

## The Thought Specular: Kieslowski's *White* and Streitfeld's *Female Perversions*

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[H]ow many Didiers exist in suffering without even considering the possibility of the...representation of the malaise in which they lock themselves and those close to them...? [...] This is when the freedom and negativity proper to psychoanalytical representation may become mired in fetish. Is this the end of a civilization of questioning and freedom? Or its shift, its mutation?

-Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*

This essay points out counter-fetishistic moves within two quite distinct films that came out around the same time: Krzysztof Kieslowki's *White* (1994) and Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* (1996). My interest is in thinking - via film as theory - about and beyond fetishism. Fetishism is thriving, in particular at the movies, but some film itself militates against it, galvanising the theoretical debate and resisting the globalising tide of our spectacular, psychically diminished Western world.

This is where Kristeva's recent commentary on cinema enters the picture. In a chapter of *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, titled 'Fantasy and Cinema,' Kristeva treats film as fantasy that 'prompts us to take seriously this other reality - psychical reality' (2002, 65). To Kristeva, fantasy 'distortedly admits the subject's desire' (2002, 65). Allies of psychoanalysis, literature and art - especially film - open the verbal path to the construction of fantasies and prepare the terrain for psychoanalytical interpretation' (2002, 68). Hence they acquire the capacity

to dissolve fetishism through a negotiation with the drive that can result in the restoration and promotion of desire. But not all images that carry fantasy are, in Kristeva's estimation, beneficial. Today we 'inhabit a veritable paradise of fantasy . . . thanks to images in the media'; yet this saturation is the very opposite of liberating, as popular images tend to have the power to deprive us of our own 'imaginary scenarios' (2002, 67). Such an 'impoverishment of fantasies' Kristeva worries might even 'abolish inner depth itself.' However, even as most cinema reduces the viewer to a 'passive consumer,' pulverising fantasy, substituting its own brash images and thus shrinking our psyches - 'It is not a time of great works' (2002, 13) - Kristeva makes a special case for 'an other cinema,' a cinematic genre she labels 'the thought specular' (2002, 69). Kristeva champions cinema that 'explores the specular,' e.g., Eisenstein, Godard, Bresson, Hitchcock, Pasolini (2002, 73), that seizes us at the point of fascination, at the site of the (Lacanian) gaze. The 'thought specular' both designates and denounces fantasy: it lures the spectator to locate his/her fantasies and then to empty them out. It puts into play Freud's primary processes, Kristeva's semiotic, a 'primary seizure of drives always in excess in relation to the represented and the signified' (2002, 74). The thought specular thinks the specular in a way that is itself specular; but even as such ethical cinema, as Kristeva regards it, employs the visual/fantasy, it is protected from it as it demonstrates its fetishistic logic. Kristeva's ethical cinema displays evil - evil being a non-symbolised death drive - at first taking us for a ride but ultimately 'mak[ing] us keep our distance' (2002, 79). Such cinema is even the 'privileged place of sadomasochistic fantasy, so that fear and its seduction explode in laughter and distance' (2002, 80). Kristeva seems to think that it is cinema's choice: whether to indulge in sadomasochism, to authorise perversion, to banalise evil or to demystify fetishistic fixations.

To demystify is precisely what the two contemporary films - *White* and *Female Perversions* - analysed here seek to do, as they loosen and undermine various forms of debilitating fetishisms. The emergence of the thought specular especially in non-avant-garde cinema is a striking phenomenon, an

intriguing ethical (in Kristeva's sense of giving expression to the death drive), theoretical and psychoanalytic turn. In the form of obsessional neurosis and capitalism (Kieslowski) and the objectification of women as Daddy's girls as well as erotic objects (Streitfeld), fetishism is unveiled, avowed, disclosed to be psychic poison - what Kristeva calls a new malady of the soul.

Here we have, then, more or less mainstream film working against the kind of cinema that Kristeva finds pernicious, i.e., that sustains the fetishist's inability to face the negativity that indicates his or her mortality and that (were it to be encountered) would facilitate desire. Here we observe film that undoes resistance to the negativity or 'the nothing,' in Heideggerian terms, without which there can be 'no selfhood' or 'freedom.' Kristeva's psychoanalytic work is founded on the Heideggerian idea that 'For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs' (Heidegger 1929, 103-104).

### *Whiting Out Fetishism*

Krzysztof Kieslowski's *White* (1994), the second or middle film of his exquisite *Three Colours* (*Blue*, *White* and *Red*) trilogy, extends into the 1990s the anti-fetishism protest of the 1970s when feminists, Marxists and theorists of modernist aesthetics challenged what they took to be an illusory Hollywood cinema.<sup>1</sup> *White* focuses on a Polish hairdresser, now working in Paris, who has a gorgeous wife, Dominique, who divorces him for his

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, in *Fetishism and Curiosity*, lays out the terms of this protest; "Anti-fetishism, like a portmanteau, linked together different strands of the debates which aimed to exorcise: the cinema's conventional investment in willing suspension of disbelief and denial of its own materiality; the psychic process of defense against a (mis)perception of the female body as castrated; femininity fragmented and then reconstructed in image into a surface of perfect sheen; the erasure of labour processes in the society of the spectacle; the glamour of Hollywood cinema in which fascination with the erotic erases the machinery of cinema and filmic processes. . . . The influence of Brecht met psychoanalysis, modernist semiotics and Althusserian Marxism. In both theory and practice during this period, there was an aspiration towards the defetishisation of the film medium" (Mulvey, 1996, 9).

inability to ‘consummate the marriage.’ Karol loses all of his earthly possessions and is in effect driven out of France by his estranged wife. The film critiques fetishism both at the level of its personal narrative as well as economically: i.e., in terms of post-Communist Poland’s new capitalist national identity, that is, in terms of commodity fetishism. Exemplifying Kristeva’s thought specular insofar as it plays out Karol’s fantasy only to reveal its destructiveness, *White* weaves psychoanalytic fetishism together with commodity fetishism in an ironic condemnation of both.

Kieslowski’s *White* exposes its protagonist’s fetishistic resistance to marital desire leading to consummation in a way that accords with the film’s critique of post-Communism in Poland. *White* implicitly argues for a gap that would enable the co-existence, rather than the conflation, of the Symbolic and the Real - against the threat of capitalist, postmodern instant gratification that reduces if not collapses the distance between desire and its object. The hero’s avoidance of consummation with a woman he finds ravishing chimes with his later devotion to capitalism insofar as both are means of dodging the aporia in the system. As part of its effort to liquidate fetishism, *White* unveils such a phobia: fear of an ‘encounter with the negative, body and soul’ (Kristeva 2002, 145), a resistance to ‘symbolic castration,’ to put it in Kristeva’s terms. Such an encounter depends on negation and is impregnated ‘with separation and frustration, freighted with oral, anal, and penile losses.’ At the same time, it serves as an invaluable cut that would ‘benevolently [generate] the capacity of thinking itself’ and open the door to ‘indefinite questioning’ (2002, 146-47).

Although Karol seems to have achieved climactic sexual intercourse with his wife prior to their marriage, upon being married he becomes impotent and consequently, shocked, finds himself in divorce court. A hairdresser - a possible clue to his fetishistic psychic composition?<sup>2</sup> - Karol steals a delicate bust that resembles, and for a long while displaces, the

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<sup>2</sup> In “Fetishism,” Freud discusses the *coupeur de nattes* who reaps pleasure from cutting off women’s hair to illustrate the fetishist’s divided attitude toward women’s castration: he is compelled “to carry out” the very castration he disavows (Freud, 1927, p. 157).

beautiful wife he fails to keep: upon transporting to Poland this figure of a pale young woman in a lacey bonnet, Karol bends to kiss his new fetish object. An obsessional with the obsessional's typical 'impossible desire' that precludes satisfaction due to the terror of an accompanying *aphanisis*, Karol seems better suited to capitalism than to marriage. In this economic system, everything is aggressively fungible. Gaps are put into play only immediately to be filled and reopened *ad infinitum* so that the gap never gains ontological consistency. (Reiterating this fear of openings, in *White*, as in *Blue*, a hunched-over elderly person pops a bottle into a green recycling bin, where it fails to fall through, plugging a hole.)

Capitalism is fetishistic insofar as the social relation among men is taken to be, as Marx writes in *Capital I*, 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1967, 77). As Slavoj Žižek elaborates in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 'The *value* of a certain commodity, which is effectively an insignia of a network of social relations between producers of diverse commodities, assumes the form of a quasi-"natural" property of another thing-commodity, money: we say that the value of a certain commodity is such-and-such amount of money' (1989, 23). Social relations are obscured - disavowed. An ideological fantasy structures, and gives consistency to, social reality: capitalists 'know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation,' but they persist in following it (Žižek, 1989, 33). Or, as Guy Debord puts it in *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relationships conceals their true character as relationships between human beings and between classes' (1995, 19).

A flaccid Karol refuses to consummate his marriage; consummation is anxiety producing. He avoids an encounter with a sumptuous yet angelic woman to circumvent his constitutive lack, engagement with which has the potential (as he is stuck unconsciously believing) to shatter his Imaginary sense of self - whereas in actuality such an encounter has the potential to open Karol up to absence. Instead, Karol plunges into the pursuit of capitalist profit, where excess is folded into the system, rather than

acknowledged. Again, as Žižek explains: ‘the labour force is a peculiar commodity, the use of which – labour itself – produces a certain surplus-value, and it is this surplus over the value of the labour force itself which is appropriated by the capitalist’ (1989, 22). Like capitalism, Karol is neurotically compelled to retain everything, refusing to conceive of Nothing. He demands from a public phone the release of two unused francs for the call he makes; he not only receives back the two-franc piece, but he also hangs on to it for most of the film.

*White* characterises Poland as a place where, Karol’s employee reminds him, ‘These days you can buy anything.’ ‘Anything’ includes even a corpse, the purchase of which epitomises the point that excess/whiteness/nothingness is re-consumed by the system as even dead bodies are recycled. Karol buys the nondescript body of a Russian man whose head is bashed in, so that he can stage his own death in an effort to bring Dominique to his funeral, allowing him to observe her response to his death and then to frame her for it. Driven to profit, Karol cannot bear to lose anything; totally retentive, he cannot face loss. Even at the end, when he arranges things to ignite desire between himself and Dominique, Karol places an ineradicable distance between himself and his former wife - now that she is incarcerated and he off to Hong Kong - in order to avoid any lasting vulnerability. If he reappears (recall that he had staged his own death, implicating Dominique in his demise), Karol rather than Dominique goes to jail; they can never again coalesce. Desire with its accompanying *jouissance* has been ruled out, as one of them must necessarily be behind bars. Dominique turns out to be such a horrifying threat to Karol’s obsessional psychic structure that he must cage her. Perhaps his plot is not so much to seek revenge as to ensure that she can no longer lure him into what he assumes would be psychic disintegration.

On the non-diegetic level as well, *White* exposes fetishism; exposure being an apt way to undermine it given that fetishism operates through disavowal. Kieslowski punctuates *White* with semiotic splashes of color, which often paint the entire frame, so that the film itself undergoes *aphanisis*, gracefully. *White* can afford to lose its identity *as diegesis*, can even be said

to flaunt its disbelief in its own reality. Unlike capitalism, Karol, and the obsessional spectator, *White* insists on the leftover. After Karol stumbles verbally in answering the judge's questions early on about his unconsummated marriage, a flashback appears of the moments directly after Karol and Dominique marry at the church. From Karol's point of view, we watch a swirl of whiteness emerge: a veiled and strikingly white Dominique in the eye of this psychic tornado. This flashback at this critical moment in the courtroom would seem to respond to the judge's question: was the marriage consummated? Whiteness, celebrated by the film, traumatises Karol and serves as a blankness into which unconsciously he feels he cannot afford to collapse: a haze, the Lacanian gaze, which the so-called, feminist 'male gaze' - actually the male look - avoids like the plague; *objet a*, the cause of his desire, 'something from which the subject,' as Lacan defines the *objet a* in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 'in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack' (Lacan, 1981, 103). It is at this very point of absence that thought-specular '[c]inema seizes us,' according to Kristeva, 'precisely. This is its magic' (2002, 73). It is through this gaze, in other words, that film has the potential to dislodge a fantasy from an object, to unearth the unsymbolised drives that, by remaining unsymbolised, cause the fundamental fantasy doggedly to persist.

The flashback scene, riveted on Dominique, seems to elide Karol, as though to represent his obsessional phobia of fading as a subject - or desubjectification. Karol sabotages himself maritally in a desperate attempt, carried out through his impotence, to preserve his fantasy of unbarred subjectivity. But the void avoided by Karol is offered up to the viewer, as though *White* is intent on spectatorial disruption.

One scene in particular (alluded to earlier as a potential encounter with lack) remains unmoored from the rest of the film, and unlike the recycling bin, unplugged. Toward the end Karol reveals to Dominique in her hotel room that he is, after all, still alive. Mutually impassioned, they make love. Finally, he can perform, melt together with her in orgasmic pleasure, now that a huge wall imminently divides them: he is 'dead' in society's eyes, and

soon she will be escorted off to prison. In this interstitial bubble, Karol can momentarily experience the *jouissance* of his desire with his former bride. Accompanied by Dominique's blissful moaning, the screen fades to pervasive white. But, while the film presents a state of borderlessness at this point, in a way that invites the viewer to revel in something cavernous, amorphous and profound beyond the diegesis, Karol seems to have met the paradoxical challenge of controlling even the very experience whose bliss derives from its breaking down of boundaries. It is as though Karol has subdued the gaze as part of his power game. Or, concentrating on Karol's loss here, we might view it as an instance of 'the obsessional [momentarily] running aground' on 'the *Zeitlos*' (unbound time), as Kristeva would put it, 'hoping to possess the unmeasurable by measuring it' (2002, 41).

*White* addresses the fetishist who, like Karol, desires only remote objects and struggles to release himself into the film especially at the moment of Dominique's *jouissance* as it is represented by the white nothingness on the screen. The film invites us to watch it in a non-fetishistic way by succumbing to the gaps - the white-outs - themselves. By demonstrating this psychic opportunity unseized by Karol, by building it technically into his film, Kieslowski subtly punctures the fetishism of the obsessional as well as the related commodity fetishism of capitalism, which is the very means by which Karol effects his grip on the gaze. In the end Karol in a sense buys Dominique's love; but he cannot have/enjoy it. He can only conquer it. He forgoes the intimacy that might have provided some respite from, and resistance to, the virtual capitalist world he seems instead at the end of the film to reenter. Beyond Karol, however, *White* itself yields a *jouissance* that, as Kristeva describes it, 'is not simply the narcissistic or egoistic caprice of man spoiled by consumer society' (where Karol wants to live) 'or the society of the spectacle. The *jouissance* at issue here . . . proves indispensable to keeping the psyche alive, indispensable to the faculty of representation and questioning that specifies the human being' (2002, 7-8). Polarising obsessional neurosis/capitalism, on one side, and negativity, on the other, *White* provides the space of intimacy that panics Karol.

*Feminist Fetishism*

In contemporary film the tendency to rupture the diegesis by featuring filmic technique, to exhibit rather than cover over or suture the filmic cut, has evolved into the curious phenomenon of ‘cutters’ (or self-harmers) popping up as central figures in film narratives. This outburst on the narrative level raises the question of its relation to the fetishistic history of film insofar as the female act of cutting might seem to respond to the male unwillingness to acknowledge a cut. In the latter (male fetishism, based on disavowal), we find an attempt at eliding an aporia; in the former (women cutting themselves) an attempt, at least as desperate, to effect a split. How does such physical splitting relate to the idea that, as Mary Ann Doane sums it up in ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,’ ‘[s]pectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body’ (Doane, 1999, 133)?

What I propose is that the recent outbreak of cinematic representations of cutting, of women cutting themselves, in contemporary film - as this act bears a paranomastic relation to the very cuts in film that disrupt the diegesis and hence break the spell of fetishism, opening up the wound/absence the film is actually predicated on - might be read, again within the genre of Kristeva’s ‘thought specular,’ as a response to the predominance of fetishism in the operations of filmmaking and viewing. Simply put: whereas a fetishist disavows a lack, a cutter does just the opposite - carves out a lack that she seems to be insisting must be avowed. Such cinematic cutting of the body might signal a mutation, in relation to the dominant fetishistic mode. It would seem to question the way that ‘the freedom and negativity proper to psychical representation [has] become mired in fetish’ (Kristeva 2002, 129), by opening up a gap to disturb fetishistic fixation.

Such an act, for one thing, tends to disarticulate male systems of viewing by rendering the film difficult to watch, to inject a disorienting dissonance, perhaps pressuring the viewer defensively to think, ‘Oh well, this

is just a film, not a woman actually slicing up her genitals,' thus bursting the filmic fetish standing in for the filmic void. Cutting isn't sexy. The reasons typically proffered for why women cut themselves - to feel *something* rather than numbness, the urge to be a subject, the desire to desire - are not disconnected from this reading of women's self-cutting as a challenge to fetishism. If fetishism objectifies women, then it might be instrumental in causing women to feel compelled to subjectify themselves, a process requiring the opening of a space, a lack, a site of desire, through behaviour that might itself be best characterised as perversion. If my hypothesis is valid then voyeurism, fetishism and sadism have produced a masochistic reaction.

However, if the reason women cut themselves were diagnosed according to three recent contemporary films that feature cutters - *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *Secretary* (2002) and *Thirteen* (2003) - it would appear that women resort to self-mutilation due to an overly intense, suffocating maternal bond, unbarred by a paternal metaphor. Cloying or controlling maternal love coupled with paternal absence or neglect that coexists with a lack of maternal desire, which in turn enjoins the mother unconsciously to take her daughter for the phallus that fulfills her, these films suggest, produces a daughter who engages in self-laceration. A daughter with roughly such a parental background might deploy a razor or knife as *her* phallus, to secure release from the Imaginary mOther prison. Such melancholic daughters, prisoners of 'the affect, of the archaic Thing, of primary inscriptions of affects and emotions' have in effect swallowed 'but not digested,' Kristeva explains, 'the mother-Thing' (2002, 24). Consequently, they need to disgorge the invading maternal object. They may use various methods to expel her, such as vomiting, giving birth, and, I am suggesting, cutting.

Ironically, such young women vulnerable to becoming the object of their mother's desire, or even *jouissance*, might in turn be enthralled by male fetishising, i.e., by being objects of the 'male gaze,' but only in an effort ultimately to slide out of the jaws of the all-consuming mOther, a psychic metonymy that can be observed in *The Piano Teacher*, *Secretary* and

*Thirteen*. The protagonists of these three films seem driven, to varying degrees, to objectify themselves in relation to someone else besides the mOther, in an attempt to achieve finally, subsequent to two phases of objectification, subjectification. Male fetishism here, in other words, is used by such heroines to escape the clutches of the suffocating mother.

Insofar as cutting moves the cutter toward subjectification, it demonstrates Kristeva's practice of employing perversion for therapeutic purposes. Kristeva holds a special place for perversion in psychoanalysis. She reads perversion in Proust, for example, as a way of seizing an 'enclosure of incommunicable pleasure' and of narrativising 'the (inevitably sadomasochistic) intrigues inherent in eroticism' (2002, 57). Perversion, that is, has the capacity to access the drives, the death drive, *jouissance* and (in Lacanian parlance) the Real. The 'therapy of the sensorial cave [ ] often needs a perverse object as a pseudo-object in order to traverse its autistic enclosure' (2002, 59). Deploying perversion for such purposes, a film enters the category of the 'thought specular.'<sup>3</sup> Rather than participating in sadomasochistic drives for their own sake, it exhibits them to think them through, by giving them, through the specular, self-conscious representation. By inscribing the drive, the specular enables it to morph into desire, transforming aggression into seduction. It is the specular - film - in particular, that has the capacity to do this, being at the point of 'departure of...signs, narcissistic identifications, and phantasmatic trances' (Kristeva 2002, 72).

Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* (1996) traces the self-mutilating daughter's over-identification with the mother to the father's brutalising of the mother. Here cutting serves as a solution by way of a family dynamic that exculpates both mother and daughter. *Female Perversions* presents a heroine whose ritual cutting seems to begin as the consequence of a childhood in which she meant, at a key moment of her father's violence

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<sup>3</sup> See my article "The Use of Perversion: *Secretary* or *The Piano Player*?" in *The Symptom* (issue #5, winter 2004), for an analysis of perversion put to such beneficial uses in these two films. Other relevant films are *In My Skin* and, less directly, Jane Campion's *In the Cut*.

toward her mother, to offer solace to her mother but instead somehow ended up succouring her father in an implied incestuous relation of some sort. In a scene late in the film, Eve slowly cuts her breast, methodically encircling her nipple in imitation of her mother's writing (in the distant past but now in Eve's present nightmarish daydream) similarly on her breast with a pen as part of the mother's effort to seduce Eve's father, who responds by pushing Eve's mother down. Eve evolves thereafter into a 'phallic woman' insofar as she dresses the part (short skirts, high heels, elegant lingerie, long hair, impeccable make up) and is professionally a high-powered lawyer on the elevated social road to a judgeship. It seems plausible that Eve turns into a phallic feminine object to succeed with her father (and father substitutes) where her mother failed. I find Eve's sister Madelyn's charge that Eve strives for the 'big Daddy dick' counter-intuitively compelling if it is translated into the notion that Eve wants to be the phallus for her father so that he can avoid anxiety over losing his. Eve (like Madelyn herself, in fact) wants to be the fetishistic object of her father's desire. In a clear rivalry, both sisters make repeated attempts to attract their father's attention by becoming the phallus that he can have. Demonstrating Kristeva's thought specular, this is the dominant fantasy that this film, as itself fantasy, engages in.

One might even read Eve as flaunting a certain excess of femininity, as wearing a compensatory mask of femininity, reflecting Joan Riviere's explication of masquerade in 'Womanliness as a Masquerade.' It is arguable that Eve exemplifies Riviere's thesis about the professional or intellectual woman having to 'make up' for seeming to pilfer the phallus by exaggerating her femininity, by flirting as a way of insisting that she 'is' the phallus (for them) rather than 'has' it (for herself). In fact, an uncanny continuum appears to emerge within *Female Perversions* starting from Eve's psychic trouble with her father, reflected specifically in her compulsion to fill his lack, to her phallic feminine image in her professional life. Just as the phallic feminine daughter, the Daddy's girl, comforts her father, the professional/intellectual phallic feminine woman serves as an anxiety-relieving fetish for her surrounding anxiety-ridden male colleagues.

Cooperating with the man's tendency to fetishise women, rather than posing a threat, such a woman is pleasing. This, I submit, is the most apparent feminist reading of the film, yet it is only the first phase of the many permutations that *Female Perversions* explores on the topic of femininity.

Eve may be read, then, as an exposé of 'normal female perversion' as this concept is laid out in Louise Kaplan's voluminous book *Female Perversions*. As Kaplan's 'pervert,' Eve adheres to patriarchal ideals of femininity, the very ideals that perhaps draw most male spectators to movies. The masquerade of femininity - which Mary Ann Doane reads as a sophisticated distancing of the woman from herself, as a disorienting way of keeping herself from being imaged as incapable of lack, from being objectified - may be seen à la Riviere and Kaplan as falling, after all, into the patriarchal trap of objectification. The woman in feminine masquerade - who to Doane challenges the concept of essential womanhood, where womanhood is defined as all body with no capacity for performance or rather performativity - might be perceived as the pusillanimous white doll of patriarchy, who possesses no power, lacks lack/desire and is constituted by perverse cultural behavioural norms. In a way Eve lends herself to this description. She expresses major doubts to her male superior about receiving the judgeship and is haunted throughout the film by hallucinatory voices that question and ridicule her professional ambitions. Such behaviour seems part pretence but also might insinuate that Eve has internalised and wrestles with the uneasiness that society bestows on women who excel in traditionally male arenas. 'Eve,' as Jean Walton put it in a conference paper in Vancouver, is perhaps 'an unconscious collaborator with the patriarchal system, apparently unaware of how her adherence to feminine phallicism has constrained her sexual and emotional life' (1999, 6).

Although Walton senses a link between what she calls an Oedipal, traumatic primal scene with Eve's father and Eve's 'bondage scenario [that] she constructs for herself to reach orgasm during sex,' and consequently interprets Streitfeld's film as complicating the social issue of femininity with what I would call a personal dimension, Walton for the most part stresses

that Eve is ‘hopelessly implicated in the social system that produces [her] as ‘feminine’ (1999, 6). The film can in turn be read as italicising in particular the ‘whiteness’ of female perversions, by including Latina women of colour who stare impassively at an Eve who initially is oblivious to them and eventually quite disturbed by these non-white women who seem to ‘see through her,’ to gaze at her - from the site of the Lacanian, not of course the male, gaze. One could interpret *Female Perversions* as admiring such Latina women over the pale, brittle, phallic, feminine collaborator, Eve. Indeed, Walton reads the racial others in *Female Perversions* as being transformed, through the mediation of Madelyn’s thesis, into the ‘terrifying matriarchal Earth Woman of [Eve’s] dreams,’ who equips Eve ‘to acknowledge the unconscious Oedipal determinants of her erotic fantasy life’ (1999, 10). The climactic result is that Eve can cut the ‘rope,’ imaged over and over in her nightmares, that knots together her psycho-sexual world. Read along these compelling lines, *Female Perversions* enacts Kristeva’s thought specular in setting up Eve’s fundamental fantasy of being a (her father’s) fetish, lets the spectator ride with it and in so doing lays it bare, subsequently representing its demise, through the heroine’s encounter with what she is not, an aporia that enters the film through the penetrating eyes of the Latina woman. Eve is thus granted the tools that allow her to cut herself free.

*Female Perversions* reinforces its critique of conventional femininity by including Ed, a thirteen-year-old girl who also mutilates herself in ways that can be analyzed from both cultural and psychoanalytic perspectives. Ed tends to cut herself in response to her mother’s (Emma’s) traditional romantic attachment to Rick so that it may be argued that Ed abuses herself because she feels slighted emotionally by her mother. Given her mother’s hopelessly sentimental aspirations, Ed’s self-mutilation can also be regarded as a radical act of protest against Kaplanesque ‘female perversions.’ In this reading, Ed’s cutting rebels against such romanticism, which causes Emma to metamorphose into a foolish feminine bauble and serves as an explicit representation of my thesis that women’s cutting undercuts men’s fetishism. (So even though the daughter’s cutting may commence in relation to the

mother, it can still function as a counter-fetishistic move.) Given that *Female Perversions* features such a character (who also hacks away at her short hair as part of her campaign to avoid becoming the object of the ‘male gaze’), the film might be said to deploy a *feminist* perversion that slices away at conventional feminine, actually masculine, fantasy. Emma aspires to be like the mannequins of her frilly dress shop. Ed’s cutting speaks to that dehumanisation by implying the necessity of women having a lack rather than hysterically being the object that fills his lack. Ed’s final act of carving the word ‘LOVE’ into her leg in a way epitomises this point of her resistance to the fetishistic relations between men and women. Innocent thirteen-year-old Ed believes in ‘LOVE.’ She fails to realise, however, as Lacan does, that, being ‘the desire to be One,’ love ‘leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between “them-two” . . . sexes’ (1998, 6), that love cannot be inscribed and that ‘love is impossible’ (1998, 87).

This impasse - Love as aporia - is where I think *Female Perversions* becomes especially shrewd, in particular through Ed’s aunt as she overlaps with Lacan who teaches that love is giving what you don not possess: the true cause of the other’s desire, *objet a*. I take Ed’s aunt’s didactic erotic dance to be the centrepiece of the film. Ironically in a way like Simone de Beauvoir or Cindy Sherman, she makes the critical point that femininity is supplementary to women: ‘you can learn to be feminine too,’ she instructs Ed. ‘It’s not something that comes to you naturally. You gotta work at it.’ The aunt had trained herself to be feminine and she advises Ed to practice every day and she’ll catch on. More specifically, a woman has to learn how to convince a man that she has what he desires. (‘It’s all about power,’ Ed’s aunt concludes.) She then proceeds, in fetishistic garb (lots of black, high heels, lingerie, even a veil she waves around), to show Ed how to dance to seduce a man: ‘You do this well, and any man will want you.’

But Ed’s vulgar aunt does not really mean ‘you’ in her statement that ‘any man will want you,’ since she tells Ed that ‘you gotta erase yourself.’ ‘You gotta become, like, generic.’ *Female Perversions*, I think, may ‘fail’ in this way - fail, that is, to be straightforwardly feminist. The aunt would seem

to teach Ed how to conform to a Kaplanesque perverse norm, about which the film is clearly self-conscious. Nevertheless, *Female Perversions* nowhere offers an attractive alternative. Can Emma's outburst that the problem with the women of Madelyn's dissertation is that they are fat and unattractive simply be dismissed? The grotesque, curvaceous Earth woman of Eve's dreams and daydreams who enables Eve to cut her rope is certainly no role model, nor is she (I think) meant to be. Even though Eve finally takes her sister's picture of a Mexican woman with iguanas curled on top of her head - a Mexican Medusa-figure, perhaps reminiscent of Cixous's famous essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' - *Female Perversions* offers no glimpse of Eve (as judge) incorporating such an image or a sense that she might relinquish 'femininity.'

I am, nonetheless, inclined to think that the film's take on 'femininity' leans toward Doane's understanding of the feminine masquerade rather than Riviere's. To Doane, the mask holds femininity at a distance; hence it can work against 'patriarchal positioning' or male fetishising by undermining the notion of woman or femininity as 'closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic' (1999, 138). Masquerade, in Doane's conception, produces a gap between a biological woman and her image, splitting or cutting the female subject in this way. Doane's feminist logic is that because of its instability, its destabilising of the image, the feminine masquerade confounds the 'masculine structure of the look' (1999, 139), shattering what feminists call 'the male gaze.' This, then, is the more complex 'advice' the film, operating paradigmatically as Kristeva's 'thought specular,' has to offer women on how to traverse the fundamental fantasy of serving as a phallic object.

It is not that I think Eve will set out as a judge to frighten rather than comfort men but that the film positions her at the end as a multi-dimensional subject whose 'femininity' has become conceptually sophisticated in part because of the film's own unwillingness to make up its mind, so to speak, about whether or not to value this concept. In the course of the film's equivocations - between presenting femininity as something to be avoided at

all costs, the product of a girl's sick relations with her parents as well as of patriarchal manipulation, and as attractive (who isn't 'enchanted by Tilda Swinton's brilliant and nuanced acting'? to quote Walton [1999, 2]) - femininity itself emerges as complicated.

Because *Female Perversions* does not quite resolve the issue of femininity but offers at least two positions – that femininity is a white perverse norm of patriarchy, and even that idea is made more intricate, as we have seen, by the personal dimension of the film, *and* that femininity is a clever mask, a role that women can learn in order to manipulate men's desire - the film ends up being a kind of (conceptual) fetish itself (I almost wrote 'ironically'). However, if we consider Doane's point that 'The female . . . must find it extremely difficult, if not impossible to assume the position of fetishist' as well as Doane's reference to the 'abolition of a distance' in women, their 'inability to fetishise' (1999, 137), we are inclined to congratulate Streitfeld for producing a film whose double take on femininity does just that. *Female Perversions* counters fetishism with (thought?) fetishism, insofar as it 'disavows' the femininity that is a strategic construction of patriarchy (in and beyond the family) and 'avows' femininity simultaneously by suggesting practically that women learn how to put it on as a costume, as well as even by preserving its actual appeal (refusing to offer an alternative). This threefold 'fetishistic' position on 'femininity' is sufficiently cracked open, however, so that nothingness holds a place in it. This 'fetish' flaunts its gaps. Femininity is not discarded; yet, multiplied, it is de-essentialised. This 'fetish' provides for negativity, the support of desire, and freedom.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A substantial engagement with feminist work on fetishism is beyond the scope of this paper; but it is important to mention *Space, Time, and Perversion* by Elizabeth Grosz, who rehearses the history of fetishism in psychoanalysis, explaining why it is considered a "uniquely male perversion" (1995, 9). Grosz seems to take a fetishistic position on the question of the relevance and validity of psychoanalysis in relation to feminism (one similar to the case I make in my analysis of *Female Perversions*). She recommends a "cultivated ambivalence" that "may provide the distance necessary to extract what may be of use in psychoanalysis" (1995, 154).

Given that Ed's aunt's lesson promotes a woman's adoption of the mask of femininity, as though she ought to assume it so long as men are built psychically the way they are - so long as the conditions of men's desire require the object (rather than the man) to be the signifier of castration - the film gives agency to women to don feminine clothing and accessories, to wear the mask, which idea of masquerade accords with Doane's sense of it as effecting a 'defamiliarisation of female iconography' (1999, 139). Thematically 'disavowing' femininity insofar as it is female (Kaplansque) perversion that patriarchy tricks women into thinking is natural and necessary, even as the film 'avows' 'femininity' as a politically useful mask, if not an attractive as well as enjoyable inhabitation - an actual experience - *Female Perversions* doubly, if not triply, cuts through the Daddy girl's fundamental fantasy that she is bound to be his feminine object of desire, for real. That is, she can be it for pleasure. To cede it entirely would only be another way of remaining tied (oppositionally) to the fantasy of pleasing Daddy. This is the brilliance of such a position.

Operating as part of Kristeva's notion of the thought specular, perversion here functions on behalf of psychic expansion. Eve's self-mutilation, her eventual cutting of the rope, Ed's cutting, and the aunt's figurative slicing of herself into, on the one hand, who she thinks she is and, on the other, the erotic object she deliberately becomes when she dances - all culminate in fetishistic splits that save women from being mere objects of the 'male gaze' or, perhaps worse, the non-entity that Emma would have collapsed into had Rick been slightly compassionate or more conventional and less obsessional. *Female Perversions* as fetish object ironically underscores the *cuts* at the heart of all fetishism and becomes in turn an anti-fetish fetish.

As instances of Kristeva's 'thought specular,' Kieslowski's *White* and Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* have the potential to absorb and transform the spectator's own malady of the soul, whether it be fetishism or the compulsion to be a fetish. Through such reflection - a way of drawing the

spectator's trauma into semiotic representation - these very distinctive films offer 'forgiveness,' that is, as Kristeva defines it, the transfiguration of the spectator's psychic distress into meaning, by transporting it from the crypt of the unconscious into the amber light of consciousness.

*Inscribing Thanatology in the Society of the Spectacle*

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord laments that man no longer knows his own desires, that he leads an inauthentic life with no real connection to time, language, or history and that he lacks a sense of 'moving toward self-realization' as well as toward death (1995, 115). 'Real life' has been negated and will remain negated until 'false consciousness,' along with 'a false consciousness of encounter,' is done away with (1995, 152). Sounding faintly psychoanalytic, Debord even suggests that the spectacle stages 'a false way out of a generalized autism' (1995, 153) and crushes 'living desire' (1995, 45). So long as the intimate is neglected, so long as intimate revolts fail to transpire, our state of generalised autism will remain solidly intact and desire will become an outmoded experience. As Kristeva insists, the 'unrepresentable sensations of the soul (the series of psychical representations of the unrepresentable, passing through . . . the primary processes, etc.)' (2002, 52) must be thought and named. It is not only the analyst but great (thoughtful) writers and filmmakers who have the ability to access frozen drives and thereby crack open this culturally pervasive sensorial cave. Perhaps directors as distinct from one another - and as ostensibly removed from Eisenstein, Godard, Bresson, Hitchcock and Pasolini - as Kieslowski and Streitfeld, as well as others I've mentioned and failed to mention, can succeed where the fetishist fails.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* was originally part of this essay but had to be cut, in the interest of space. By exposing the chasm at the heart of love and film, Lynch's film doubly undermines fetishism: the phantasmatic form that plugs the lack of love with an object as well as the fetishism of filmic verisimilitude. *Mulholland Dr.* drags the fetishism of *White's* capitalism (especially as it is manifested in Hollywood), of the obsessional (on the screen and in the audience), of love as well as film itself - insofar as it projects itself as present - down to its vacuous base, a blue box, unmistakably an escape hatch, containing Nothing. Facing the oblique relation of the object of desire and the *objet a*, an abyss, Freud's *Zeitlos*, the Real, at the level of the

*White* and *Female Perversions* do their part in arming the spectator against the contemporary robotisation process. By bringing the spectator into relation with his or her unconscious, by luring the spectator into the abyss, into 'hazardous regions' wherein 'unity is annihilated' (Kristeva, 2002, 10) - all for the sake of reviving desire through such negotiations with the death drive - films in the category of the thought specular restore psychic depth. While 'psychic depth' may seem like a strictly private matter, Kristeva's thought specular has the power to inject death, the unconscious, the unseen into consciousness and as a result to turn back the tide of the dehumanisation of society - even to militate against biopower. For, as Foucault elaborates in *Society Must Be Defended*, with the predominance of the power of social regularisation, death is gradually *disqualified*. Death has become, Foucault reminds us, 'something to be hidden away' (2003, 247). Foucault's assertion that 'Power no longer recognizes death' (2003, 248) provides a further rationale behind Kristeva's perspective that contemporary society needs to reintegrate thanatology into the logic of the living. Such a reintegration seems critical to stave off the new episteme she appears to be diagnosing in which the psychically complex desiring subject has vanished and robots rule.

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unconscious, within this savvy and sophisticated example of Kristeva's thought specular, the spectator is prompted to exit through the blue box, i.e., to extricate him/herself from psychic fixations, or at least to work through them, to enter eventually into fresh psychic territory.

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