

Is it Possible to Represent the Sexual Relation in Cinema? [Est-il possible de représenter le rapport sexuel au cinéma?]^{1,2}

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Abstract

This article offers a reflection on the Lacanian theory of the representation of the sexual relation in film. It draws on the Lacanian logic of sexualization and its interpretation by Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek, analyzing what the author calls the cinematic non-relation, taking as an example Alfonso Cuarón's film *Y tu mamá también* (2011). The article begins by returning to the work of Laura Mulvey, who was one of the first theorists to use psychoanalysis as a political weapon to challenge the phallogocentric portrayal of women in Hollywood cinema. The author argues that Mulvey was correct in her conclusions, however not with regard to the production of a "male gaze", but rather with regard to the cinematographic construction of male desire, which is a constitutive element of patriarchal society. The author argues that it is not by creating an "alternative" cinema, but rather developing critical theory, itself, as a political weapon that we are able to challenge the dominant ideology. It is the practice of theory that politicizes cinema and the spectator, rather than the reverse.

Introduction

Towards the end of the 1970s, a period in which both psychoanalysis and semiotics were highly regarded in film theory, Jacqueline Rose (1980, pp. 199-200) identified an interesting paradox: in the context of their dialogue with psychoanalysis, feminists leaned more and more on questions of the construction and representation of sexual difference, especially in cinema, while film theorists, for their part, though they largely appealed to psychoanalysis, did so without ever addressing the question of sexual difference. This observation was made all the more paradoxical given that film theorists often employed psychoanalytic concepts which were developed precisely in order to analyze the question of sexual difference.

Film theorists saw in psychoanalysis and semiotics a means of combating the formalist methods which had dominated earlier theoretical analyses of cinema. Some of them turned to the work of Jacques Lacan, best known at the time for his thesis that "the unconscious is structured like a language", because of the way he used language, semiotics and structural linguistics to rethink Freud. Critical theory played an equal role in shifting the interests of film

¹ Translator's note: as is customary when translating Lacan, I have chosen to leave *jouissance* untranslated throughout in order to preserve the ambiguity between sexual climax and enjoyment more generally that the term connotes (AB).

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theorists toward Lacan; the influence of Louis Althusser, in particular, is present in the Lacanian film theory of the 1970s. In his article on the “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus”, Jean-Louis Baudry (1970) applied Althusser’s theory of Ideological State Apparatuses to the theory of cinema, arguing that the cinematic apparatus functioned in the same way as Althusser’s ideological apparatuses (1970). Since the notion of ideology inherited from Althusser was itself influenced by Lacanian thought—in particular, by Lacan’s article (1949) on “the mirror stage”—film theorists were inspired by Lacan to develop a theory of ideology in cinema.

Among the important contributions to the development of psychoanalytic film theory in the 1970s is Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze”.³ In her well-known article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey (1975) explicitly uses psychoanalysis as a political tool in order to highlight the phallocentrism of classic Hollywood cinema. Mulvey, in this regard, goes much further than her predecessors as well as many of her contemporaries who were influenced by Althusser and Lacan. Mulvey (1975, p. 484) asserts that the cinema is a pleasure-producing medium; as an advanced representational system, the cinema is capable of structuring ways of seeing and the pleasure of watching. According to Mulvey, Hollywood cinema can engender two forms of visual pleasure: voyeurism and narcissism. In the case of voyeurism, the spectator takes pleasure in making the other the object of his enjoyment, while in the case of narcissism, the ego turns towards itself, generating an image charged with visual pleasure. Relying on the theses put forward by Lacan (1949) in his article on the mirror stage, Mulvey (p. 486) asserts that cinematic representation makes possible the momentary loss of the subject’s self-awareness, which is in turn replaced by the image belonging to the male protagonist; in this way, according to Mulvey, the cinema contributes to the reproduction of the “male gaze”.

Mulvey argues that patriarchal society is divided between active/male and passive/female poles. In cinema, the image of the woman is there to be looked at, while the image of the man is there for the spectator (whether male or female) to identify with. According to Mulvey (p. 493), Hollywood cinema produces a series of interdependent looks: that of the spectator, the camera, and the male protagonist. It is for the benefit of this third look (the male protagonist), that the other two are obscured, thus producing the “male gaze”.

If I insist on Mulvey’s theses, it is first of all because she largely contributed to the advancement of the first phase of a Lacanian theory of cinema, dealing mainly with critical questions around ideological interpellation and the formation of the subject in cinema. The concept of “male gaze” has held an important place in the debates concerning theories of ideology and subjectivity which have taken place in cinema and cultural studies. In this framework, a certain number of Lacanian concepts have found a suitable field of application. Another reason I am particularly interested in Mulvey comes from the fact that she was the first to attempt to theorize sexual difference in cinema, drawing inspiration from Lacan. However, I must clarify that Mulvey comes to the right conclusion, but for the wrong reasons; this is to say that popular cinema is indeed in large part phallogentric, but this is not because of the medium itself as much as it is due of the general persistence of phallogentricity throughout culture. Another point to underline about Mulvey’s article, whose thinking is influenced by an allegiance to “screen theory” and to forms of Brechtian distancing, concerns her proposition that the contestation of the phallogentricity of popular cinema requires the production of an alternative, avant-garde cinema capable of challenging the spectators against the dominant

³ We should also add Christian Metz’s concept of the “imaginary signifier” (1977).

ideology (phallogentrism in this case). I maintain on the contrary that the cinema is incapable of inducing new forms of consciousness and subjective positions by itself which would be likely to indict the status quo: the theoretical and analytical interpretation of cinema remains the only viable and practical method to challenge ideological representations and to produce configurations and alternative forms of subjectivity. It is in the labor of theory—especially Lacanian and Marxist theory, that I focus on here—and not in the position of the spectator that one can challenge ideology. Nevertheless, there are some films which help in the practice of a general analysis of ideology, and which can point us in the direction of an emancipatory politics. Finally, the last point that I want to underline about Mulvey’s article is that if her goal is to contest the phallogentric representation of women, as well as phallogentric ways of looking, her approach doesn’t really take into account the Lacanian theory of the sexual relation and his logics of sexuation; on the contrary, like many of her contemporaries, Mulvey ends up operating, in the words of Joan Copjec (1989, p. 31), “a sort of ‘Foucauldianization’ of Lacanian theory”. Much has already been discussed about the misinterpretation of the Lacanian theory of the gaze; just as numerous contemporary Lacanians have noted,⁴ the first Lacanian thinkers of cinema (based on the “mirror stage”) simply developed a variation of Foucault’s theory of “panopticism”. Despite this, it is necessary to return to Mulvey’s critique of phallogentrism in cinema by revisiting the Lacanian formulae of sexuation.

In what follows, I want to develop some of the ideas formulated by neo-Lacanian film theorists—in particular Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek and Fabio Vighi—on the question of the sexual relation. Building on the Lacanian thesis according to which “there is no sexual relation”, I will show that film, if it proves incapable of representing the sexual relation, is nevertheless capable of indicating and visually representing the “non-relation” between the masculine and the feminine, as defined by Lacan (1975) in *Encore*. I will conclude my argument with an analysis of the film *Y tu mamá también* (2001) by Alfonso Cuarón, in which two important scenes perfectly illustrate the fact that, although it is impossible to represent “sexual difference”, it is nevertheless possible to represent the “non-relation”. By approaching this non-relation, we can think more generally about the political cracks and the existing gaps in the dominant ideology, which can make the cinema a weapon against domination and exploitation.

***The Formulae of Sexuation: the Sexual Relation and the Limits of Meaning*⁵**

There are two important moments in the trajectory of Lacan’s seminar where he develops his theory of sexual difference. The first is found in his seminar from 1959-1960, on the ethics of psychoanalysis, where Lacan (1986) deals with the portrayal of the Lady in courtly love. In this context, “the woman” represents the aspect of masculine desire that escapes the subject; she represents the idealization specific to masculine desire; one therefore does not seek her for one of her positive aspects, but for what she represents as the lure of desire. The Woman in courtly love illustrates the way in which the (masculine) subject erects obstacles that bar access to the object itself. The subject creates the object (or, at least, he is responsible for its creation) and—without knowing it—discovers ways to avoid getting the object that he desires [*la réalisation de l’objet*]. As Lacan says (1975, p. 65) in *Encore*, his seminar from 1972-1973, courtly love, “is one very sophisticated way to make up for the absence of the sexual relation, by pretending that we are the ones who erect an obstacle”. The subject, in other words, “posits the presuppositions” of his own desire. According to Slavoj Žižek (1994, p. 94):

⁴ See for example Copjec (1989) and McGowan (2007).

⁵ For a political reading of the Lacanian logic of sexuation, see Flisfeder (2012a).

The point...is not simply that we set up additional conventional hindrances in order to heighten the value of the object: external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible—what such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of attaining the object.

The “Woman” is created (in this situation) by man, as something that escapes him and which, therefore, simulates the fact that without “external” obstacles, she would be “accessible”. But, according to Lacan, the “sexual relation” doesn’t exist; obstacles preventing the full realization of the object are erected only to prohibit the awareness that, without them, the object would itself cease to exist. Here, the Woman represents the “sublime object”: the object elevated to the dignity of the Thing [*le Chose*].⁶ As Fabio Vighi (2009, p. 18) explains, sublimation functions on the basis of an internalized instance of prohibition which replaces the impossibility of sexual intercourse “as if by magic”.

The second important moment in the development of Lacan’s theory of the “sexual relation” occurs in *Encore*, where, according to Copjec (2002, p. 5) Lacan suggests that he will be rewriting his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. It is in *Encore* that Lacan (1975) gives us his “formulae of sexuation”, where he establishes a distinction between the masculine logic of the “all” and the feminine logic of the non-all. As Copjec explains, Lacan rethinks his ethics from the point of view according to which being is “non-all”, the woman occupying the position of the non-all, given that she is not at the place of phallic *jouissance*. The non-all of being is concealed from man, who perceives being—in its totality—as a *fait accompli*, because of his belief in a complete being who remains yet to come (like the realization of the object). It is the man’s submission to the threat of castration that posits his existence as both limited and as a closed whole. Thus, Copjec (2002, p. 6) argues that, for Lacan, the ethical act is in itself feminine, regardless of fact of whether it is performed by a man or a woman; when it comes to acting ethically, the act, which itself indicates that being is non-all, is feminine.

Distancing herself from post-structuralist conceptions of the social construction of sex, in particular Judith Butler’s thesis, Copjec (1994, pp. 18-19) explains that sex is the stumbling block of sense which is produced by the internal limit, even the failure, of signification:

⁶ Translator’s note: although Lacan employs “das Ding” and “le chose” interchangeably in Seminar VII when referring to the German “die Sache” and “das Ding”, the latter “Ding” is to be differentiated from the former insofar as, for Lacan, “die Sache” refers to a representation of a thing, whereas “das Ding” refers to the unrepresentable Thing in its “dumb reality”, outside or “beyond-of-the-signified” It is important to note that the although the Thing (das Ding) is unrepresentable, this unrepresentability is itself representable in the symbolic. (Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 54-55).

Sex is the stumbling-block of sense. This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification. It is only there where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning—that sex comes to be [English in original].

The subject positions of “masculine” and “feminine” fill in or compensate for this limit; this is to say that there is no subject who does not occupy either the “masculine” position or “feminine” position, regardless of biological sex. What matters, rather, is that the position occupied by the subject determines their relation to *jouissance*, mediated by fantasy. The masculine and the feminine are two opposing ways to deal with the limitation of signification. Or, to use Lacanian terminology, the masculine and the feminine are two opposing ways of dealing with the limitation of signification traced by the Real.

Copjec has shown how the opposition between masculine and feminine developed in the Lacanian formulae of sexualisation can be compared to the Kantian mathematical and dynamical antinomies. The mathematical antinomy concerns real phenomena, but which are beyond the limits of everyday experience, whereas the dynamical antinomy applies to objects, which are not part of phenomenal reality, but which nonetheless fall within the realm of everyday experience, making phenomenal experience possible. The mathematical antinomy, according to Copjec, relates to the feminine, while the dynamical relates to the masculine. In the case of the mathematical, (for example, the universe is finite/the universe is infinite), the thesis and the antithesis are both false, because it is impossible to perceive an object which is both finite and infinite (the universe in its entirety can never be an object of our experience). In the case of the dynamical, the thesis and antithesis are true, because they are both based on the experience of an object that is part of our daily life, even if it does not exist in reality. Copjec and Žižek suggest that the distribution between the dynamical and mathematical antinomies correspond to Lacan’s logic of sexualisation (see Figure 1).

The four formulae can be read in the following manner: on the left, “masculine” side (all x ’s are Φx ; there is at least one x which is not Φx), the universal function implies the existence of an exception ($\exists x -\Phi x$), embodied by the figure of the castrating father; on the right, “feminine” side (not all x ’s are Φx ; there is no x that is not Φx), the negative function of the particular ($-\exists x -\Phi x$) implies that there are no exceptions. The masculine subject, on the one hand, is castrated, and therefore indicates a completed whole restricted by its limit; masculine universality is limited. The feminine subject, on the other hand, is “non-all”, and therefore, feminine universality is infinite and unlimited. The masculine logic concerns the dynamic antinomy (both statements are true), while the feminine logic concerns mathematical antinomy (both statements are false). The problem with sexual difference, argues Copjec, is that—just as the universe in Kant’s mathematical antinomy—it can never be made the object of immediate experience. Sexual difference is consequently “real” in the Lacanian sense. The feminine logic of the non-all is therefore similar to the problem of sexual difference. As a logic that operates on the side of the mathematical antinomy, the feminine subject position is closer than the

masculine position to the object which represents the real of sexual difference— or, at least, the feminine subject is analogous to the awareness of the limit around which the phallic symbolic order is constituted. The two sides—“masculine” and “feminine”—maintain a relationship with castration; but the feminine position, because it is unlimited, identifies more easily with the symbolic order, without limitation. The masculine position, on the contrary, finds pleasure in the pursuit of an object that continues to escape him.⁷ Based on this reading of Copjec, Žižek (1993, p. 59) adds that the antinomic formulas of sexualization of the “masculine” and the “feminine” are representative of the two ways in which Lacan rethinks the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. Initially, in his 1963-1964 seminar, Lacan (1973) breaks down the “I think, therefore I am” into its two moments—being and thought—maintaining that the subject is condemned to choose thought to the detriment of being, the price paid, therefore, is the loss of being. But later, in his unpublished seminar on the logic of fantasy (1966- 1967), Lacan affirms to the contrary that the subject is condemned to choose being, relegating thought to the position of the unconscious. Žižek (1993, p. 61-62), however, argues that this is not Lacan’s correction of an error he allegedly made, but rather two ways of conceiving the cogito in relation to the logic of the “masculine” and the “feminine”: the “masculine” logic, according to Žižek, chooses being, while the “feminine logic chooses thought. In the masculine logic, thought is relegated to the unconscious, while in “feminine” logic the choice of thought results in the loss of being. This explains the Lacanian thesis that “woman does not exist”. The ethical position of “woman” risks being by prioritizing thought; this is the reason why, for Lacan, the subject, in its purest form, is a feminine subject. The woman is the (ethical) subject *par excellence*.

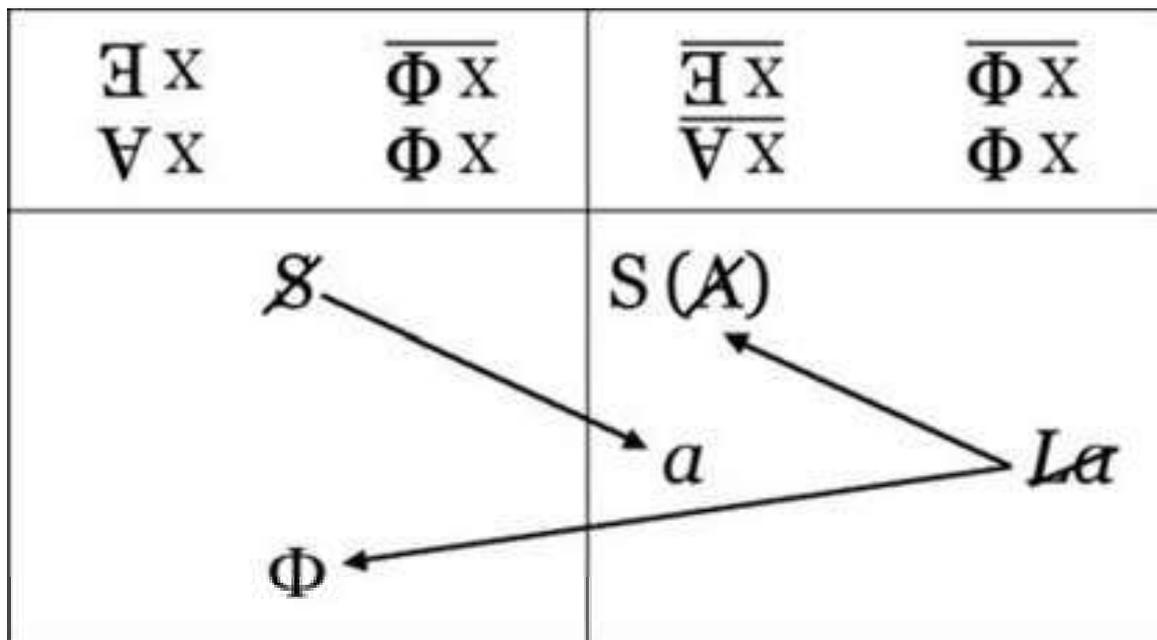


Figure 1. The formulae of sexualization.

⁷ According to Todd McGowan (2011, p. 119), “Female subjectivity is ‘female’ because it does not orient itself in relation to [the] phallic signifier but in relation to the absence of this signifier. As a result, the structure of female subjectivity is inherently political because it is attuned to the incomplete nature of the signifying structure”.

“Masculine” Cinema: the Cinema of Desire⁸

To my knowledge, in recent years, it is Fabio Vighi who has contributed the most to the advancement of Lacanian analysis of sexual difference in cinema, and much of what follows is based on his book *Sexual Difference in European Cinema: The Curse of Enjoyment* (2009). I will examine here the aesthetic effect of the formulae of sexual difference—or, more precisely, the effect of the interpretation of the formulae of sexual difference on the aesthetic representation of the sexual relation—and I show how the non-relation of sexual difference can be read in *Y tu mamá también*, as well as in other films.

“Masculine” cinema, as I understand it here, can be defined as a “cinema of desire”, in the sense that, as we have seen above, the masculine logic follows the path of an ethics of desire in courtly love; the masculine logic sublimates “woman”, functioning by means of an internalized obstacle, which replaces the impossibility of the (sexual) object. According to Vighi (2009, p. 20), the three female characters in *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1959) represent three different sublimations of the woman from the Lacanian concept of courtly love: Maddalena represents the woman in the guise of a prostitute, Emma, the faithful and maternal woman (the opposite of the clichés of Maddalena’s character), while Sylvia corresponds to a modern version of the Lady of courtly love. All three are elusive figures. It is here that we find the central characteristic of male *jouissance*: the paradox of pleasure increased tenfold by the absence of the object.

Two supplementary examples cited by Vighi deserve our attention as well: *Jules et Jim* (1962), by François Truffaut, and *Brief Encounter* (1945), by David Lean. These two films illustrate other important aspects of masculine *jouissance* regarding the absence of the object. *Jules et Jim* is generally considered to be a film that tells a nonconformist love story; but, for Vighi, the film tackles the theme of the couple’s inability to achieve full autonomy. The traumatic implication results from the fact that $1 + 1 = 3$. We have, of course, the two lovers ($1 + 1$), but the excess of *objet a* comes in between: $1 + 1 + a$. The relationship is achieved with the additional support of the fantasy. The film, then, is not simply about a bad romantic relationship, but rather about the fact that in every couple there is always a missing third—a third object that potentially assumes the posture of the imaginary “gaze”. *Jules et Jim* tells the story of two friends who “share” a woman, but who nevertheless remain friends because the woman plays the role of the missing third: she represents the fantasy realized. It is this third which is essential for the proper functioning of the couple (Vighi 2009, p. 31). Woody Allen’s film, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), also deals with missing third in every couple. The love between Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem) and Maria Elena (Penelope Cruz) can only work as a threesome. The relationship between Juan Antonio and Maria Elena was violent and catastrophic; their love required the materialization of the missing third, Cristina, to be able to function smoothly. *Brief Encounter* presents the reverse side of *Jules and Jim* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. Here we have an ideal couple, but who disavows their own presupposition. The condition of possibility for the relationship between Alec and Laura rests on the obstacle that prevents their illicit love affair (Vighi 2009, p. 145). Rather, it is the fantasy of their affair that allows them to avoid the real of *jouissance*. Their love affair does not take place in reality, according to Vighi, not in order to preserve the institution of marriage, but rather to preserve the pleasure accumulated by the fantasy that unites the two protagonists. The love affair between Alec and Laura is linked to the impossibility of the sexual relation, which is exteriorized as the object of the fantasy—*objet a*. Vighi’s examples,

⁸ The following is based on arguments presented in Flisfeder 2012b.

therefore, represent the “masculine” side of the formulas of sexualization, and the “masculine” logic of desire, as one of ceaseless desire.

Another example is without a doubt necessary here. The film *Chloe* (2009) by Atom Egoyan presents the ideological function of masculine *jouissance* in the same way, although it stages a sexual relationship between two women. In the film, Catherine (Julianne Moore) suspects that her husband, David (Liam Neeson), a university professor, is having an affair with a student. In order to verify if her suspicions are justified, Catherine hires an escort, Chloe (Amanda Seyfried), to seduce David. Chloe reports to Catherine that David did indeed have a relationship with her. She tells the details to Catherine who, in the following days, continues to fantasize about the affair between her husband and Chloe. Ultimately, it is Catherine who finds herself turned on by the fantasy and begins a romantic affair with Chloe. We later find out that Chloe and David’s relationship never happened; but the mere assumption of this relationship still arouses Catherine’s desire. Catherine’s fantasy thus follows the masculine logic of sublimation in courtly love, where an internalized obstacle (the presumed connection of David with Chloe) replaces the impossibility of the sexual object (the love relation which is impossible between Catherine and David).

The Cinematographic Non-Rapport: Y tu mamá también

In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek (2012, p. 796) discusses the change in the reading of sexual difference that Lacan makes by going from “there is no sexual relation” to “there is a (sexual) non-relation”, and specifies that this new positive formulation of the absence of relation means that the masculine and the feminine should not be conceived only as desynchronized entities, but that the sexual difference precedes the two sexes, so that the masculine and feminine subjects appear (logically) after the fact, in reaction to the impasse of the difference they try to resolve or symbolize, this impasse materializing in the pseudo-object called *objet a*. There is, therefore, a non-relation between the masculine and feminine positions, mediated by the relation of each subject to *objet a*—that is, the actual excess of the sexual relation. This model will serve as a starting point for thinking about the politics of the film *Y tu mamá también*.

The strength of *Y tu mamá también* resides in its illustration of the contrasting representations of the masculine and feminine logics, an illustration that cinematically portrays the sexual non-relation. The film features the object of masculine desire, embodied by Luisa, who on the one hand represents the elusive figure of woman in courtly love—insofar as she is seen by Julio and Tenoch as the object of their impossible desire—, but who is also, and on the other hand, the figure of their common fantasy—which is presented at the end of the film in a particularly important scene where the protagonists engage in a threesome; once again, we are confronted by the formula “ $1 + 1 = 3$ ”, which manifests itself as Luisa moves down, out of the frame, presumably to perform fellatio on the two boys, who then begin to kiss (see Figure 2).

The value of this scene lies in the concretization—as Luisa leaves the frame—of the structuring role of the fantasy in the relationship between Julio and Tenoch. The two boys’ common fantasy about a woman suggests that there is no homosexual drive behind their carnal relationship, which is still “heterosexual” at the level of the fantasy, like that of Catherine with Chloe in Egoyan’s film; they are not attracted to each other, but they are both turned on by their fantasy of Luisa; their “platonic” friendship is thus structured around the fantasy of an absent third party. This scene is also provocative because of the way it subverts straight male camaraderie, such as the machismo and chauvinism that characterizes the boys at the start of the film. By exposing their shared fantasy, Luisa disrupts the friendship between Julio and

Tenoch; by bringing to the surface their fantasy, as well as the homosexual core of their friendship, she returns the excess of the real to its place in the symbolic.



Figure 2. The threesome at the end of *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001).

Earlier in the film, the narrator makes a remark on Julio and Tenoch's class differences. Julio comes from a lower-class, left wing family; his sister is an activist, although he himself is not very interested in politics. Tenoch comes from a bourgeois family; his father is a politician, and, throughout the film, Tenoch seems receptive to progressive political ideas. However, after a dispute over whether Tenoch was the first to have sex with Luisa, class positions—which were previously unimportant within their friendship—are revealed. It is only when it is possible to “share” (at least the fantasy of) Luisa that the impossibility of class relation is disavowed and made to appear possible and reconciled. Following the logic of the “feminine” without limitation, Luisa seems to identify without exception with the entirety of the symbolic order; it

is she who has the power to make the impossible come true. This aspect of feminine *jouissance* is introduced in an earlier scene.

Towards the middle of the film, Luisa talks on the phone with her husband, Jano. (Before leaving on the trip with Julio and Tenoch, Luisa has learned not only that Jano had had extra-marital affairs, but also that she has cancer). While talking with Jano in a phone booth, Luisa moans and cries so softly that neither Jano nor the two boys can hear the sadness in her voice. As the door leading to the phone booth is left open, we can see the reflection of Julio and Tenoch playing foosball a little further away: this generates an image of “Totality”, an image without exception or excess (figure 3). This image should be read as an objectification of Luisa’s relation to the completeness of the symbolic order, outside of the confines of castration. By later returning the Real to its place in the symbolic—through her own fantasy of the non-castrated Symbolic order embodied in the embrace between Julio and Tenoch—Luisa effectively disrupts the symbolic order, which makes her the most ethical character in the film. It is by directly realizing the repressed fantasy—even one that is still structurally heterosexual—of the homosexual core of their friendship that Luisa manages to disrupt the connection between Julio and Tenoch. It is their shared fantasy that is arguably too traumatic to confront directly. It is also the fantasy of the Woman which stands in for the impossibility of their class relation.



Figure 3. Luisa in the phone booth in the middle of *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001).

We must also keep in mind that this film is set against the background of political protests in Mexico City against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and globalization. The film is political, but only insofar as its political dimension remains strictly in the background. This dimension of the film only manifests itself through an “anamorphosis”, like the one Lacan speaks of in connection with Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533). In the foreground of the painting, near the bottom, is an elongated skull that is only visible from a certain angle; in order to see the image of the skull, one has to, as Žižek would say, “look away”. Žižek uses the notion of “anamorphosis” in his analysis of the film *Children of Men*⁹ (2006), also by Cuarón.

⁹ In a six-minute, supplemental video from the DVD edition of the film.

In this case too, politics occupies precisely the backstory. In the foreground of these two films is a depiction of the impossibility of the sexual relation—the relation between Julio et Tenoch from *Y tu mamá también*, and sexual reproduction in *Children of Men*¹⁰ —, this impossibility being put in parallel in the background with the impossibility of the class relation.

In Cuarón's films, the central antagonism of the sexual relationship is coupled with a socio-political antagonism; two gaps overlap, which show both where the symbolic order is constituted and where it can be overturned. These films, it seems to me, are in this sense exemplary of the radical sublime linked to the Lacanian dimension of feminine *jouissance*. It is a *jouissance* which is not phallic—in other words, a *jouissance* which is subject to the signifier, but which is not sustained by *objet a* or fantasy.

Toward a Politics of Cinema and the Sexual Relation

On more than one occasion Žižek (2006, p. 82; 2012, pp. 746- 747) has looked at the overlap between the Lacanian logic of sexuation and the Marxist hypothesis of the historicity of class struggle. For Lacan, the sexual relation does not exist [il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel]; for Marx, there is no such thing as a class relation [il n'y a pas de rapport de classes]. But the analogy goes beyond a simple illustration of Lacanian logic. Just as the real of sexual difference cannot be reduced to the post-structuralist conception of the social construction of identity, so too class struggle cannot be thought of as the product of the simple or mere construction of a class identity. According to Žižek, each “class identity”—that is to say, the actualization of a given class identity—shifts the core of class antagonism. Class struggle is “Real”, in the Lacanian sense, because it cannot be conceived of in terms of one identity or another, but instead should be understood as a state of material relations of exploitation.

Likewise, sexual difference cannot simply be reduced to a social construction of identity. In other words, identity is that which attempts—but fails—to take the form of subjectivity as well as that which is constituted by the relation of the excess of the subjective or social form: *objet a*. The real of class struggle and the real of sexual difference can, and probably should, be considered as the two faces of the Möbius band. If we start by following the path of sexual difference, we end up returning to the political terrain of class struggle.

It is here, I believe, that *Y tu mamá también* succeeds. The film plays with the spectator's desire, luring the spectator through the desire found in sexual fantasy, but it then evenly distributes sexual tension along the lines of the political class struggle; it makes the feminine logic of the non-all, of the unlimited, coincide with the subjective position of a subject exploited by capital.

Thus, we can conceive of a model that actually relates to the Lacanian theory of the sexual relation in order to think through and question the phallogocentric logic of the masculine. While going beyond the concept of “male gaze”, this model remains faithful to Mulvey's objective of using psychoanalysis as a political weapon in questioning phallogocentrism. However, more than the creation of an alternative, avant-garde cinema to challenge the interpellative processes of Hollywood cinema, theory itself is the best tool for deconstructing and reading the ideological components of cinema. Film can serve as an ally in this operation, at least stylistically, particularly a kind of cinema that attracts its audience not by producing a Brechtian rupture, but by provoking and manipulating the spectator's desire. It is in this way that Cuarón's film,

¹⁰ I have to emphasize that this impossibility is not of the same order in the two films: in the case of *Children of Men*, the impossibility is radically real, while in the case of *Y tu mamá también*, it is contingent and metaphorical.

allied with newer and more recent readings of Lacanian theory, shows that the politics of cinema must be integrated into the project of the theory rather than the reverse.

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