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Fantasy and Showing Too Much

THE SUBJECT CANNOT directly apprehend the gaze. It is a lost object that the subject never had, which means that there is nothing for the subject to recover. Because the loss of this object is at once the moment of its emergence, desire can never achieve satisfaction by obtaining this lost object. When one obtains any object that appears to promise the satisfaction of desire, one inevitably discovers that “that’s not it.” Or, to put it in other terms, the moment when the subject would see the gaze directly would be the moment when the gaze would cease to be the gaze. Consequently, the subject can take up a stable relationship to the world of objects but not to the gaze qua objet petit a. It doesn’t exist within the represented world through which the subject finds its bearings. Fantasy, however, offers the subject a way out of this dilemma.

We often think of fantasy as a particular artistic genre that includes literary works such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or films such as Peter Jackson’s adaptation of Tolkien’s trilogy. What defines fantasy in this sense of the term is the depiction of a magical world in which the limitations of our physical universe no longer hold. The psychoanalytic conception of fantasy bears some resemblance to this generic definition, though it is significantly broader.¹ For psychoanalysis, fantasy is an imaginary scenario that fills in the gaps within ideology. In other words, it serves as a way for the individual subject to imagine a path out of the dissatisfaction produced by the demands of social existence. The act of fantasizing takes myriad forms: from a simple day-dream to works of art to entire belief systems. By distorting social reality through an imaginative act, fantasy creates an opening to the impossible object and thereby allows the subject to glimpse an otherwise inaccessible enjoyment. Works of art translate private fantasies into public ones, which provide an imaginary response to shared forms of dissatisfaction and thus

have an appeal beyond the individuals who generate them. If we understand fantasy like this, every film is a fantasy insofar as it distorts the social reality from which it emerges and translates a private imagining into a public spectacle. Even the realist film has a fantasmatic dimension: the very representation of reality mediates that reality and moves it into another form. This formal gesture is the key to fantasy's importance.

Through its form, fantasy allows the subject to relate to the lost object as an object that is simply out of reach. In fantasy, a spatial or temporal barrier, rather than an ontological one, intervenes between the subject and the lost object. Though the subject still may not obtain the object in the fantasy, the subject can imagine obtaining it as a possibility, even if not for the subject itself. Fantasy is above all the creation of possibility out of impossibility.

Fantasy works for the subject just as Giorgio Agamben sees the state of exception functioning for the juridical order. According to Agamben, the state of exception suspends the normal working of the juridical order and allows sovereign power to exercise itself directly on subjects without the mediation of law.² We can see this at work, for instance, in the status of the Guantanamo Bay detainees. They are neither criminals nor prisoners of war; they occupy an exceptional position where the rule of law does not apply. In order to place them in this position, sovereign power (specifically George W. Bush) had to declare a state of exception to the law. This state of exception carves out a position beyond the rule of law in the way that fantasy carves out a position beyond the constraints of ideology. Both the law and ideology rely on this exception to their functioning (the state of exception and fantasy) in order to function. In this beyond, one imagines the achievement of the impossible: direct justice in the case of the state of exception, or accessing the impossible object in the case of fantasy.

Like the state of exception in relation to the juridical order, fantasy is not secondary in relation to desire. Fantasy establishes the scenario and the coordinates through which the subject experiences itself as a desiring subject. Without fantasy, there would be no initial impetus for desire, and yet, paradoxically, fantasy compromises the subject's desire, providing a justification or a rationalization for the impossibility that it presents. In other words, despite its supplementary position in the psychic economy of the subject, fantasy has a phenomenological priority. This is evident nowhere as clearly as in the cinema. Even the film that tries most steadfastly to strip away the dimension of fantasy sustains it at a minimal level. In this sense, a cinema of fantasy is a mode of cinema that merely accentuates a direction that inheres in the medium as such.

The fantasmatic dimension of the cinema allows it to stage the impossible objet petit a in the form of the gaze. In the everyday experience of social reality, we do not see the way in which the gaze shapes (through distortion) the structure of that reality. Instead, we see a world constituted by a symbolic structure that renders it meaningful and seemingly complete. Despite this

symbolic structure, the gaze nonetheless appears continually in our experience. The gaze is the basis of visibility as such, which is why we take it (and its distortion of the visual field) for granted. We see, instead, a reality in which everything seems to fit.³

But the gaze is an object that does not fit, an object that cannot be reduced to the level of other objects. It protrudes as an excessive piece of reality that we cannot find anywhere within the reality. The gaze is a disturbance in the normal functioning of reality because it indicates that our social reality is not simply there as a neutral field. Instead, reality exists as something seen, something that we ourselves constitute through the act of seeing; in consequence, our seeing itself is included within our reality as the gaze. In this sense, the gaze as *objet petit a* is nothing but the way in which subjectivity necessarily stains the objective structure of social reality. There is no visibility at all except through our subjectivity, which distorts the field of the visible in the act of constituting it. We don't see, for instance, how our parents act like parents in relation to us as children rather than because their identity is defined by being parents. Or we don't see how the president has authority because we invest the position with authority, not because of any personal qualities. This stain that eludes our everyday experience becomes visible through film's ability to stage fantasy publicly.

The chapters that follow in part I will examine the attempt to create a cinema that renders the gaze visible through fantasy, a cinema that foregrounds the cinematic distortion of the field of the visible. Of course, no film can completely eliminate spectator desire as it constructs a fantasy, but the films I examine here evince little concern for producing desire. They focus on disturbing spectators with moments of too much satisfaction rather than reminding spectators of their dissatisfaction. We can see this effort commence even among early filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Charlie Chaplin. However, the main focus will be on the distinct turns that various movements within the history of film give to the fantasmatic depiction of the gaze. This analysis begins with Stanley Kubrick, moves to Spike Lee, to Michael Mann, and finally ends with Federico Fellini. The aim of this trajectory is to see how the development of a cinema of fantasy has the potential to transform spectators through what it allows them to see and experience. By rendering the excess of the gaze visible through fantasy, cinema makes us aware of the hidden enjoyment that silently informs our social reality. In doing so, it confronts spectators with the sources of their own enjoyment and deprives them of the illusion of a neutral social reality. This gives the cinema of fantasy its political, ethical, and existential power.

With Kubrick, filmic fantasy exposes in an extreme way the hidden enjoyment of symbolic authority itself—its libidinal underside, the fact that authority figures get off on the exercise of their power. Spectators see the absence of neutrality in the authority but not in themselves. Thus, though these films have a revelatory power, they tend to leave the spectator unscathed. The turn

to Lee's cinema shows how this hidden enjoyment is present not just in authority figures but in all subjects. It stains every social relation. But Mann adds another twist to our experience of excessive enjoyment depicted through fantasy: his films reveal that we must avoid the temptation to believe we can eliminate this excess. Excessive enjoyment is not just the source of oppression: it is also the foundation of our ethical being. By concluding with a look at Fellini's films, the limits of this way of relating to the gaze become apparent. By taking fantasy to its extreme, Fellini shows its stifling nature. The trajectory from Kubrick to Lee to Mann to Fellini traces the fantasmatic presentation of the gaze as it becomes increasingly complicated.

One of the fundamental impulses driving cinema is that of visibility—rendering the previously invisible (or unseen) visible, allowing spectators to see what they ordinarily do not see. Many theorists of film have identified this aspect of film as its salient feature. For instance, Joel Black contends that “one of film’s key effects has been to provide viewers with a kind of enhanced, X-ray vision that allows them to feel that they can penetrate the veil of superficial appearances and see the hidden structure of reality itself.”⁴ For Black, this sense of enhanced visibility represents the chief danger of the cinema and its link to our contemporary culture of immediacy and total exposure. Cinema threatens to render everything visible to a public (and publicizing) look. Black is certainly correct to stress that film creates a sense of enhanced vision, but he misplaces the accent of this enhancement (and thus overestimates the dangers of the cinematic experience). Contra Black, it is not that spectators feel that they can see “the hidden structure of reality itself,” but that they can see what is in reality more than reality—the excess of the gaze as *objet petit a* that accompanies our experience of reality but remains hidden in that experience. The promise of an encounter with the distortion that this excess produces is one of the main reasons that spectators go to the cinema, and it is the fantasmatic dimension of cinema that renders excess visible.

In the 1970s and 1980s, film theorists began to pay attention to the role of excess in cinema—all the ways that films go beyond what is necessary for producing meaning. Specifically, Roland Barthes, Stephen Heath, and Kristin Thompson emphasized the importance of acknowledging and theorizing excess, though none linked it directly to the gaze. Barthes labels filmic excess the “obtuse meaning,” a meaning that transcends both denotation and connotation. It is a meaning that resists meaning, a signifier without a signified.⁵ Obtuse meaning does not add to the narrative or to what the narrative communicates, but instead exceeds the narrative structure of a film. For these theoreticians of filmic excess, the excess is excessive in relation to the exigencies of narrative structure, and thus it limits our ability to read and interpret the filmic text. It indicates what our interpretation cannot include.⁶

It is at this point that the theoreticians of excess encounter a stumbling block: if excess remains irreducible to and blocks any effort at interpretation,

if “excess innately tends to elude analysis,” then the critical task becomes one of “pointing out” this excess rather than including it in an interpretation, as Thompson recognizes.⁷ This represents a danger for the interpreter of film who privileges excess. According to Thompson, “To discuss [excess] may be to invite the partial disintegration of a coherent reading.”⁸ This aspect of excess—its status as antithetical to interpretation—may be why the theoretical focus on excess never addressed its precise function in the cinema. Though theorists pointed out instances of excess in film, this critical act did not lead to a fully developed theory of filmic excess. Instead, theorists of excess used the concept primarily to discuss the limitations of narrative and of interpretation. Which is to say, excess has had almost exclusively a negative value in the history of film theory.

Despite the differences in their positions relative to excess, Barthes, Heath, and Thompson share the view that excess reveals narrative’s inability to become total, that it indicates the necessity of some element that will always escape narrative structure. In this sense, the act of pointing out excess is an act of subverting the dominance and unity of narrative. Here, the political dimension of excessive cinema (and of the critical act of noticing excess) stems from the relationship between narrative and ideology: to subvert narrative is to subvert the way in which the social order creates ideological justifications. However, the problem is that this vision of excess wrongly sees it as external to the narrative structure of film rather than internal to this structure.

Excess exceeds the filmic narrative from within; it is not an external barrier. It is nonsensical, but it is a point of nonsense (or non-sense) that exists within a structure of sense. Because they posit excess as the subversion of narrative, Barthes, Heath, and Thompson imply that excess occupies a transcendent position beyond filmic narrative. But if it were actually beyond the narrative, we would have no way of understanding excess at all: we would lack even the ability to point it out. The only properly conceivable excess is the point at which filmic narrative exceeds itself. This excess is the product of sense, not its external limit or subversion. To put it in Barthes’s language, the obtuse meaning is not a barrier to signification but the signification of a barrier. Even as the excess resists signification, it does so within a world of signification—or else we would not even be able to register it.⁹ This means that we can actually do much more with filmic excess than simply point it out.

If we understand excess as an internal excess, this does not mean that we render it meaningful (and thus deprive it of its excessive dimension).¹⁰ Excess remains the nonsensical point embodying enjoyment. But this does allow us to see how excess functions. We can observe how a film reveals excess to the spectator and where a film situates this excess. Excess becomes, according to this line of thought, a piece of nonsense that a film can deploy sensibly in order to reveal how excessive enjoyment itself functions for the subject and for society as a whole. Significance arises from the way in which cinema depicts excess, the use to which cinema puts it.

Cinema can depict this excess in many different ways, but it can never depict it directly, which is why Joel Black's fears about the link between the cinema and a culture of total exposure are unfounded. Total direct exposure is impossible, and one argues against it only to create the illusion that it is possible. If a film attempts to render the excess directly, the film completely misses it. The example of pornography illustrates this dilemma and reveals that despite the link made by numerous critics, pornography is not the ultimate truth of the cinema. As Linda Williams famously notes, pornography is a filmic genre of excess, specifically bodily excess.¹¹ And yet, because the porn film attempts to show the objet petit a directly, this object rarely becomes visible. Porn's directness—its direct approach to the object—hides the inaccessible dimension of the object, what is in the object more than the object, the source of its attractiveness. In this sense, porn is not excessive enough: it never shows enough precisely because it attempts to show everything.

The porn film aims at rendering visible the secrets and fantasies—the obscene enjoyment—that one never sees in everyday experience of social reality but that nonetheless lie hidden within that reality. But unlike the fantasmatic film, pornography assumes that the objet petit a (in the form of the gaze) is an actual object that one can see rather than a distortion in the fabric of the social reality that one must see in the process of distortion itself. Thus, this direct rendering of the objet petit a fails because there is no actual object that one might pin down and display. In fact, the oft-noted tedium of the porn film stems from its obfuscation of the objet petit a in the effort to expose it. Pornography fails because the gaze, the objet petit a in the field of the visible, is irreducible to the field of the visible itself. The films that actually enable us to recognize the gaze do so by making it visible as a distortion in this field.

Film depicts rather than eludes the excess of the gaze by producing it as a disturbance in our looking. We see the gaze in the filmic fantasy when a film makes evident an excess that haunts what it shows on the screen. This excess of the gaze can occur either on the level of content or form. In *Spectacular Passions*, Brett Farmer points out, "Moments of excess appear as a deviation from or a going beyond the motivations of dominant narrative demands either at the level of narrative content, such as certain scenes, shots, characters, or actions that have no apparent narrative function and bear little if any relation to dominant diegetic foci, or at the level of textual form, such as unconventional camera work, obtrusive editing styles, extravagant mise-en-scène, and the like."¹² The obtrusive aspects of the cinema reveal that the field of the visible is not a neutral field and that the gaze stains the seeming neutrality of this field.

Much of the appeal of cinema derives from its ability to depict the objet petit a in the form of the gaze. Many film lovers discover a way of relating to the gaze in the cinema that they cannot find anywhere else. According to Farmer, cinephilia—and he deals specifically with gay male cinephilia—

stems directly from cinema's fantasmatic rendering of this excess. The cinephile enjoys the fantasmatic dimension of the cinema. Farmer claims that the long history of gay cinephilia is not merely the result of gay men desiring male screen icons, but of gay men being drawn to the cinematic depiction of what exceeds the symbolically structured social reality.¹³ Cinema constantly shows us that there is something more in our social reality than we ordinarily experience, and in this sense, it offers, for the gay subject, the promise that there is something beyond normative heterosexuality, even within the social order as it is presently constituted. Cinephilia derives not from a thirst for a window into reality that the cinema offers, but from its window into what exceeds reality. It has its basis in the cinematic rendering of the gaze, an object that does not appear outside the filmic fantasy.

Cinephilia is an extreme response to the lure of filmic fantasies, but it nonetheless reveals something fundamental in the art of the cinema. Much of the political and existential importance of the cinema stems from its depiction of the gaze through a public staging of fantasy. Film has the ability to stage the gaze fantasmatically not because of its ability to penetrate into the essence of reality, but because of its very failure to do so—its capacity for distortion. By allowing the spectator to see and embrace this fantasmatic distortion, film can use fantasy to expose an enjoyment hidden by the power of ideology, and this is precisely what some of the earliest theorists of film celebrated in the discovery of this new artistic medium.