

Kaja Silverman, "Suture" [Excerpts]

Excerpted from chapter 5 of Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

(from: Rosen 1986: 219ff.)

. . . The concept of suture attempts to account for the means by which [subjects](#) emerge within [discourse](#). As I have already indicated, although that concept has been most intensely theorized in relation to cinematic texts, its initial formulation comes from Jacques-Alain Miller, one of [Lacan](#)'s disciples. We will look briefly at that formulation before turning to the cinematic one.

Miller defines suture as that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being. In "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)," he writes:

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse. . . it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension—the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of. [\[1\]](#)

Miller's account of suture locates the emphasis in orthodox Lacanian places; the key terms in his definition of it are "lack" and "absence." Indeed, as Miller describes it, suture closely resembles the subject's inauguration into language, illustrated by Lacan with the "fort" / "da" game. A given signifier (a pronoun, a personal name) grants the subject access to the [symbolic order](#), but alienates it not only from

its own needs but from its drives. That signifier stands in for the absent subject (i.e. absent in being) whose lack it can never stop signifying.

The French theoretician Jean-Pierre Oudart subsequently transported the concept of suture into film studies, where it has been used to probe the precise /220/ nature of [cinematic signification](#)—to answer the frequently pondered questions "What is the cinematic equivalent for language in the literary text?" and "What is cinematic syntax?" These formal speculations have not preempted those about subjectivity but have been integrated into them. The theory of suture has been rendered more complex with each new statement about it, so that it now embraces a set of assumptions not only about cinematic signification, but about the viewing subject and the operations of [ideology](#). Rather than retracing each argument in turn, we will here attempt to provide a synthesis of the contributions made by Jean-Pierre Oudart, Daniel Dayan, Stephen Heath, [and] Laura Mulvey....

Suture: The Cinematic Model

Theoreticians of cinematic suture agree that films are articulated and the viewing subject spoken by means of interlocking [shots](#). They are thus in fundamental accord with Noel [Burch](#)'s remark that "Although camera movements, entrances into and exits from frame, composition and so on can all function as devices aiding in the organization of the film object. . . the shot transition [remains] the basic element [of that organization]." [2] Shot relationships are seen as the equivalent of [syntactic](#) ones in [linguistic discourse](#), as the agency

whereby [meaning](#) emerges and a [subject-position](#) is constructed for the viewer.

However, some theoreticians conceptualize those relationships differently from others. Whereas Oudart and Dayan find the [shot/reverse shot formation](#) to be virtually synonymous with the operations of suture, Heath suggests that it is only one element in a much larger system, and emphasizes features of the editing process which are common to all shot transitions. We will begin by discussing the shot/reverse shot formation....

.. [T]he shot/reverse shot formation derives its real importance and interest for many of the theoreticians of suture because it demonstrates so lucidly the way in which cinema operates to reduplicate the history of the subject. The viewer of the cinematic spectacle experiences shot I as an imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference. Shot I is thus the site of a [jouissance](#) akin to that of the [mirror stage](#) prior to the child's discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass.

However, almost immediately the viewing subject becomes aware of the limitations on what it sees—aware, that is, of an absent field. At this point shot I becomes a signifier of that absent field, and *jouissance* gives way to unpleasure. Daniel Dayan offers a very clear summary of this transition in "The Tutor Code of classical Cinema":
/221/

When the viewer discovers the frame—the first step in reading the film—the triumph of his former *possession* of the image fades out. The viewer discovers that the camera is hiding things, and therefore distrusts it and the frame itself

which he now understands to be arbitrary. He wonders why the frame is what it is. This radically transforms his mode of participation—the unreal space between characters and/or objects is no longer perceived as pleasurable. It is now the space which separates the camera from the characters. The latter have lost their quality of presence. The spectator discovers that his possession of space was only partial, illusory. He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the gaze of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent.[\[3\]](#)

Jean-Pierre Oudart refers to the spectator who occupies the missing field as the "Absent One." The Absent One, also known as [the Other](#), has all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father: potency, knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power. It is, of course, the speaking subject of the cinematic text, a subject which, as we have already indicated, finds its locus in a cluster of technological apparatuses (the camera, the tape recorder, etc.). We shall see that this speaking subject often finds its fictional correlative in an ideal paternal representation.

The speaking subject has everything which the viewing subject, suddenly cognizant of the limitations on its vision, understands itself to be lacking. This sense of lack inspires in that subject the desire for "something else," a desire to see more.

However, it is equally important that the presence of the speaking subject be hidden from the viewer. Oudart insists that the classic film text must at all costs conceal from the viewing subject the passivity of that subject's position, and this necessitates denying the fact that there is any reality outside the fiction.

The shot/reverse shot formation is ideally suited for this dual purpose, since it alerts the spectator to that other field whose absence is experienced as unpleasurable while at the same time linking it to the gaze of a fictional character. Thus a gaze within the fiction serves to conceal the controlling gaze outside the fiction; a benign other steps in and obscures the presence of the coercive and castrating Other. In other words, the subject of the speech passes itself off as [the speaking subject](#).

For Oudart, cinematic signification depends entirely upon the moment of unpleasure in which the viewing subject perceives that it is lacking something, i.e., that there is an absent field. Only then, with the disruption of imaginary plenitude, does the shot become a [signifier](#), speaking first and foremost of that thing about which the Lacanian signifier never stops speaking: [castration](#). A complex signifying chain is introduced in place of the lack which can never be made good, suturing over the wound of castration with narrative. However, it is only by inflicting the wound to begin with that [the viewing subject](#) can be made to want the restorative of meaning and narrative. /222/

Stephen [Heath](#) emphasizes the process of negation which occurs concurrently with a film's positive assertions—its structuring absences and losses. In "Narrative Space," he writes:

Film is the production not just of a negation but equally, simultaneously of a negativity, the excessive foundation of the process itself, of the very movement of the spectator as subject in the film; which movement is stopped in the negation and its centering positions, the constant phasing in of subject vision ("this but not that" as the sense of the image in flow).[\[4\]](#)

The unseen [apparatuses](#) of [enunciation](#) represent one of these structuring losses, but there are others which are equally important. The classic cinematic organization depends upon the subject's willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to "stand in" for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, "Yes, that's me," or "That's what I see."

Equally important to the cinematic organization are the operations of cutting and excluding. It is not merely that the camera is incapable of showing us everything at once, but that it does not wish to do so. We must be shown only enough to know that there is more, and to want that "more" to be disclosed. A prime agency of disclosure is the [cut](#), which divides one [shot](#) from the next. The cut guarantees that both the preceding and the subsequent shots will function as structuring absences to the present shot. These absences make possible a signifying ensemble, convert one shot into a signifier of the next one, and the signified of the preceding one.

Thus cinematic coherence and plentitude emerge through multiple cuts and negations. Each image is defined through its differences from those that surround it [syntagmatically](#) and those it [paradigmatically](#) implies ("this but not that"), as well as through its denial of any discourse but its own. Each positive cinematic assertion represents an imaginary conversion of a whole series of negative ones. This castrating coherence, this definition of a discursive position for the viewing subject which necessitates not only its [loss of being](#) but the repudiation

of alternative discourses, is one of the chief aims of the system of suture.

Most [classic cinematic texts](#) go to great lengths to cover over these "cuts." [Hitchcock's](#) *Psycho*, on the other hand, deliberately exposes the negations upon which filmic plentitude is predicated. It unabashedly foregrounds the [voyeuristic](#) dimensions of the cinematic experience, making constant references to the speaking subject, and forcing the viewer into oblique and uncomfortable positions *vis-à-vis* both the [cinematic apparatuses](#) and the [spectacle](#) which they produce.

Psycho not only ruptures the [Oedipal formation](#) which provides the basis of the present [symbolic order](#) but declines to put it back together at the end. The /223/ final shot of Norman / mother, which conspicuously lacks a reverse shot, makes clear that the coherence of that order proceeds from the institution of sexual difference, and the denial of bisexuality.

Finally, *Psycho* obliges the viewing subject to make abrupt shifts in [identification](#). These identifications are often in [binary](#) opposition to each other; thus the viewing subject finds itself inscribed into the cinematic discourse at one juncture as victim, and at the next juncture as victimizer. These abrupt shifts would seem to thwart the process of identification, as would all the other strategies just enumerated. However, quite the reverse holds true. The more intense the threat of castration and loss, the more intense the viewing subject's desire for [narrative closure](#).

Psycho's opening few shots take in the exterior of a group of city buildings, without a single reverse shot to anchor that spectacle to a fictional gaze. The transition from urban skyline to the interior of a hotel room is achieved by means of a [trick shot](#): the camera appears to penetrate the space left at the bottom of a window whose venetian blind is three-quarters closed. The viewing subject is made acutely aware of the impossibility of this shot—not just the technical but the "moral" impossibility, since the shot in question effects a startling breach of privacy.

Our sense of intruding is accentuated by the first shot inside the hotel room, which shows us a woman (Marion), still in bed, and her lover (Sam) standing beside the bed, half-undressed, with a towel in his hands. His face is cropped by the frame, so that he preserves a certain anonymity denied to Marion, who will be the object of numerous coercive gazes during the film. From the very outset, the viewer is not permitted to forget that he or she participates in that visual coercion.

Marion and Sam exchange a series of embraces before leaving the hotel room. Their lovemaking is interrupted by a discussion about Sam's marital status, and the strain imposed by their clandestine meetings. Marion expresses an intense desire to have their relationship "normalized"—to be inserted through marriage into an acceptable discursive position. Sam comments bitterly on the economic obstacles in the way of such a union. Later in the same day when Marion is entrusted with \$40,000 which is intended to buy someone else's marital bliss, and when the man who gives it to her announces that he never carries more money than he can afford to lose, Marion

decides to achieve her culturally induced ambitions through culturally taboo means.

The sequence which follows is an extremely interesting one in terms of suture. In the first shot of that scene Marion stands in the doorway of her bedroom closet, her right side toward the camera, wearing a black brassiere and half-slip. A bed separates the camera from her, and in the left far corner there is a vanity table and mirror. Suddenly the camera moves backward to reveal a corner of the bed not previously exposed, on which lies the envelope of stolen money. It /224/ zooms in on the money, then pans to the left and provides a closeup of an open suitcase, full of clothing. During all of this time, Marion is facing the closet, unable to see what we see.

There is a cut to Marion, who turns and looks toward the bed. Once again the camera pulls back to reveal the packet of money. In the next shot, Marion adjusts her hair and clothes in front of the vanity table and mirror. She turns to look at the bed, and we are given a reverse shot of the stolen envelope. This particular shot/reverse shot formation is repeated. Finally, Marion sits down on the bed, puts the money in her purse, picks up the suitcase, and leaves.

This sequence achieves a number of things: It establishes the fascination of the money, not only for Marion but for us (we can't help looking at it, even when Marion's back is turned). It delimits a claustral transactional area, an area from which all mediating objects (i.e., the bed) are eventually removed, from which Marion can no longer emerge. The film resorts more and more obsessively to

shot/reverse shots in the following episodes, suggesting Marion's absolute entrapment within the position of a thief. Finally, it associates the money with a [transcendental gaze](#), a gaze which exceeds Marion's, and that can see her without ever being seen—one which knows her better than she knows herself.

The privileged object in the shot/reverse shot formations which punctuate the second half of this episode is the packet of money, not Marion. Indeed, the entire spatial field is defined in relation to that spot on the bed where the \$40,000 lies; positioned in front of it, we look for a long time at the contents of the room before its human inhabitant ever casts a significant glance at anything. By privileging the point of view of an inanimate object, Hitchcock makes us acutely aware of what Oudart would call the "Absent One"—i.e., of the speaking subject. Our relationship with the camera remains unmediated, "unsoftened" by the intervention of a human gaze.

Far from attempting to erase our perception of the cinematic apparatus, the film exploits it, playing on the viewing subject's own paranoia and guilt. We enjoy our visual superiority to Marion, but at the same time we understand that the gaze of the camera—that gaze in which we participate—exceeds us, threatening not only Marion but anyone exposed to the film's spectacle.

It would appear that the system of suture cannot be too closely identified with that shot/reverse shot formation in which the function of looking is firmly associated with a fictional character, since by violating that convention Hitchcock throws a much wider net over his audience. He

thereby forces the viewing subject to take up residence not only within one of the film's discursive positions (that of victim), but a second (that of sadistic and legalistic voyeur). The whole operation of suture can be made *more* rather than less irresistible when the field of the speaking subject is continually implied. Two other episodes in *Psycho* demonstrate the same point.

The earlier of these inscribes the law into the fictional level of the film through the figure of a highway patrolman. An opening [long-shot](#) shows Marion's car /225/ pulled over to the side of a deserted road. A police car pulls into frame and parks behind it. In the next shot the patrolman climbs out of his car, walks over to the driver's side of Marion's automobile, and looks through the window. A third shot shows us what he sees—a sleeping Marion. A succession of almost identical shot/reverse shot formations follow, by means of which the superiority of the legal point of view is dramatized. The patrolman knocks on Marion's window and at last she wakes up. We are now provided with a shot/reverse shot exchange between the two characters, but although Marion does in fact look back at the person who has intruded upon her, his eyes are concealed by a pair of dark glasses.

The policeman interrogates Marion about her reasons for sleeping in her car, and she explains that she pulled over because of fatigue. She asks: "Have I broken a law?" The conversation is as oblique as the exchange of looks—rather than answering her question, the patrolman asks: "Is there anything wrong?" His question is neither casual nor solicitous; it is a threat, backed up by a series of quick shot/reverse shots which expose Marion yet further to the

scrutiny of a law which it seems impossible to evade, and impossible to decipher.

The police officer asks to see Marion's license. Again the question is far from innocent; "license" has as broadly existential a meaning as the word "wrong" in the earlier question. After she gives him her driver's license, the patrolman walks around to the front of the car to write down the license plate number. We see him through the windshield, still protected by his dark glasses from any personal recognition. The reverse shot discloses not Marion, but the license plate which seems to speak for her with greater authority, and to do so through a legal discourse which renders her even more passive.

The policeman permits Marion to resume her journey, but he tails her for several miles. Her paranoia during this period is conveyed through a group of alternating frontal shots of her driving, and reverse shots of her rearview mirror. The patrol car is clearly visible in both—Marion is now doubly inscribed.

Several sequences later, as Marion continues on her journey in the rain and darkness, the voices of her boss, of the man whose money she has stolen, and of a female friend are superimposed on the sound track, speaking about Marion and defining her even more fully. This device is the acoustic equivalent of all those shots which we have seen, but which Marion has been unable to see because her back was turned, because she was looking in another direction, or because she was asleep. It serves, like those shots, to reinforce the viewing subject's consciousness of an [Other](#) whose transcendent and

castrating gaze can never be returned, and which always sees one thing: guilt.

The famous shower sequence not only further disassociates the film's spectacle from any of its characters but suggests how much larger the system of suture is than any shot formation. The scene begins with Marion undressing in a motel bedroom, watched through a peephole by Norman, her eventual killer. She goes into the bathroom and flushes down the torn pieces of paper on which she /226/ has just taken stock of her financial situation (she has decided to return the stolen money, and wants to calculate how much of it she has spent). Marion then closes the bathroom door, effectively eliminating the possibility of Norman or anyone else within the fiction watching her while she showers. Once again the camera insists on the primacy of its own point of view.

Marion steps inside the bath, and we see her outline through the half-transparent curtain. Then, in a shot which parallels the earlier one in which we seem to slip through the bottom of the hotel window, we penetrate the curtain and find ourselves inside the shower with Marion. The film flaunts these trick shots, as if to suggest the futility of resisting the gaze of the speaking subject.

There are nine shots inside the shower before Marion's killer attacks. They are remarkable for their brevity, and for their violation of the 30-degree rule (the rule that at least 30 degrees of space must separate the position of the camera in one shot from that which follows it in order to justify the intervening cut). Some of the theoreticians of suture argue that the narrative text attempts to conceal its

discontinuities and ruptures, but the shower sequence repeatedly draws our attention to the fact of the cinematic cut. This episode also includes a number of obtrusive and disorienting shots—shots taken from the point of view of the shower head at which Marion looks. When the stabbing begins, there is a cinematic cut with almost every thrust of the knife. The implied equation is too striking to ignore: the cinematic machine is lethal; it too murders and dissects. The shower sequence would seem to validate Heath's point that the coherence and plenitude of narrative film are created through negation and loss.

We have no choice but to [identify](#) with Marion in the shower, to insert ourselves into the position of the wayward subject who has strayed from the highway of cultural acceptability, but who now wants to make amends. The vulnerability of her naked and surprisingly small body leaves us without anything to deflect that transaction. Marion's encounter with the warm water inside the shower not only suggests a ritual purification, but a contact so basic and primitive as to break down even such dividing lines as class or sexual difference. Finally, the whole process of identification is formally insisted upon by the brevity of the shots; the point of view shifts constantly within the extremely confined space of the shower, making Marion the only stable object, that thing to which we necessarily cling.

That identification is not even disrupted when the cutting activity is mirrored at the level of the fiction, and a bleeding, stumbling Marion struggles to avoid the next knife wound. It is sustained up until the moment when Marion is definitively dead, an inanimate eye now closed

to all visual exchanges. At this point we find ourselves in the equally appalling position of the gaze which has negotiated Marion's murder, and the shading of the corners of the frame so as to simulate the perspective of a peephole insists that we acknowledge our own voyeuristic implication. /227/

Relief comes with the resumption of narrative, a resumption which is effected through a [tracking shot](#) from the bathroom into the bedroom. That tracking shot comes to rest first upon the packet of money, then upon an open window through which Norman's house can be seen, and finally upon the figure of Norman himself, running toward the motel. When Norman emerges from his house, adjacent to the motel, the full extent of our complicity becomes evident, since we then realize that for the past five or ten minutes we have shared not his point of view, but that of a more potent and castrating Other. But the envelope of money rescues us from too prolonged a consideration of that fact.

The \$40,000 assures us that there is more to follow, and that even though we have just lost our heroine, and our own discursive position, we can afford to finance others. What sutures us at this juncture is the fear of being cut off from narrative. Our investment in the fiction is made manifest through the packet of money which provides an imaginary bridge from Marion to the next protagonist.

Psycho is relentless in its treatment of the viewing subject, forcing upon it next an identification with Norman, who with sober face and professional skill disposes of the now affect-less body of Marion, cleans the motel room, and

sinks the incriminating car in quicksand. Marion is subsequently replaced in the narrative by her look-alike sister, and Norman's schizophrenia dramatizes the same vacillation from the position of victim to that of victimizer which the viewing subject is obliged to make in the shower sequence and elsewhere. *Psycho* runs through a whole series of culturally overdetermined narratives, showing the same cool willingness to substitute one for another that it adopts with its characters. Moreover, the manifest context of these narratives yields all too quickly to the latent, undergoing in the process a disquieting vulgarization. We understand perfectly the bourgeois inspiration of Marion's marital dreams, and the spuriousness of the redemptive scenario she hopes to enact by returning the money. Similarly, Norman's Oedipal crisis is played more as farce than melodrama, replete with stuffed birds and hackneyed quarrels in which he plays both parts.

The film terrorizes the viewing subject, refusing ever to let it off the hook. That hook is the system of suture, which is held up to our scrutiny even as we find ourselves thoroughly ensnared by it. What *Psycho* obliges us to understand is that we want suture so badly that we'll take it at any price, even with the fullest knowledge of what it entails—passive insertions into preexisting [discursive positions](#) (both mythically potent and mythically impotent); threatened losses and false recoveries; and subordination to the castrating gaze of a symbolic Other.

In fact, the more the operations of [enunciation](#) are revealed to the viewing subject, the more tenacious is its desire for the comfort and [closure](#) of narrative—the more

anxious it will be to seek refuge within the film's fiction. In so doing, the viewing subject submits to [cinematic signification](#), permits itself to be spoken /228/ by the film's discourse. For the theoreticians of suture, the viewing subject thereby reenacts its entry into the symbolic order....

We have seen that the match of subject and cinematic discourse occurs not just at the level of the shot but at that of [the story](#)—that films [reinterpellate](#) the viewer into preestablished discursive positions not only by effacing the signs of their own production but through the lure of narrative. The standard format of the classic cinematic text duplicates within the fiction as a whole the paradigm of the shot/reverse shot, disrupting the existing symbolic order, dislocating the subject-positions within it, and challenging its ideals of coherence and fullness only in order subsequently to reaffirm that order, those positions and those ideals.

Sometimes it is recognizably the same order which is restored at the end of the film. Thus *It's a Wonderful Life* calls into question the potency of George Bailey and the authenticity of the structures of the family and capitalism only so that it can revalidate them. In other cases a new order seems to replace one which has been fractured. For instance, in *Marnie* a "false" coherence (the coherence of a matriarchy) gives way to a "true" coherence (the coherence of a patriarchy). However, the new order always turns out to have been the original order, temporarily interrupted. The system of suture functions not only constantly to reinterpellate the viewing subject

into the same discursive positions, thereby giving that subject the illusion of a stable and continuous identity, but to rearticulate the existing symbolic order in ideologically orthodox ways.

We observed earlier, in relation to *Psycho*, that the insertion of the viewer into the cinematic discourse is facilitated through the cuts by means of which films are articulated. That insertion also involves another cutting operation, that implied by sexual difference. It is imperative to note that the identifications and erotic investments of classic cinema—like those established during the Oedipus complex—produce a sexually differentiated subject. Not only are classic cinema's subject positions organized along sexual lines, but so is the desire it inaugurates. Indeed, the entire system of suture is inconceivable apart from sexual difference. As Claire Johnston points out in "Towards a Feminist Film Practice: Some Theses":

As a process, a practice of signification, suture is an ideological operation with a particular function in relation to paternal ideology in that out of a system of differences it establishes a position in relation to the [phallus](#). In so doing it places the spectator in relation to that position.... It is this imaginary unity, the sutured coherence, the imaginary sense of identity set up by the classic film which must be challenged by a feminist film practice to achieve a different constitution of the subject in relation to ideology. [5]

One of the chief mechanisms by which the system of suture conceals the apparatuses of enunciation is by setting up a relay of glances between the male /229/ characters within the fiction and the male viewers in the theater audience, a relay which has the female body as its object. Similarly, one of the most effective strategies at its disposal for deflecting attention

away from the passivity and lack of the viewing subject's own position is by displacing those values onto a female character within the fiction. (Needless to say, this displacement assuages the anxieties only of the male viewer; it heightens those of the female viewer.) Often the entire narrative is organized around a demonstration and an interrogation of the female character's castrated condition, a demonstration and an interrogation which have as their ultimate aim the recovery of a sense of potency and wholeness for both the male character and the male viewer. This narrative organization reflects the [paradigm](#) which suture establishes at the level of the shot; in both cases an absence is first revealed, and then covered over through a skillful displacement from the level of enunciation onto that of the fiction. We will discuss the relationship between suture and sexual difference in greater detail in the following section.

Suture and Sexual Difference

. . . [Laura] Mulvey's argument [in "[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#)"[\[6\]](#)] bears a striking resemblance to the suture theory. Both posit a cinematic adventure in which plenitude is fractured by difference and lack, only to be sealed over once again. For the theoreticians of suture, the salvage activity is carried out by means of the movement from one shot to the next. For Mulvey, as for the many feminist film theoreticians who have worked along similar lines,[\[7\]](#) the lack which must be both dramatized and contained finds its locus in the female body. The various absences upon which classic cinema turns, from the

excluded real to the hidden camera and tape recorder, are in effect signified *through* woman. As Jacqueline Rose observes in "The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory," the female subject

is structured as image around this reference [to the excluded real] and. . . thereby *comes* to represent the potential loss and difference which underpins the whole system.... What classical cinema performs or "puts on stage" is this image of woman as other, dark continent, and from there what escapes or is lost to the system; at the same time as sexuality is frozen into her body as spectacle, the object of phallic desire and/or identification.[\[8\]](#)

"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" suggests a kind of "thematics" which complements and enriches that part of the suture argument which is more strictly concerned with the level of enunciation. It also demonstrates the impossibility of thinking about any part of the classic cinematic organization—including editing—apart from sexual difference. Indeed, the two theoretical models achieve a particularly tight join at precisely that point most stressed by [/230/ Oudart and Dayan](#), i.e., the shot/reverse shot formation. Not only can a metaphoric connection be established between the two halves of that formation on the one hand, and the alignment of female spectacle with male vision on the other, but the former provides the ideal vehicle for the latter. Classic cinema abounds in shot/reverse shot formations in which men look at women. We will examine below some of the other ways in which cinematic articulation relies upon the female figure.

However, before doing so I would like to return to the two representational strategies isolated by Mulvey for neutralizing the anxiety aroused by female lack. The first of these, we recall, involves an interrogation calculated to

establish either the female subject's guilt or her illness, while the second negotiates her erotic overinvestment. Mulvey associates the former alternative with narrative progression, and the latter with narrative interruption. In other words, whereas investigation of the guilty or sick woman always entails a diegetic coercion, fetishism of the female form sometimes serves to rupture the diegesis and so to "dis-place" the viewer. These two very different resolutions to the problem of castration anxiety warrant a careful analysis, since the second contains the potential to subvert the first. As we will see, the model described by Mulvey can give rise to at least two transgressive representations. One of these representations, brilliantly exploited by *Lola Montes*, transfers to woman qualities which are normally the exclusive property of the phallus, most notably the capacity to transcend narrative.

Max Ophuls' highly self-conscious film can almost be read as a disquisition about the status of the female image in classic cinema. Its elaborately orchestrated narrative unfolds through the interrogation of Lola, an interrogation which establishes that she is both "fallen" and unwell. In addition the film quite literally circles around Lola-as-spectacle, and although that spectacle is nothing if not fetishized, it is nonetheless fully contained within the narrative. It thus not only dramatizes both of the solutions cited by Mulvey for neutralizing the male viewer's anxiety but shows how they can be combined.

At the same time, *Lola Montes* gives us another series of female images which remain much more fragmented, and which threaten the coherence not only of the diegesis but of the dominant symbolic order. Ultimately those images

are consolidated within the main narrative, but the strain which they exert upon it suggests that they represent an important area of resistance to traditional power relations.

Ophuls' film moves back and forth between two temporal planes, one of which situates the viewer in a continuous present tense, and the other of which locates the viewer in a discontinuous past. The sequences from the film's present tense all take place in a circus whose one and only theme is the rise and descent of a [femme fatale](#). Lola's climb to fame and fall to ignominy are dramatized in a variety of ways, ranging from pantomime to trapeze acts. The show is written, directed, and produced by the ringmaster, who is in the business of selling /231/ scandals. However, it is billed as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," the real-life story of Lola Montes told in "her own inimitable words."

Parts of that story are narrated by the ringmaster. Other parts are extracted in the form of set speeches from Lola, who particularly toward the end of the film requires frequent prompting. However, portions of her past are also conveyed to us through [flashbacks](#), and they are connected with her much more intimately than the lines she speaks. Not only do the usual conventions governing flashbacks serve to link them with Lola's consciousness, but they are invariably signaled by a [lap dissolve](#) of her face over a remote object or landscape.

The flashbacks differ from the circus performance in other important respects as well. Whereas Lola's movements are rigorously supervised in the latter, in the former they are characterized by an unusual freedom and spontaneity.

Our first glimpse of her in the circus proves paradigmatic in this respect: she sits on a fixed base while the camera circles vertiginously around her. Later, dressed in a white wedding dress and bridal crown, Lola remains immobile in the middle of an even more dazzling display of movement; she is stationed on a rotating platform, surrounded by a second platform which rotates in the opposite direction. These two sequences underscore the fact that in the circus Lola does not so much move as submit to movement. They thus anticipate the film's final shot, in which a caged and altogether tamed Lola extends her hand through the bars to be kissed by a long line of male spectators.

The last enclosure contrasts strikingly with the carriage in which Lola travels in all but two of the flashbacks. That vehicle permits her not only to leave one country and enter another at will, but to break off one relationship and begin another whenever she chooses to do so; even when she travels in someone else's carriage her own follows closely behind. It is while seated in the latter that she makes her most revealing statement: "For me, life is movement."

That remark is borne out again and again in the flashback scenes. Lola repeatedly breaks away from or interrupts rituals within which she has been assigned a relatively passive place—a prearranged marriage, a marital union in which she is called upon to act the part of a martyr, a Spanish dance, a military procession, a royal audience. Indeed, she effects her dramatic ascent entirely through actions which defy the norm.

In each of these situations Lola makes a spectacle of herself. In other words, she invites the male gaze, draws visual attention to herself. However, it is important to note that the alignment of male look with female image does not here work in the usual way, since far from locating power on the male side that visual transaction confers it on the female side. Thus whereas in the circus episodes the scopic exchange functions to subordinate Lola, in the flashback scenes it provides the agency whereby she assumes power.

The very different status of the male gaze in the film's two [temporal registers](#) can be explained by the fact that in one instance Lola's exhibitionism is passive but in the other active. In the circus scenes she is constrained by the ringmaster's /232/ look to conform to a preestablished representation, and obliged night after night to repeat the same part. In the flashback scenes, however, Lola exercises fascination and control over numerous male gazes through an elaborate masquerade, an ongoing performance in which she both scripts and constantly changes the parts she plays. Her recourse to the principle of unpredictability is as vital as the artistic control she wields, and may indeed be synonymous with it, since, as we suggested above, it permits her to disrupt the many narratives which would otherwise contain her.

Lola's capacity to transgress the diegetic flow is inscribed into the film's formal operations as well as its fiction. The fluctuation between the sustained storytelling efforts of the ringmaster and the fragmented and nonlinear memories which proceed from Lola's consciousness introduce into the film's structure a tension which is not

neutralized until her literal and metaphoric fall. Like her scandals, those memories have the quality of a "cut-out or icon" which Mulvey associates with the fetishist solution, situating the film in a "no-man's-land outside its own time and space." In short, they run counter to the flow of the circus narrative. However, after her jump Lola entirely succumbs to the tyranny of the ringmaster's gaze, and her memories cease to function as a point of resistance to the passivity and masochism of her present plight. The flashbacks abruptly terminate, and she takes her place inside the gilded cage.

The one flashback which the ringmaster shares with Lola proves critical in determining the ultimate assimilation of past to present. That flashback also clarifies the very different terms under which Lola will be obliged to play to the male gaze once she joins the circus. In it the ringmaster pays Lola a private visit and offers to sell her as "the most scandalous woman in the world." Although she declines his offer, we know from certain other signs of acquiescence that she will eventually capitulate. For instance, he tells her to stop pacing and she does so—she submits, that is, to the restrictions which he verbally places on her movements, permits herself to be positioned by him. Similarly, when he informs her that she smokes too much, she throws away her cigar.

Even more significant is Lola's response to the ringmaster's assertion that men come to watch her dance only because of her beauty: she sits down in front of a mirror and regards her reflection, as if for the first time. In effect, she subordinates herself to this view of her. For the

first time Lola submits to the look of another, is constituted through and dominated by the male gaze.

Lola Montes uses its governing circus metaphor as a means of foregrounding the centrality of a passive and compliant female representation to the operations of classic cinema. Not only does the ringmaster write his narrative across the surface of Lola's body, but the film shows itself to be dependent upon that same surface for its own articulation. Composition, *mise-en-scène*, lighting, camera movement, and shot matches all function to display Lola, and that display in turn provides them with their formal coherence.

At the same time that Ophuls' film dramatizes the "ideal" relationship between /233/ the fetishized female image and narrative progression, it also suggests ways in which that image can be used to subvert or disrupt the diegesis. Like Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* or *Morocco*, *Lola Montes* indicates that the power relations which are inscribed into classic cinema through its [scopic regime](#) are by no means as stable as is the regime itself. In other words, the identification of the female subject with specularity and the male subject with vision does not necessarily assure the latter a dominant position. The construction of woman-as-fetish carries with it certain dangers for male subjectivity. Not only does that construction facilitate the detachment of the female image from narrative control, but it can challenge the very assumption upon which the existing symbolic order depends—the assumption, that is, that woman is castrated or lacking. In short, the [fetish](#) can become indistinguishable from the [phallus](#). This is, of course, precisely what happens in some of the flashback sequences in *Lola Montes*.

Yet another "[perverse](#)" resolution of the castration anxiety discussed by Mulvey involves the privileging of lack and passivity over potency and aggressivity. This resolution, like the one in which the woman aspires to the position of the phallus, leaves intact the scopic regime of classic cinema. Indeed, both are only made possible by the preservation of that regime. The famous strip sequence from Charles Vidor's 1946 film, *Gilda*, provides a particularly vivid dramatization of the second way in which the construction of woman-as-fetish can challenge the system of which it is a part. The episode in question represents the climactic moment in a plot which is notable for its masochistic excess: the title character has earlier made a toast to her own destruction, referred to herself as the "dirty laundry," married someone who frightens her, and encouraged Johnny Farrell, the man she loves, to imagine her a whore.

The strip sequence is in fact an extension of the last of these projects. It takes place after the assumed death of Gilda's first husband, and her remarriage to Johnny—a marriage which, due to Johnny's sexual jealousy, has never been consummated. Gilda goes to the casino, where he works, to assure him once again that her seeming promiscuity has only been a masquerade. When he casts renewed aspersions on her fidelity, she decides to play her assigned part to the hilt.

Like most of the other episodes of ritual self-humiliation engineered by Gilda, this one relies on the equation of female subjectivity with spectacle, and male subjectivity with the look. Here she does not play just to Johnny's gaze but to those of the casino staff, a large group of

predominantly male customers, and a detective. Initially she contents herself with singing and swaying to an erotically self-lacerating song, but when she is encouraged by the onlookers to remove her clothes she promptly complies, only stopping when she is dragged from the floor by one of Johnny's henchmen.

This song-and-dance number provides a classic example of what Mulvey calls the "fetishist" solution to the problem of female lack. However, it deviates /233/ from Mulvey's model in that the erotic overvaluation of Gilda's body (her arms, her face, her hair, the black sheath she wears, the necklace and gloves she tosses to the crowd) does not serve to conceal her castration, but to flaunt it. It also involves a rather noisy demonstration of female guilt, in that it is intended by Gilda to provide the final, irrefutable evidence of her promiscuity. Finally, that demonstration is not orchestrated by the male subject, but is "voluntarily" supplied by the female subject; Gilda not only engages in a self-incriminating striptease, but sings a song about the age-old evil of woman ("Put the Blame on Mame").

The film thus superimposes the two rather contradictory strategies isolated by Mulvey as calculated to neutralize the male subject's castration anxieties. The insufficient figure loudly proclaims her guilt, and through her song, dance, and striptease simultaneously fosters the overvaluation of her physical attributes. Confession and fetishism do not here work to deflect attention away from female lack to male potency, but to inspire in the viewer (fictional and actual) the desire to have it fully revealed—to have it revealed, moreover, not as a repellent but as a pleasurable sight.

Perhaps most remarkably, the conjunction of castration and overvaluation results in a kind of masochistic eroticism in which Johnny participates not only as viewer but as spectacle. When Gilda is pulled away at the end of her act she says to Johnny: "You wanted that. Now you should be happy. You wanted everyone to know that Johnny Farrell's wife is a tramp." She thereby suggests that Johnny wants not only her exposure, but his own; that his position, like hers, is a passive and masochistic one. The viewing subject is no more exempt from this passivity and masochism than is Johnny; whether that subject identifies with Gilda or Johnny, the result is at least in this respect the same.

Suture can be understood as the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate (i.e., create the desire for) new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack. Since the promised compensation involves an ever greater subordination to already existing scenarios, the viewing subject's position is a supremely passive one, a fact which is carefully concealed through cinematic sleight-of-hand. This sleight-of-hand involves attributing to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation: the ability to generate narrative, the omnipotent and coercive gaze, the castrating authority of the law.

The shot/reverse shot formation merely constitutes one device for achieving this transfer. As Mulvey suggests, others include spying on the woman, diagnosing her illness, forcing her to confess, or better yet (as in *Lola Montes*) writing a narrative by means of which she is

defined. It is no accident that in the films described by Mulvey the woman is made to confess by a male character.

Gilda threatens to reveal this cinematic sleight-of-hand when she freely "confesses" to the crimes and natural disasters caused by women throughout history. Perhaps even more disruptive is the fact that she renders so transparent the degree /235/to which her guilt is culturally inherited and written. However, most remarkable is the way in which the film acknowledges and dwells upon the lures of castration. Gilda exercises fascination precisely by virtue of those things she lacks—money, legal authority, power, the omnipotent and coercive gaze. She insists upon her inadequacy, repeats words ("decent?") which might be used to put her beyond the pale, drinks to her own downfall, invites men to undress her, and sings Lyrics which underscore female guilt.

Vidor's film thus poses a temptation which suture is intended to overcome; the temptation to refuse cultural reintegration, to skid off course, out of control, to prefer castration to false plenitude. That danger, like the one suggested by *Lola Montes*, is implicit in classic cinema's scopopic regime. It represents a point of female resistance within the very system which defines woman as powerless and lacking....

Notes

[1] Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)," *Screen* (1977-78), vol. 18, no. 4 [The original

French publication of this article was in 1966. In the present context, a chronological listing of original publications on cinema and suture considered central by the author may be of interest: Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* (1977-78), vol. 18, no. 4, originally published in *Cahiers du cinema* (April and May 1969), nos. 211 and 212; Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1974), vol. 23, no. 1; and Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen*, (1977-78), vol. 23, no. 4—ED.]

[2] Noel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 12.

[3] Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 448.

[4] Stephen Heath, "[Narrative Space](#)," *Screen* (1976), vol. 17, no. 3

[5] Claire Johnston, "Towards a Feminist Film Practice: Some Theses," *Edinburgh Magazine*, (1976), no. 1, p. 56.

[6] Laura Mulvey "[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#)," *Screen* (1975), vol. 16, no. 3

[7] See Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity" *Cine-Tracts* (1980), vol. 3, no. 3, and "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body" *October* (1981), no. 17, pp. 23-31; Teresa de Lauretis, "Through the Looking-Glass," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's, 1980), pp. 187-202, and "Woman, Cinema, and

Language," *Yale Italian Studies* (1980), 1(2):5-21; Sandy Flitterman, "Woman, Desire, and the Look: Feminism and the Enunciative Apparatus in Cinema," *Cine-Tracts*(1978), vol. 2, no. 1; Leslie Stern, "Point of View: The Blind Spot," *Film Reader* (Evanston, 111.: Northwestern University Film Division/School of Speech, 1977), no. 5, pp. 214-36; and Linda Williams, "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions," *Cine-Tracts* (1981), vol. 3, no. 4, and "When the Woman Looks" [published in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, eds., *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, American Film Institute Monograph no. 3 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984)—ED.]

[8] Jacqueline Rose, "The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory" in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, p. 182.