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## **From Jocasta to Lolita: The Oedipal Fantasy Inverted**

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### **Part I: A Psychoanalytical Approach to the Cultural Fantasy of Girlhood**

In today's sexualized cultural context, mainstream images frequently disseminate problematic fantasies, not the least of which is the recent and increasing sexualization of young girls. This particular fantasy has indeed become prominent in popular cultural discourses, mainly in visual manifestations such as advertising, music videos and, of course, cinema. The predominance of the media sexualization of girlhood has brought on numerous discussions that mostly revolve around alarming reports on the dangers of this particular fantasy, and its ties to pedophilia and incest. In a report produced by the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, girlhood is implied as a fantasy that transcends young girls per se; the report indeed notes a somewhat intriguing paradox in which "young girls imbued with adult sexuality may seem sexually appealing", while at

the same time “women are often considered sexy only when they appear young, thus blurring the line between who is and is not sexually mature” (APA 2007: 3).<sup>1</sup> The majority of the literature produced in response to this phenomenon by a wide variety of academic fields uncovers an inherent iconophobia, contenting itself in placing the blame on popular culture and the media that circulate it. This can possibly be explained by the fact that much of the literature published is targeted for a generalized audience<sup>2</sup>; and while some of these critical reflections remain highly pertinent, certain crucial questions are circumvented. For instance: what is the *source* of this particular phenomenon, and what is its link to *desire*? Even more fundamentally, one can ask: *why* does our culture— a culture that repudiates pedophilia and poses incest as a fundamental taboo— produce visual artefacts that posit girlhood as object of desire?

These questions require a different approach than what has been the predominant paradigm in criticizing popular visual culture. Indeed, critical discourses that discuss the sexualization of girlhood usually do so by positing the young girl as the focal point of an objectifying gaze. As such, references to Laura Mulvey’s (1975) notion of visual pleasure, as well as John Berger’s (1972) analysis of male production and spectatorship in visual arts (to name but these), abound. And while such approaches can seem to effectively address the problematical aspects of cultural and ideological discourses, they are unable to account for the radicality inherent to the positing of girlhood as fantasy. As Valerie Walkerdine (1997) pertinently suggests, in one of the rare studies of the sexualization of young girls in popular culture, “little girls are the object of a strong, ubiquitous, but equally strongly denied erotic gaze. It is not the little girl who is the problem, but the gaze itself, in all its hypocrisy” (157).<sup>3</sup> While the gaze mentioned here appears to be the traditional objectifying gaze theorized in 1970s and 1980s psychoanalytic film theory, a concept whose shortcomings we will discuss shortly, Walkerdine nevertheless reveals a fascinating reflection by posing the gaze as problematic and hypocritical. In another rare take on the sexualization of girlhood, Barbra Ann Churchill’s (2003) doctoral thesis posits the sexualized young girl as a “child (femme) fatale” that “embodies [...] many overlapping and interrelated anxieties— the breakdown of the nuclear family, decaying middle-class values, female sexuality unbound, and taboo eroticism” (187). Quoting Camille Paglia, Churchill postulates the sexualized young girl as a return of the repressed (10), a statement that urgently calls for an in-depth analysis. Ultimately, these interesting endeavours into a decidedly understudied phenomenon pose highly interesting questions; however, these

interrogations are often approached through a theoretical paradigm that has since been questioned, criticized, and profoundly rearticulated.

This paper therefore aims to question the fantasy of girlhood as it is conveyed by certain contemporary popular films, while at the same time approaching the topic from the perspective of contemporary Lacanian film studies. As such, focus will be drawn on the theoretical standpoints offered by Slavoj Žižek, as well as Joan Copjec, Elizabeth Cowie and Todd McGowan, all of whom approach the gaze not as a tool of objectification and mastery, but as an *objet a*. Upon demonstrating the pertinence of present-day Lacanian film theory in the analysis of the aforementioned fantasy, as well as the desire and gaze that drive it, an analysis of Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) will problematize this very fantasy and its hidden, traumatic kernel of enjoyment. It will be argued that, through the positing of girlhood as object of desire, and through the use of visual allusions to the notion of fantasy, Mendes' film reveals itself as one among many discourses that confront the spectator to the underlying Real of a widespread cultural fantasy. The ultimate aim of this paper will be to determine how a certain cinema attempts to defy the mainstream ideology of sexualization by showing that which the symbolic cannot explain, namely the young girl as object of desire and as a contemporary, inverted and perverted form of Oedipal fantasy. This ubiquitous fantasy of girlhood, and more precisely the cultural predominance of the young girl as prohibited object, indeed suggests a possible inversion of Oedipal desire, an inversion articulated through the filmic gaze among others.

## Rethinking the Filmic Gaze

Although film studies have relied on Lacanian psychoanalysis for several decades, only recently have their problematical uses of Lacanian concepts been questioned and reinstated within Lacan's framework. In the late 1980s, Slavoj Žižek was among the first to note that "the Lacan who served as a point of reference for these theories [...] was the Lacan before the break" (Žižek 1989: 7). The "break" Žižek refers to here is Lacan's shift towards the Real in his later seminars. As he summarizes, "in the earlier stages, the accent fell on the boundary separating the Imaginary from the Symbolic", while on the other hand, in the later stage, "emphasis shifts to the barrier separating the Real from

symbolically structured reality” (Žižek 1989: 11). This focus on the Lacanian Real led Žižek to emphasize the importance of the *objet a*, or what he refers to as the “sublime object of ideology”. The *objet a*, as both the object and the cause of desire, simultaneously represents “the pure lack, the void around which desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, *and* the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it visible by filling it out” (Žižek 2005: 178). It is a lost object that never existed prior to being lost; it thereby drives Lacan’s concept of desire as impossible to satisfy. Most importantly, it is inherently absent from traditional Lacanian film theory, an absence that renders the theorizing of filmic desire invalid and incomplete. These first English writings by Žižek therefore mark his entrance into the field of film studies, as well as a radical reorganizing of Lacanian concepts and their application to film and cultural studies. As later he notes, “for Lacan, psychoanalysis at its most fundamental is not a theory and technique of treating psychic disturbances, but a theory and practice that confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence” (Žižek 2006: 2). This radical dimension consists of the subject’s encounter with the Real as a traumatic point at which his symbolic reality fails on some level or another. The publication of Žižek’s works led to a properly Lacanian approach to desire, fantasy, and the gaze as *objet a*.

Drawing on these reflections, Joan Copjec offers one of the first in-depth rearticulations of film theory’s reliance on Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to her, the common conception of the screen as mirror remains its “central misconception”, since it “operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan’s more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen” (Copjec 1994: 15-16). This brings her to suggest that traditional Lacanian film theory regarded the gaze in a panoptic context, theorizing a Foucauldian spectator that is “all-perceiving”, and whose gaze is one of mastery over the object. She states that “the relation between apparatus and gaze creates only the mirage of psychoanalysis” (26); film theory in the 1970s and 1980s was therefore operating a “kind of ‘Foucauldinization’ of Lacanian theory”, relying on “an early misreading of Lacan” (19). This not only led Christian Metz to view the spectator as all-perceiving, but it also drove Jean-Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory as well as Laura Mulvey’s notion of a desiring and objectifying male gaze. As Copjec argues, the gaze theorized by film studies is believed to be an imaginary gaze, inspired by theorists’ reading of the mirror stage essay. And while “it is true that the mirror-phase essay does describe the child’s narcissistic relation to its mirror image, it is, nevertheless, *not* in this essay but in Seminar XI that Lacan himself formulates *his* concept of the gaze [as *objet*

a]” (Copjec 1994: 30). Copjec’s rereading of Lacan allows her to reconsider the notion of filmic desire, shifting it from a panoptic desire for mastery over the object to a desire structured through the subject’s constitutive lack. As she puts it, “desire fills no possibility but seeks after an impossibility; this makes desire always, constitutionally, contentless” (Copjec 1994: 36). In this perspective, cinematic desire as it is articulated through the filmic gaze can never allow the spectator to fully master the image; the spectator’s look for the gaze is necessarily left unsatisfied.

The apparent confusion between the child’s looking in the mirror and Lacan’s notion of gaze as *objet a* brings Elizabeth Cowie to differentiate gaze from look. As she specifies, “to look is merely to see whereas the gaze is to be posed by oneself in a field of vision” (Cowie 1997: 288). This obviously has important repercussions on the notion of filmic desire, since early Lacanian film theorists— Mulvey in particular— define desire as the desire for mastery through an objectifying gaze. When one considers the gaze as *objet a*, desire becomes “not the wish to see some particular thing, or even just to see, but to see what is being shown, what I cannot yet see but know is there to see” (Cowie 1997: 288). The gaze as it was conceived within film studies, in addition to being inspired by Foucault more than by Lacan, can also be viewed psychoanalytically as a look. As such, when discussing the fantasy of girlhood, most reflections rely on this Foucauldian version of psychoanalytic film theory. This inevitably distances criticism from the main problem at stake, namely the radicality of the fantasy in question, which we will be discussing shortly.

In an article published in 2003, Todd McGowan also shows how traditional Lacanian film theory erred in its use of psychoanalytic terminology. In a response to David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s charge against psychoanalytic film theory, as articulated in *Post-Theory*, McGowan suggests that “the proper response [...] is to expand Lacanian analysis of the cinema— making it even more Lacanian” (McGowan 2003: 28).<sup>4</sup> Following in the steps of Žižek, Copjec and Cowie, McGowan aptly notes how the gaze theorized by film studies is misconstrued as subjective, rather than objective. Lacan’s gaze “is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back” (McGowan 2003: 28-29). The turn to the Lacanian Real, and its necessary consideration of the gaze as an *objet a*, drives McGowan’s reflection as well as his call for a renewed psychoanalytic film theory. This theory must, according to him, focus on the role of the *objet a* in generating desire. In *The Real Gaze*, McGowan follows-up his initial questionings and presents one of the most articulated rereadings of

Lacan, specifically aimed at reinstating psychoanalytic film theory. Rethinking the traditional approach to filmic desire, he states that

the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision. It is a blank spot in the subject's look, a blank spot that threatens the subject's sense of mastery in looking because the subject cannot see it directly or successfully integrate it into the rest of the visual field. [...] Even when the subject sees a complete image, something remains obscure: the subject cannot see how its own desire distorts what it sees (McGowan 2007: 11).

It is within this lack of mastery that the filmic gaze confronts the spectator, potentially driving him to a traumatic encounter with the Real. The gaze thus provides a form of enjoyment through its position as *objet a*. Far from reiterating spectatorship as an act driven by a hypothetical desire for mastery, the gaze and its incorporation within film theory conceives the filmic spectator as a lacking, desiring, and ultimately truly Lacanian subject.

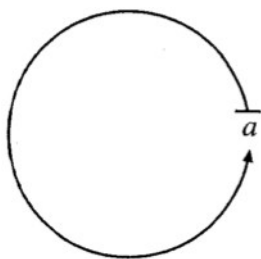
This contemporary psychoanalytic perspective obviously has profound repercussions on possible discourses concerning the sexualization of girlhood within popular visual media. Furthermore, it seriously impedes current critical reflections concerning desire and its tie with the sexualized image of girlhood. Given the fact that the act of looking at an image is driven by the desire to encounter the Lacanian gaze, the sexualized girl can no longer be approached as a mere object of a desiring look, but rather as a form of fantasy.

## Filmic Fantasy

Fantasy, as it is articulated through Lacan by Žižek, Cowie and McGowan, serves as a lure, a narrative structure that leads the subject to believe he has access to the object-cause of desire. As Cowie notes, the word fantasy is derived from the Greek term "phantasia", which literally means to "make visible". As such, fantasy "has come to mean the making visible, the making present, of what isn't there, of what can never *directly* be seen" (Cowie 1997: 128). In other words, fantasy attempts to stage the *objet a* in an

imaginary scenario. As such, it also acts as a veil, shielding the subject from an actual encounter with the impossible object. By taking on a narrative form, fantasy therefore produces an imaginary access to the *objet a* or, more specifically in the case of the cinema, an illusory access to the gaze itself. In this vein, the ideological role of the cinema, largely discussed by Žižek and McGowan, rests in its capacity to distance the spectator from his constitutive lack through scenarios in which the *objet a* presents itself as attainable, for example through the gratification of the typical *Happy Ending*. This is, of course, highly deceitful, as pointed out by Hilary Neroni who argues that these typical endings “do not have to reveal that the achievement of resolution— although it may look like it— is not the *objet petit a* but instead an inadequate stand-in” (Neroni 2004: 216). The film spectator’s desire for the gaze as *objet a* is thereby triggered through film’s reliance on fantasy.

For Lacan, the unattainable aspect of the *objet a* structures desire in an incomplete circularity; the impossibility of the *objet a* creates a gap, thus bringing desire in a perpetual return on itself. Žižek summarizes this concept on numerous occasions, in various texts; for example, in *Enjoy Your Symptom*, he describes the *objet a* as a “reef, the obstacle which interrupts the closed circuit of the ‘pleasure principle’ and derails its balanced movement” (Žižek 1992: 55), then referring to Lacan’s elementary scheme in which this circularity is portrayed as such:



Source: Žižek 1992: 56

As Žižek points out, it is the displeasure of this incomplete circularity that generates enjoyment. In this context, fantasy poses itself as the illusory possibility of closing the gap within the circular structure of desire by hinting the possibility of attaining the *objet a*. Lacan illustrates this relation between subject and object, as it is mediated by fantasy, through the following formula:  $\$ \diamond a$ , where  $\$$  represents the split subject of the Symbolic,  $a$  represents the *objet a*, and  $\diamond$  represents “the tying of Symbolic ( $\$$ ), Imaginary ( $a$ ) and Real ( $a$ ) as it is operated by fantasy” (Chemama and Vandermersch

1993: 131, my translation). It is this tying function that shields the subject from the horror of the Real. In its deploying of fantasy scenarios, the cinema— especially popular cinema— decidedly avoids revealing the presence of the *objet a* (the gaze) and its traumatic encounter with the Real. This, no doubt, is due to the fact that, “the realization of fantasy, while fully possible, is always violent” (McGowan 2007a: 45).

## **Girlhood as Fantasy**

Sofia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) proposes an interesting example of this logic of fantasy. The male narrator, who represents the collective voice of a group of adolescent boys fascinated by the femininity of the five Lisbon sisters, makes several allusions to the Lacanian notion of fantasy. The sisters are viewed as inaccessible, unattainable, and the boys state that their encounter with them has “scarred [them] forever, making [them] happier with dreams than wives” (Coppola 1999), a declaration that suggests their relation to the sisters relies almost exclusively on fantasy, an impediment that becomes more and more obvious as the film advances. When the girls are eventually locked in their home by their overprotective and highly abject mother, the boys resort to fantasy in order to sustain a relation with their impossible object, using popular music to communicate with them<sup>5</sup>, and imagining fantasmatic escapades in their company, all in order to maintain the possibility of an encounter with them. Of course, the fantasy of girlhood and of femininity obfuscates the girls’ actual existence in the collective masculine eye, as in the spectator’s. At the end of the film, the boys are finally led to believe they will achieve contact with the girls; as they enter the Lisbon home, Coppola uses montage as a tool to depict the contrast between the fantasy and the actual (inexistent) object: the shots of the boys making their way to the basement, searching for the girls, are edited with shots of their escaping with the girls in the family station-wagon. The spectator is thus momentarily led to believe that the boys will gain access to the impossible object. However, once they arrive in the basement, and just as one of them becomes febrile at the notion of finally being with the sisters— as he puts it: “those girls make me crazy. If we could just feel one of them up” (Coppola 1999)— the desired object manifests itself behind him, in its most traumatic dimension. In this view,



the Lisbon girls' suicide seems to suggest the void that lurks behind the *objet a* as it is displayed and conceptualized by fantasy. Hence the film functions through the scenario construed by the boys, who narrate the events 25 years after their unraveling, an indication of their continual return to the construction of their collective fantasy in an attempt to veil its traumatic kernel.

Coppola's film adequately depicts how femininity<sup>5</sup> and girlhood<sup>6</sup> as fantasy prevail in popular cinema, not to mention the wider field of popular visual culture. However, in order to approach the sexualization of girlhood as cultural fantasy, it is necessary to understand how the fantasy of femininity has evolved over time. When addressing the representation of Woman<sup>6</sup> in narratives, it is not uncommon to come across the infamous angel-whore dichotomy in which Woman is either presented as impossibly chaste and pure, or as decidedly sexual and thus impure. It is my contention, however, that this dichotomist paradigm is unable to account for the many facets of femininity that articulate current media representations of Woman and of girlhood. For instance, while the typical femme fatale would undoubtedly be posited as a whore in this model, one can easily wonder where to situate Churchill's concept of the "child (femme) fatale", i.e. the sexualized young girl. Although there currently is very little questioning addressed towards the angel/whore dichotomy, Wyman and Dionisopoulos nevertheless suggest that "this dichotomous perspective is self-limiting, and can benefit from a re-examination and expansion" (2000: 209). I therefore believe that the actual dichotomy that articulates fantasies of femininity revolves around the opposition between pure and impure (or asexual and sexual), rather than angel/virgin and whore. Whereas typical images of girlhood usually revolve around the fantasy of the angelic virgin, the pure/impure dichotomy allows for the positing of the young girl as sexual and, hence, sexualized, thus enabling us to account for contemporary fantasies of girlhood as they appear in present-day popular culture. Just as the femme fatale is the impure opposite of the pure and domesticated housewife in the typical film noir<sup>7</sup>, the "child (femme) fatale" is the impure and sexual opposite of the angelic and idyllic vision of asexual childhood, an ideal that dates back to Romanticism.<sup>8</sup> In light of this, the current media sexualization of girlhood can be tied with a shift in the typical portrayal of Woman as object of cinematic desire; the object is more and more frequently posited within the fantasy of the child (femme) fatale. As we will see, this shift often rests upon a profound reorganizing of the Oedipal fantasy.

As a primal fantasy, the Oedipal fantasy shapes the relation between the subject and the incest taboo, a relation that configures desire while also introducing symbolic Law. Žižek, quoting Lacan's Seminar VII, recalls how "an object becomes an object of desire only in so far as it is prohibited", adding as a most pertinent example that "there is no incestuous desire prior to the prohibition of incest", and specifying that "desire itself needs Law, its prohibition, as the obstacle to be transgressed" (Žižek 2005: 174). In its portrayal of the impossible object-cause of desire, fantasy necessarily posits an object that transgresses social or cultural norms, thus concealing the traumatic encounter that the actual object would bring upon the subject. However, Žižek also adds that "the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference" (Žižek 1997: 6), a statement that can easily relate to Chuchill's positing of sexualized girlhood as a return of the repressed. When it comes to the inverted Oedipal fantasy, this logic is highly palpable in Park Chan-Wook's *Oldboy* (2003), where after being imprisoned for 15 years the protagonist falls in love with a young girl, only to discover in the end that she is his own daughter, thus highly problematizing the structures of Oedipal desire. As an anastrophe of the Sophoclean tale, the film presents a modern-day Oedipus who falls in love with his offspring, rather than with his ascendant. And while Oedipus refuses to see the truth by blinding himself, *Oldboy's* protagonist refuses to *communicate* the truth, cutting off his own tongue. In so doing, he recedes from the realm of language, no longer being able to speak or to symbolize his desire. Park Chan-Wook's film therefore poses an interesting unravelling of the underside of fantasy, revealing the potential trauma that lurks behind its object.

While the traditional Lacanian approach would view sexualized images of girlhood as a form of desire perverted by the ideology of sexualization, in doing so it would evade the linking of the desired object with the *objet a* as well as with the traumatic enjoyment it entails. On the other hand, the contemporary Lacanian approach proposed by Žižek, Copjec, Cowie and McGowan allows us to approach the sexualized young girl for what she represents: not so much a helpless object of a Mulveyan eroticized male gaze, but rather the object of a fantasy that conceals a repressed desire, a desire that emerges through the perverted Lacanian gaze she implies. Although popular cinema, as well as mainstream advertising and popular music videos, frequently

frame girlhood as object of desire in an unproblematic perspective, giving way to the widespread dissemination of a highly problematic fantasy, there are many films that question this fantasy in various ways. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (Lynch 1992), for instance, articulates the incestuous facet of the fantasy of ideal girlhood, an ideal that is presented along with its particularly dark underside. Although Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) presents the sexual and impure counterpart to Donna Hayward (Maira Kelly), Laura herself is presented as a dichotomous character, split between the pure, angelic, successful and beautiful young girl and the sexual, depraved and inherently impure whore.<sup>9</sup> Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (1994), on the other hand, explores the tensions between sexualized girlhood and womanhood, notably through the schoolgirl's uniform that Christina (Mia Kirshner) wears while performing her exotic dance routine. More importantly, the film also posits these tensions around a paternal figure. These succinct examples show that cinema has been drawing on the fantasy of girlhood and has been attempting to reveal its underside for some time now. Among such filmic explorations, Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* can be seen as a particularly strong and in-depth reflection on the fantasy of girlhood and, even more so, on the traumatic encounter that such a fantasy entails.

## **Part II: Look Closer!**

*American Beauty* uses this specific fantasy to comment on the never-ending struggle between the rigors of the reality principle and the search for enjoyment that is entailed by the pleasure principle. The visual portrayals of girlhood within the film function, as we shall see, within the operating logic of fantasy and, more specifically, the primal Oedipal fantasy. Through the displacement of Lester's (Kevin Spacey) fantasy object from Jane (Thora Birch), his own daughter, to Angela (Mena Suvari), his daughter's friend, the film masks its inverted Oedipal setting in a way that renders it "acceptable" for the spectator. Cowie addresses this issue when she asks "how the reader or spectator can overcome the internal censorship which fantasy in the adult – and especially material related to primal fantasies – is subject to", only to answer shortly thereafter that "the fantasy origin of the material is disguised" (Cowie 1997: 141). This disguised incestuous dimension of the film has been widely discussed, most notably by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn who sees masculine desire for girlhood as a generalized phenomenon in bourgeois society (Karlyn

2004: 73). While she does not approach the film in its inverted Oedipal dimension, her analysis encompasses various mentions of the nymphet as fantasy as well as its ties with incest. Nevertheless, her reading of the film avoids the discussion of the radical aspect of Lester's fantasizing and, as such, does not offer a properly Lacanian analysis of the film and its depicting of desire, fantasy and gaze. Rather than simply portray a generalized desire for the nymphet, it seems that *American Beauty* calls us to pay attention to the underside of this fantasy. In accepting the invitation formulated by the film's tagline (that is, the invitation to "look closer"), one can uncover "what reality itself obscures" the dimension of fantasy" (McGowan 2007: 32). In what follows, I will argue that the whole point of the film reveals itself through the act of "looking closer".

## The Fantasizing Father

The film's characters evolve within the upper classes of American society, and through their various relations to its symbolic structure, one can envision a somewhat cynical portrayal of the exigencies that come with their subjectivization. This aspect of the film serves as the focal point of the lack that fantasy attempts to account for. As McGowan points out, "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 (McGowan 2007: 23). In this respect, it seems necessary to examine the characters' portrayal of this dissatisfaction before discussing the resorting to fantasy. As such, attention should be paid to Lester's opening comments on his life. While an establishing shot of the entire neighbourhood descends in order to focus on the Burnhams' street, Lester presents himself and states that he will be dead in less than a year. As he adds, "of course, I don't know this yet. And in a way, I'm dead already" (Mendes 1999), an obvious sign of the monotony and disillusion his life entails. The spectator can grasp the extent of Lester's lack of enjoyment when, in a voice-over accompanying the following shot where he is seen masturbating in the shower, he announces that this will be the highpoint of his day. His opening voice-over ends with the conclusion that he *has* lost something, although he isn't exactly sure what it is; nevertheless, as he states, "it is never too late to get it back". This leads us directly to the conclusion that Lester's loss is in fact the fundamental loss of the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire that he never actually possessed. It is in this

context that he becomes a privileged subject of fantasy.

As a father figure, Lester clashes with the image of fatherhood disseminated by Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper). While Lester endures the fact that both his wife and daughter think he is a “gigantic loser”, and projects the image of an immiserated father who consciously admits his status as lacking subject, Colonel Fitts is portrayed as an imposing, phallogocentric, homophobic and violent patriarch. In many ways, he incarnates the authoritative Name of the Father, dedicated to the upholding of symbolic Law, and directing a contemptuous look at anything that does not “fit” within the structured social existence he believes he must defend. In the breakfast scene where the spectator first encounters the Colonel, he states that “this country is going straight to hell” in response to his son Ricky’s (Wes Bentley) inquiry on the state of the world. His comment is followed by the doorbell’s ring, and Colonel Fitts is faced with a neighbourhood greeting from the gay couple that lives a few doors away. When equating his following rant against “those faggots” with his own repressed homosexuality, as it is manifested in the end of the film, we are faced with the evidence underlying Copjec’s argument for a properly Lacanian approach to desire, as opposed to the Foucauldian approach that she detects within traditional film theory. For, as she states, “it is the *repression* of [...] this desire that founds society”, specifying that “the law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocally has a desire, but one who *rejects* its desire, wants not to desire it. The subject is thus conceived as split from its desire, and desire itself is conceived as something precisely unrealized” (Copjec 1994: 24-25). As the Colonel tells Ricky when confronting him about accessing his cabinet and the Nazi china it contains, one can’t just “go around doing whatever [one feels] like”, insisting that his son needs “structure” and “discipline”.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the film, when he defies him, Ricky ends up calling him a “sad old man”, hence suggesting the end of his paternal authority. In a Žižekian perspective, the Colonel’s destiny represents the death of the Name of the Father as symbolic authority. In Žižek’s words, he is dead “in the sense that *he does not know anything about enjoyment*, about life substance: the symbolic order [...] and enjoyment are radically incompatible” (Žižek 1992: 143). Consequently, through his discourse as well as his military heritage, Colonel Fitts upholds the values of a conservative symbolic Law that relies on the repression inherent to the reality principle, as opposed to Lester who gradually, through his search for enjoyment, lives according to the pleasure principle. The antagonism between the two main father figures constructs *American Beauty*’s portrayal of the dynamics of fantasy, as well as its consequences.

## “Looking for the gaze”

Before discussing the fantasy of girlhood and its tie with Lester’s ultimate search for enjoyment, however, the film’s intimation for the spectator to “look closer” calls upon an exploration of its articulation of the gaze. While voluntarily hinting to the title of Todd McGowan’s aforementioned article, the title of this section also suggests the important differentiation between the notions of look and gaze, discussed earlier. *American Beauty* contains many shots that seem to play around the spectator’s search for the filmic gaze; furthermore, the characters themselves are portrayed as searching for a form of gaze. This, of course, is most obvious with Ricky and his relentless resorting to his camera to capture various scenes that surround him. While it would seem reasonable to link Ricky’s filming with a form of voyeurism, such a reading would necessarily overlook what it is that he is filming and, most importantly, what he is looking for. Voyeurism represents the compulsion to witness a scene that evades symbolic organization, and as such the voyeur’s quest is inherently ill-fated. As McGowan fittingly explains it, “there is something fundamentally disappointing about voyeurism: it never sees what it’s looking for but instead sees a moment created for its look” (McGowan 2007a: 4). In this regard, Ricky’s quest is different from that of the voyeur’s; while the voyeur searches for a subject unaware of his look, Ricky is looking for what evades his look: he is looking for that which escapes his symbolic comprehension or, to put it in his own words, for the “entire life behind things” (Mendes 1999).<sup>11</sup> In this regard, his account of the dead homeless woman he filmed is highly revealing of his quest for the gaze. When Jane asks him why he filmed her, Ricky answers that it “when you see something like that, it’s like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you’re careful you can look right back” (Mendes 1999).<sup>12</sup> When considering the fact that Ricky is looking for manifestations of the Real, it appears vital to recall Žižek’s description of the Real as “not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also the ‘flesh from which everything exudes,’ the life substance in its mucous palpitation” (Žižek 1992: 26).

Ricky’s fascination for the Real, for the “entire life behind things”, as well as his compulsion to capture the gaze, makes him impervious to the fantasy that Angela incarnates. After he first introduces himself to Jane, she comments on how confident he seems – a confidence that does not fit with his age, but that befits his refusal of symbolic authority and its logic of desire – which brings Angela to express her disbelief at the fact

that he didn't even look at her once. While "the whole world" seems to be *looking* at Angela, Ricky seems to see beyond the fantasy of girlhood she represents in order to focus his interest on the girlhood "behind things". This brings on his fascination with Jane. In an ensuing scene where Angela is in Jane's room, and they notice Ricky filming them, Angela puts on a show, dancing for the camera. Completely oblivious of her, Ricky zooms in on Jane's *mirror image* only to notice she is smiling. In so doing, Mendes shifts the focus and shows us what would usually escape our look; he reveals an "authentic" girlhood that lures behind the facet of fantasized girlhood. The movie's request for us to "look closer" is fully operative here, as it is in many other instances: we are forced by the zooming camera to "look closer" for what the image can reveal. As such, we are "looking closer" as Lacan suggests we do so in contemplating Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*<sup>13</sup>, and in so doing we are faced with the point at which the image gazes back or, in this case, Ricky is faced with the point at which Jane *smiles* back at him.

## The Aesthetics of Fantasy

While Ricky evades symbolic authority by fully indulging in his fascination for the Real, Lester attempts to circumvent the same authority by submitting to the pleasure principle's necessary quest for enjoyment. This quest for enjoyment unavoidably confronts him to a fundamentally unappeasable desire for an elusive object, that "something" that he lost and that he believes it is never too late to "get back". His quest for enjoyment brings him to refuse his "fascist" working conditions and, when he bribes his superiors for a generous severance package, he caves into a hedonistic pursuit of the *objet a*, whether it be the dream car from his adolescence, the transformation of his garage into a teenage-inspired hangout where he can smoke marijuana while listening to Bob Dylan, and most importantly his desire to shape up in order to "look good naked" (Mendes 1999). This last desire is directly linked to the fundamental desire for the gaze as *objet a*: Lester wants to "look good naked" in order to subject to Angela's gaze, a desire that he regularly attempts to fulfill (and evade) through fantasy scenarios where *she* is displayed for *his* look. Mendes' portrayal of Lester's fantasy scenarios requires close attention, as it is the point in which the film consolidates its rendering of fantasy with the necessary traumatic, incestuous kernel that it veils.

Lester's first encounter with Angela marks a breaking point in the film, a moment

after which he embraces the quest for the impossible object by submitting to the logic of fantasy. It is also the spectator's first encounter with the portrayal of girlhood as fantasy. As such, it is obviously no accident that the encounter occurs during a cheerleader halftime show. Through her position as cheerleader, an iconic image of youth on display, Angela is immediately posited as fantasy; and because Jane is also a cheerleader, Lester's fantasizing of Angela can easily be seen as the displacement of an Oedipal desire for a daughter figure.<sup>14</sup> The film's central discourse is articulated through its visual rendering of Lester's fantasizing, the setting of which resembles Cowie's notion of fantasy as "a veritable *mise en scène* of desire" (Cowie 1997: 133). Several visual and audio elements support this *mise en scène* of desire: the cheerleader's uniform, the drastic shift in the soundtrack, the filming and lighting of the striptease, Angela's wink making her complicit as object of fantasy, and the editing that repeats several of her movements, not the least of which is the insisting duplication of the unzipping of her uniform. This highly repetitive editing seems to reproduce the enjoyment that accompanies the unbearable postponement of the moment the object of desire is attained. However, the ultimate functioning of fantasy in this and every other fantasy scene in the movie resides in the digitally-added rose petals that cover the actual object, thus shielding Lester (and the viewer) from the daughter figure's nudity. While evoking a representation of desire that "is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes" (Cowie 1997: 127), the rose petals simultaneously represent eroticism and femininity. As such, they connote what they "purport to conceal": Angela's budding sexuality.

The rose petals therefore are present in order to protect Lester from the Real dimension of his object of desire, which in this case revolves around its incestuous dimension. The fantasy portrayed faces the spectator with the most radical dimension of fantasizing, that is the fantasy that encompasses the fundamental, incestuous desire for the ultimate prohibited object. On this, McGowan provides the following explanation:

Every fantasy is, in a sense, an incestuous fantasy: in order to provide enjoyment, fantasy must enact a scenario for accessing the privileged— that is, the prohibited— object. The subject fantasizes about obtaining something off-limits, and the model for this object is the familial object that the symbolic law bars. But the fantasy remains bearable for the subject only insofar as the subject fails to recognize its incestuous dimension (McGowan 2007a: 143).<sup>15</sup>

While Lester necessarily does not recognize the incestuous nature of his fantasy, its



obviousness for the spectator provides the radical dimension of the film, as it problematizes the fantasy of girlhood. And while Angela's body remains— for the most part of the film— a veiled *objet a*, the spectator encounters the daughter-object through Jane's stripping for Ricky's camera. Far from the striptease Angela *performs* in Lester's fantasy, Jane's revealing of herself for Ricky is blunt and devoid of any form of performance or spectacle. As she reveals her breasts— the specific female attribute that remains out of the range of Lester's fantasy— the spectator's look cannot avoid the camera's gaze, as the countershots of Ricky filming include the television showing what the camera is filming, creating a somewhat "complete" image. Contrary to Lester, Ricky's embracing of the gaze as *objet a*, through his fascination for the "entire life behind things", seems to exclude him from the need for fantasy. As McGowan points out, "such a subject does not use the turn to fantasy to supplement desire and to escape the path of desire, but instead uses it to discover the impossible object— the gaze— that supports this subject" (McGowan 2007: 167). This is precisely where the film leads the spectator: not to the conclusion that the young girl is asexual and absolved from desire, but rather that her position as fantasy object for the father pinpoints the traumatic aspect of the sexualization of girlhood. In other words, it is not so much the look directed toward the young girl that is problematical, but the fact that it is the *father's* look, which posits her as an inverted Oedipal fantasy.<sup>16</sup>

As psychoanalytical logic would have it, the fantasy surrounding Angela breaks apart the moment she becomes within Lester's reach. While his fantasy version of Angela portrays her as sexually experimented, as evidenced in the bath scene where she asks Lester to wash her as she has been "very dirty", his actual encounter with Angela reveals a confused and inexperienced young girl. The moment he asks her what she wants and that she responds that she doesn't know, the incestuous, traumatic kernel of his fantasy object begins to reveal itself. During this encounter, the roses appear in a vase; no longer do they veil the Real dimension of Angela as young girl. And at the precise instant when Lester unbuttons Angela's blouse and that her breasts are actually revealed to him, she warns him that she is a virgin. Hence, while Lester's fantasy version of Angela provided him an imaginary access to her as object, it unavoidably did so by "stripping the object of the very impossibility that [made] it an object-cause of desire in the first place" (McGowan 2007a: 63). As Lester realizes, Angela is not a "child (femme) fatale" that will fulfill his desire, but rather (as Ricky

suggests) a truly ordinary young girl. It is important here to note Lester's reaction to the underside of his fantasy: in choosing to uphold the incest taboo and the symbolic Law that structures it, and then turning to contemplate the family portrait, he grasps the extent of the traumatic kernel his fantasy entailed. Although his encounter with the impossibility of the *objet a* is not the direct cause of his imminent death, his quest for enjoyment that led him to this object is. As the incarnation of symbolic Law, Colonel Fitts punishes Lester not only for refusing his own advances, but most importantly for his ultimate enjoyment of a fundamental fantasy, be it Oedipal or homoerotic. As such, the Colonel safeguards the prohibition of incest, his own repressed homosexuality, as well as the film's resolution.

In this sense, *American Beauty* reveals the traumatic kernel of an underlying incestuous desire embedded within current sexualized fantasy-images of girlhood or, more specifically, "daughterhood". Through Lester's fantasizing of Angela, the film exposes a new, contemporary form of Oedipal desire directed toward the daughter figure. In a recent article on Žižek and film studies, Matthew Flisfeder specifies that "in cinema, fantasy is definitely *not* that which appears on the screen [but rather] that which allows the subject to take pleasure from the screen as surplus-enjoyment" (Flisfeder 2011: 85); as such, the spectator does not so much relate to Lester's fantasy as he is confronted to the revealing of what the fantasy veils. With its depiction of girlhood as fantasy through visual references that prevail within popular culture (the cheerleader, the "dirty", impure child (femme) fatale, the symbolism of the roses), *American Beauty* places the spectator in the midst of his own Oedipal fantasy. Through its portrayal of the fantasy of girlhood, and its tie with a traumatic encounter with the Real prohibited daughter-object, Mendes' film reveals an inverted Oedipal fantasy tied to contemporary images of girlhood, a fantasy that can be linked to the social anxieties related to femininity as discussed by Churchill (2003). The film also confirms cinema's ability to reveal itself as a potentially provocative and radical discourse, allowing thoughtful questioning and criticizing of this specific cultural fantasy. Indeed, recent cinema regularly problematizes the fantasy of girlhood by revealing various forms of traumatic encounters, from the young virgin (Jess Weixler) in *Teeth* (2007), who reveals a dangerous and castrating sexuality in the form of the mythological *vagina dentata*<sup>17</sup>, to the adventurous Haley (Ellen Page) who hunts down pedophiles to confront them with their perversion before killing them in David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005). Hence, while

popular cinema frequently plays a role, along with other popular visual media, in the current sexualization of girlhood, it nevertheless maintains its potential radicality in confronting us with the traumatic kernel hidden by this fantasy.

# 1 Notes

Given this generalized attraction to images that connote youth, and the equating of desirability with being (or looking) young, the focus of this paper will be on the fantasy of girlhood rather than that of the young girl.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of such literature include Lamb and Brown (2006), Durham (2008) and Levin And Kilbourne (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Walkerdine goes on wondering if the iconophobia and mediaphobia inherent in the criticism of the sexualization of girlhood is not in fact an attempt to silence the fact that “these very adults find the children disturbingly erotic” (Walkerdine 1997: 176).

<sup>4</sup> As McGowan puts it, “the *Post-Theory* critique of Lacanian film theory has not really addressed a properly *Lacanian* film theory” (2003: 28). In the introduction to *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek also replies to *Post-Theory*’s charge against Lacanian psychoanalysis by asking “what if one should finally give Lacan himself a chance?” (Žižek 2001: 2).

<sup>5</sup> The songs that are played in these scenes depict longing, a specific form of desire articulated through nostalgia. In this way, the turn to music as a form of ‘incantation of desire’ seems to further render the film’s structuring of desire and fantasy. For more on longing and nostalgia in Coppola’s film, see Hoskin 2007.

<sup>6</sup> The term “Woman” is intended here as the media representation of femininity as Teresa de Lauretis intends it; it designates a “fictional construct, a distillate from diverse [...] discourses in Western culture” (de Lauretis 1984: 5).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this issue, see Neale (2000) and Grant (2007).

<sup>8</sup> For more on this subject, see Higonnet 1998.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed psychoanalytical reading of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, as well as most of David Lynch’s films, see McGowan (2007a).

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, the Colonel’s portrayal as father figure is one of impotence, just as it is with Lester, albeit for different reasons. Indeed, the Colonel’s obsession for discipline and structure in the upbringing of his son obscures his appreciation of Ricky’s activities, as he convinces himself that Ricky manages to afford the impressive array of electronic devices he owns with money made as a catering waiter. In so doing, he remains blind to Ricky’s illicit drug-related activities, all in spite of the fact that Ricky completes his accounting in plain sight.

<sup>11</sup> Ricky uses this expression when commenting on the plastic bag he filmed for 15 minutes while it “danced” with him, driven by the wind. His fascination for this image inevitably relies on the tie that links the plastic bag to the Lacanian Real, a tie that lies in the bag’s escape from any type of structure or will. Furthermore, as with Lacan’s account of his encounter with a sardine can that was looking back at him, the plastic bag can be seen as a traumatic, excess object that gazes back at Ricky, causing his fascination.

<sup>12</sup> When one equates Ricky’s “God” to the big Other, this declaration reveals a profoundly Lacanian signification.

<sup>13</sup> See Lacan (1973) for his illustration of the gaze as *objet a* through the analysis of the anamorphic stain in Holbein’s painting.

<sup>14</sup> As an incestuous, prohibited fantasy, Angela shares a few common features with the Nabokovian prototypical sexualized young girl, Lolita. Not only does Angela share an almost identical name—Lolita’s actual name is Dolores Haze, which is pronounced similarly to Angela’s name (Hayes)—but she admits being used to guys “drooling” over her, a phenomenon that begun when she was 12 (the same age as Lolita). Most importantly Angela, as the object of fantasy, shares incestuous similarities with Lolita insofar as they are both desired by father figures. This specific point is where *American Beauty*’s radicality manifests itself most convincingly.

<sup>15</sup> While McGowan provides this description of fantasy through his analysis of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (Lynch 1992), it can easily apply to any narrative that relates to incestuous desire and fantasizing.

<sup>16</sup> And while Lester fantasizes about a metaphorical daughter figure, his fantasy veils his actual daughter who wishes for his death. When Ricky confronts Jane wish by asking if she’d rather he

have the crush on her, her disdainful response indicates the upholding of the incest taboo. All the while, as she further discusses her father's lack of attention towards her at the profit of Angela, she asks how it can be that he is not damaging her, giving a serious hint at another hidden aspect of the widespread fantasy of sexualized girlhood, that is its impact on the traditional Oedipal scenario.<sup>17</sup> The tagline for *Teeth* reads "Every rose has its thorns", an obvious reference to the symbolism attached to the rose as well as a possible reference to the fantasmatical role the rose petals play within *American Beauty*.

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