicates what it means to identify, not with a photograph's points of meaning, but rather with its points of symbolic failure. In so doing, it sets the scene for understanding a key point of the book: a shift away from the focus of most feminist film theory upon what it means to look *at* Woman, to a focus upon what it means to look *as* Woman. The ambiguity in the title of chapter four, "How Should a Woman Look?" is intended to signal this same shift away from discussions of how a woman is looked at (how she is seen) to how a woman looks (how she sees as woman). In particular, in viewing Kertész's photograph, "New York City," I am interested in thinking about what it means to identify with the image's point of symbolic failure (in the case of this image, the vase) rather than with how the image of Woman (in this case, the glass bust) might appear. In this sense, my project elucidates Jacqueline Rose's suggestion that film theory must seek to elaborate "not just what we see, but how we see" (Rose 231).

From these insights follows the crux of the book's theoretical contribution to theories of spectatorship and a politics of the image (chapters 3 and 4). I propose a psychoanalytically inflected approach to theorizing feminist spectatorship that differs from traditional media studies work in this area. Traditionally, film and art theorists (such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Griselda Pollock) have predicated their approaches to feminist spectatorship on the rejection of pleasure and surprise. Consequently, much earlier work remained pessimistic about the possibilities for a subversive feminist spectatorship in the face of the multiple and complex mechanisms of oppression associated with mainstream films and images. In fact, so theoretically daunting was the task of strategizing a subversive feminist viewing practice that Mulvey and many of her colleagues and followers turned their attention away from questions of media consumption and instead situated their interventions in the field of media production, in particular the creation of avant-garde film. By producing self-reflexive films that foregrounded rather than erased their techniques of production, Mulvey and other avant-garde film-makers tried to loosen films' ideological grip on spectators. In particular, they attempted to produce films that avoided both the objectification of women and a masochistic position for the female spectator. In line with these suggestions, filmmaker and theorist Peter Gidal proposed that films "should exclude all images of woman on the grounds that they could only partake of the dominant system of meanings" (Lapsley and Westlake 100). The ludicrousness of

this proposal, Lapsley and Westlake comment, "makes all the more evident the impasse film theory had reached" (100). Rather than follow these earlier approaches, I elaborate a subversive strategy that makes space for the pleasures of viewing mainstream films and images. In particular, I develop a politics/theory of the feminist spectator that depends precisely on moments of surprise and the potential for pleasure.

In elucidating the ideological function performed by cinema, early feminist film theory scholarship tended to concentrate on the role of genre, particularly, melodrama, film noir,[1] and horror films.[2] Elizabeth Cowie's influential analysis of the 1978 film Coma[3] demonstrates the fertility of genre theory in accounting for the complexities of filmic interpretation. The leading character in Coma, Susan Wheeler, has been celebrated as a feminist heroine—an ideal response to the frequent demand for "positive" images of women in film, "both to challenge existing, negative definitions and as progressive figures for identification" (Cowie 12). Wheeler is an intelligent and independent woman—depicted as a dedicated surgeon and a caring friend—whose suspicions about the disappearance of patients at the hospital in which she works propel large portions of the narrative action. Cowie argues, however, that this traditional "progressive" reading of Wheeler is sustained only by ignoring the generic conventions that frame the viewers' filmic expectations and interpretations. By drawing upon the cinematic codes of both detective films and suspense films, Cowie undermines this feminist reading of Susan Wheeler. In commenting upon Cowie's analysis, Lapsley and Westlake point out, " ... unlike the male heroes of classic Hollywood [detective films], Susan as detective is not always the bearer of knowledge. Susan's position is better understood within the conventions of the suspense film, where the protagonist is perceived as a victim, beset by dangers of which she remains unaware and of which the audience has knowledge" (Lapsley and Westlake 27). Cowie's attention to genre, thus, moves us away from an analysis of representation based upon the presence of textual elements (whether texts contain, for example, "positive" or "negative" images of women) and toward an understanding of how representation, as a discursive practice, does "not simply reproduce given definitions" but rather operates as a site for "a (re)constitution of definitions" (Cowie 39).

Other feminist scholarship at the time demonstrated how genres such as melodrama, which are usually derided for perpetuating degrading portrayals of women, could actually function subversively.[4] In particular, this scholarship focused upon how melodrama's "inability to contain the various contradictions it sought to manage resulted in incoherent and fissured texts, thereby exposing rather than concealing the oppression of patriarchy"

(Lapsley and Westlake 28). Within the project to reveal the feminist potential of melodrama, two key approaches became dominant. The first, espoused by Teresa deLauretis[5] involves reading a text "against the grain," in order to discover its internal inconsistencies, excesses, and fissures, in particular, looking for places where patriarchal discourse breaks down. This approach has yielded significant contributions to scholarship in the area of female spectatorship, but as Judith Mayne points out, there are "the obvious limitations" to restricting the investigation of feminist spectatorship to "what falls through the cracks of patriarchal discourse" (Mayne 71).

The second approach involves "theorizing the complex range of desires inspired by the cinema" (71). It recognizes that viewers' cinematic identifications are often unstable. In particular, viewers' identifications may not line up with their gender or sexuality. Linda Williams' work on the 1937 melodrama Stella Dallas demonstrates this approach. Williams contends that "in the 'woman's film'—addressed to a female audience and taken up with traditionally female concerns—a multiplicity of subject-positions are produced... [leading] the female spectator... to identify with contradiction itself" (72). This in turn, it is contended, interrupts "the single narrative perspective of the classic Hollywood cinema" (72).

By removing the stigma of "collusion and complicity... [with] the interests of patriarchy" that the term "identification" came to imply, Jackie Stacey's groundbreaking work on female spectatorship[6] provides a point of departure from these two approaches (Storey 72). Through an analysis of two melodramas (All About Eve [1950] and Desperately Seeking Susan [1984]) that deal with "one woman's obsession with another woman," Stacey examines the unexplored significance of "a woman's look at another woman" both within the diegesis and between spectator and character (Stacey 249). The pleasures these films offer female spectators, Stacey argues, cannot be contained within the prevalent paradigm that reduces spectatorial pleasure to either a modality of desire or of identification.

This book expands upon these insights gleaned from genre analysis in considering how viewers position themselves in relation to what they see. In particular, it seeks to account for Parveen Adams' charge that "it is not the image of woman as such that is crucial, but how the image organizes the way in which the [it] is looked at" (Adams EI 2). In addition, it aims to revisit earlier work on genre analysis in the light of a Lacanian distinction between the "look" and the "gaze," a distinction that, with the notable exception of Cowie's contributions, this work tends to confuse.

In Seminar XI Lacan illustrates the difference between the look and the gaze through an interpretation of a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and

Nothingness. Sartre describes a voyeur looking through a keyhole who is startled by the sound of footsteps in the corridor. For Lacan, "the look" refers to the voyeur's act of staring through the keyhole, while "the gaze" refers to that which "surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame" (Lacan *Sem XI* 84). The gaze, for Lacan, occurs when we "sense ourselves as beings who are looked at" (75). The gaze, thus, is not "a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (84).

In most feminist film theory scholarship, the phrase *the male gaze* is used to refer to the position of mastery from which the spectator is encouraged to view classic Hollywood films. From the position of "the male gaze," viewers identify with the male protagonist and see the on-screen women as an erotic object that possesses what Mulvey calls a "to-be-looked-at-ness." But for Lacan, the gaze has nothing to do with mastery. Indeed, as Cowie emphasizes, "the gaze is the inverse of the omnipotent look.... [It is what] surprises the subject in its desiring" (Cowie 288). Thus, in Lacanian parlance, what is usually called the "male gaze" more precisely describes his notion of "the look." The gaze, for Lacan, resides not on the side of the subject but rather emanates from the object.

Joan Copjec argues that film theory has confused Lacan's notion of an 'indeterminate gaze' with Michel Foucault's concept of a 'panoptic gaze.' Rather than understand the gaze in Foucauldian terms, as a mechanism of surveillance, under whose watch the subject is totally visible, the Lacanian gaze "does not see you" (Copjec 36). Copjec traces this misunderstanding to film theory's reliance on Lacan's formulation of the "mirror-stage" in *Ecrits* (1966) as the paradigm for understanding how a subject comes to "misrecognize" her/himself within the cinematic screen. In *Seminar XI* (1973), however, Lacan revises this earlier account of the mirror phase and provides his most detailed account of the gaze as a site for a process of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) which, as Silverman puts it, "may induce a very different affective response than the jubilation attributed to the child in 'The Mirror Stage'—in other words, it does not invariably involve an identification with ideality" (Silverman *TVW* 19). In particular, rather than a simple specular identification with what one sees, Lacanian misrecognition occurs at the point *beyond* what is visible to the subject. Copjec takes Lacan's rejection of ideality even further, arguing the radical point that

> For beyond everything that is displayed to the subject, the question is asked, "What is being concealed from me?"... This point at which something appears to be *in*visible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation... is the point of the