University of Reading

"…pure existence, without sense…": Joan Copjec, Hitchcock's Rebecca, and reading the real

Article

Accepted Version

rebecca essay for Centaur.pdf

Cocks, N. (2024) "…pure existence, without sense…": Joan Copjec, Hitchcock's Rebecca, and reading the real. Textual Practice, 38 (5). pp. 770-788. ISSN 0950-236X doi: 10.1080/0950236X.2023.2214122 Available at https://reading-pure-test.eprints-hosting.org/111711/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2214122

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

University of Reading

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Neil Cocks

‘…pure existence, without sense…: Joan Copjec, Hitchcock’s Rebecca, and reading the real

Abstract:

In 2001, Slavoj Žižek made the surprising suggestion that Lacanians were missing from contemporary Film criticism. The surprise arose from the consensus amongst ‘Post-Theorist’ scholars that Lacanians were unduly dominant. For Žižek, however, the *Screen* theorists who popularised Lacanian approaches to Film misconstrue his work, and to correct this a return to the ‘Late Lacan’ of ‘the Real’ is required.

This article suggests that due to the success of Žižek’s arguments, the only missing Lacanians in 2022 are those he originally dismissed. Taking as its focus the work of Joan Copjec - Žižek’s fellow traveller in Theory- and her 1994 reading of a scene from Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, it suggests that difficulties arising within the analysis of the real might be productively engaged through a critical return to issues of interest to *Screen* theory. Copjec’s insistence that *Rebecca* offers an encounter with the real is countered through a reading of the return of symbolic structures to a point of seemingly pure existence: according to the argument offered here, textuality is repressed with Copjec’s reading of the scene, rather than having no place within it.

Keywords:

Joan Copjec, object *a*, Hitchcock, the real, perspective.

Disclosure statement:

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

Word count:

8,203 words

‘…pure existence, without sense…: Joan Copjec, Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, and reading the real

i) Introduction

This article questions certain aspects of Žižekian approaches to Film Theory. I begin by acknowledging an elision of the problem of the real in the way in which Film Studies as a discipline developed through the 1970s to the 1990s as represented by the journal *Screen*. I then register the force of Žižek’s polemical intervention against this state of affairs in 2001. By this time, according to Žižek, Screen approaches dominated psychoanalytic Film Studies, meaning that the force of Lacan’s precise theorizations of the visual were not felt within it. I then proceed to develop a critique the Lacanian understanding of the real, and its application in Film Studies, through an extended analysis of its articulation in the work of the theorist Joan Copjec. Finally, I suggest that such a critique might result in the success of Žižek’s intervention being questioned, in so far as it has resulted in a forgetting of what was valuable in the work of *Screen* theorists such as Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe, and Stephen Heath. My aim in this article is to recuperate a moment which runs the risk of either being lost in the history of criticism or included only as history, with little or no contemporary relevance to the study of film.

ii) The lack of Lacanians

Slavoj Žižek begins *The Fright of Real Tears*, his 2001 study of the cinematic gaze, with the surprising claims that Lacanian critics are missing from the contemporary Film Studies scene. [i] The surprise relates to the contention, prevalent amongst a growing group of film scholars at the time, that Lacanians have in fact too great a hold on critical discussions of the medium. Žižek charts the rise of these ‘Anti-Theorists’ or ‘Post-Theorists’, exemplified by Noël Carroll and David Bordell, who eschew what is taken to be dogmatic *Theory* in favor of the seemingly more modest pursuit of

[i] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post*-Theory (London: BFI Publishing, 2001 [1991]).

theories. [ii] The idea is that scholars should be free to engage any approach that contributes to an understanding of film, with historicism, shot-by-shot constructions of filmed environments, and cognitivist accounts of audience response being the most frequently cited. Although Žižek makes clear that Anti-Theorists 'acknowledge the inner differences in the field of Theory (say, between the early *Screen* focus on interpellation, Gaze, suture and the later more historicist-culturalist feminist orientation), they nonetheless emphasise a common Lacanian element as central'. [iii] It is this element that frustrates critics such as Carroll and Bordell, as according to their arguments Lacanian approaches have no bearing on the real world and fail to address the complexity of audience reactions to films, the history of film production, or meanings that fall outside a concern with a limited range of narratives: mirrors; voyeurism; desire.

It should be noted here that Žižek identifies 'the authors usually referred to as Lacanians' only as extending 'from Laura Mulvey to Kaja Silverman'. [iv] It is not a clear definition. Are we, for example, to take Mulvey as representative of the early *Screen* writers, or is she one of the later feminists? Is the extension of the field from Mulvey to Silverman sequential, and does that mean that *Screen* publications prior to, say, 1975s landmark 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' are to be discounted? [v] Are the later theorists with a 'more historicist-culturalist feminist orientation' understood to fall wholly within the history of *Screen*? And are *Screen* writers such as Jackie Stacey and Jacqueline Rose understood to operate within the field defined by Mulvey and Silverman, despite

[ii] See David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Bordwell was himself a *Screen* theorist, as is also the case, Žižek notes, for Ben Brewster, the theorist whose career Žižek calls upon to illustrate the shift from Theory to Post-Theory. Žižek (2001 [1991]), p. 13.

[iii] Žižek (2001 [1991]), p. 1.

[iv] Žižek (2001 [1991]), p. 2.

[v] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen*, 16/3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

questioning many of the psychoanalytic orthodoxies with which Žižek takes issue? [vi] In short, without naming names, it is difficult to establish the scope of Žižek's critique.

What is clear, however, is Žižek's understanding of the central error in the Anti-Theorist critique of Lacanian approaches: the theorists it targets have very little actually to say about Lacan. The work of 'authors usually referred to as Lacanians' is understood to be characterized by an undue focus on a handful of texts from the middle period, 'structuralist' Lacan, rather than the Lacan of the real, and is a misreading even of these. Crucially, Žižek argues that the 'gaze' upon which the work of Silverman and Mulvey is founded is figured as active and controlling, rather than the unseeing limit or blemish that it is for Lacan. [vii] It is with this 'little piece of the real' foremost in mind that *The Fright of Real Tears* aims to introduce to contemporary Film Studies the Lacanian focus that has been missing from it.

I would contend that Žižek's project has been so successful that the only missing Lacanians in 2022 are those he originally warned us against. Film Studies is at present dominated by anti-theory, and where theory is engaged, it is generally concerned with materiality, affect, or assemblage. It is rare to find an appeal to early *Screen* Theorists such as Stephen Heath or Colin MacCabe, or a discussion of structures of deferral, or accounts of perspective that engage 'suture', in contemporary theory. [viii]

[vi] See, for example, Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street, *Queer Screen: A Screen Reader (*London: Routledge, 2008) ; Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2020 [1986]); Jacqueline Rose, 'Paranoia and the Film System'. *Screen*, 17/4 (1976), pp. 85 – 104. Joan Copjec references Rose's work with approval in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015 [1994), p. 250; p. 251.

[vii] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

[viii] See Colin MacCabe, 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure', *Screen*, 17/3 (1976), pp. 7–2.

Where such work is engaged, it tends to be in texts concerned with contextualizing *Screen* in its historical moment, rather than registering is relevance to ongoing debates.[ix]

Žižek's criticism of 'authors usually referred to as Lacanians' is exacting, especially in terms of their limited engagement with Lacan's writing. It is my suggestion, however, that neglect of this theory has had a detrimental effect on contemporary Film Studies. Here I am tempted to coopt, for a moment, the kind of dialectical operation beloved by Žižek: the Žižekian critique of *Screen* Theory, both early and late, is compelling, perhaps even devastating, but for all that it can lead also to an understanding of the importance of such theory. In their victory over *Screen* theory, the Žižekians – also referred to here as 'the Ljubljana school' - have justified a turning away from the attentive engagement with film language within Psychoanalytic responses to film, a limitation that, to my mind, highlights certain advantages in the work their critique has seemingly made obsolete. [x]

iii) Joan Copjec and the gaze

To introduce the Žižekian rejection of 'authors usually referred to as Lacanians' in a little more detail, I will introduce the text that is the focus of this article, *Read My Desire* (1994) by Joan Copjec. Copjec is the one theorist not of the original Ljubljana School who Žižek acknowledges had already understood the limitations of what passed for Lacanian scholarship in Film Theory at the time of the initial publication of *The Fright of Real Tears.* [xi] Referring to the work of Christian Metz and Stephen

[ix] One notable recent attempt to move against this trend is Hunter Vaughan and Tom Conley's edited collection, *The Anthem Handbook of* Screen *Theory* (New York: Anthem Press, 2018).

[x] Ljubljana school refers specifically to scholars including to Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, and Miran Božovič who worked with Žižek in the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. I am not the first to question this approach, of course. See Tom Cohen, 'Beyond "The Gaze": Žižek, Hitchcock, and the American Sublime', *American Literary History*, 7/2 (1995), pp. 350-378, for a particularly influential critique, not least upon this present article.

[xi] Žižek (2011 [1991]) p. 2.

Heath, 'and others', [xii] as well as 'film theorists' who 'attempt […] to clear a space for feminist cinema', [xiii] Copjec understands the gaze that goes unrecognized within *Screen* Theory in the following terms:

> The gaze, the object-cause of desire, is the object cause of the subject of desire in the field of the visible. In other words, it is what the subject does not see and not simply what it is that founds it [….] When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye but a blind one […] The horrible truth […] is that the gaze does not see you. So, if you are looking for confirmation of the truth of your being or the clarity of your vision, you are on your own; the gaze of the Other is not confirming; it will not validate you. [xiv]

Copjec's first target here is what she takes to be the 'Foucauldian' notion of the gaze which underpins both the early *Screen* theory of suture and interpellation, and the dominant forms of feminist psychoanalytic Film Studies in the 1990s, in which a certain look, however bound to absence, controls and produces the subject: the gaze of the panopticon. [xv] For Copjec, the truly Lacanian gaze does not see the subject who is fixated upon it. As indicated in this quotation, rather than active or agential, the gaze is instead the point at which the desiring subject's vision fails, a failure that is, nonetheless, constitutive of that subject.

In the concluding section of this article, I will engage this Copjecian reading of the gaze as the constitutive 'object cause of desire' in more detail. For now, I will limit myself to a brief introduction to Copjec's understanding of this 'object cause', which, after Lacan, she terms the 'object *a*', and the

---

[xii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 21. See Colin MacCabe, 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure', *Screen*, 17/3 (1976), pp. 7–2; Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen*, 16/2 (1975), p. 14–76.

[xiii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 16. The only text Copjec references in relation to this approach Teresa de Lauretis' *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). See also de Lauretis, 'Snow on the Oedipal Stage', *Screen*, 22 (1981), pp. 24-39.

[xiv] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 36.

[xv] Copjec (2015 [1994]), pp. 15 – 37.

highlighting of what is, for her, one of its central challenges. In terms of Copjec's definition, I would begin with the following:

> desire is the desire of the Other – [yet] we have no image of the Other's desire (it remains indeterminate), and it is this very lack that causes our desire. It is first of all an *unsatisfied* desire that initiates our own, one that is not filled up with the meaning, or has no signified. […] It is not the long arm of the law that determines the shape and reach of every subject, but rather something that escapes the law and its determination, something we can't manage to put our finger on. One cannot argue that the subject is constructed by language and then overlook the essential fact of language's duplicity […] This duplicity ensures that the subject will *not* come into being as language's determinate meaning. An incitement to discourse is not an incitement to being. What is aroused instead is the desire for nonbeing, for an *in*determinate something that is perceived as *extra*discursive. This indeterminate something [is] referred to by Lacan as object *a*. [xvi]

The object *a*, then, founds the subject, and enables desire. One should not imagine from this an idealized and unreachable object, but, instead, one that is strangely 'nonempirical' and necessarily indeterminate: as Copjec states, the object *a* lacks a signified. For Copjec, when we look at a film, and see something within it that seems to stick out and return our gaze, we are encountering the object *a*, and this is thus not a moment in which we trace another's agency or depth ('whenever we delve below [the surface], we are sure to come up empty' [xvii]). Instead, it is a confrontation with the unseeable nothing essential to our vision and desire. The explicit challenge of this, for Copjec, is that the object *a* is at once the nothing that eludes us as we fix on whatever stain or blot on screen has captured our attention *and* the blot itself. The object *a* is the real that has no place in the symbolic, but also the absence of the real, the point at which the real's non-inclusion is registered. It follows from this understanding that the object *a* cannot be caught up in deferral for two, closely related reasons: it is a

[xvi] Copjec (2015 [1994]), pp. 48 – 49.

[xvii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 13.

precise point of fascination within the visual field; 'it ha[s] neither an essence nor a signification'. [xviii] That is to say, the object *a* is what is unseen within the visual field, and thus cannot be assigned meaning within the structures of the visual, whilst also the singular point of interest that does not bear repetition within differentiated structures of signification. Copjec recognizes that the object *a* is always encountered within a historical moment, and within a given signifying structure, but it is itself not bound to such structures: the encounter with the 'disfiguring surplus' of the 'object cause of desire' is always with nothing and negation, the nothing necessary to seeing and to the formation of the desiring subject; the negation that registers the real. [xix]

My concern in what follows is with testing this understanding of the object *a* by returning the symbolic to a point within a film by Alfred Hitchcock that Copjec insists is untouched by it. Put simply, my question is: can we *read* the point within film that Copjec regards as a manifestation, registering and negation of the real? [xx] Or is the object *a* wholly resistant to meaning and displacement?

I have separated what follows into three sections: the first will critically address the precise terms in which the appeal to the asymbolic is articulated, the next will question the extent to which what Copjec reads as the uncanny point of the real can indeed be separated from a wider grammar of cinematic seeing. I then argue that thinking about ideas of voice and narration can further problematise the unique status of the real, before comparing the sequence that is of interest to Copjec

[xviii] Copjec (2014 [1994]), p. 119.

[xix] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 129

[xx] For Copjec, it also has an imaginary dimension, but I understand this in terms of Žižek's notion of the 'Imaginary Real'. See Copjec (1994 [2015]), pp. 122-3; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 479. For a reading of the imaginary that can be understood to offer the basis of a potential critique of this present article, see Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the 'Real'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). For a questioning reading of a different school of Film Questions claims to question presence through an appeal to it, see Daniela Caselli, 'Kindergarten theory: Childhood, Affect, Critical Thought', *Feminist Theory* 11/3 (2010), pp. 241-254.

with an earlier moment in the film. Finally, I draw out a variety of tensions within Copjec's construction of the object *a* that go unread within her work.

iv) '…it expresses a purely thetic proposition…'

Alfred Hitchcock attempted to option Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* when he read a galley proof on the set of *The Lady Vanishes* [1938], but the rights had been secured by the producer David O Selznick. When Selznick persuaded Hitchcock to work for the first time in America, the director saw the opportunity to adapt the novel. Both men were equal in the control they wished to exercise over their product, however, and Hitchcock found that the creative freedom he had sought in America eluded him. He would later declare that *Rebecca* (1940) was 'not a Hitchcock picture', as it followed too closely Selznick's doctrine of 'picturization' in which fidelity to source material was paramount. The result, Hitchcock claimed, was a film that was too rooted in an 'old-fashioned […] school of feminine literature'. [xxi] Commentators from François Truffaut to Tania Modleski have questioned Hitchcock's move to disown the film, with Modleski, for example, placing *Rebecca* within a Hitchcockian oeuvre defined by internal contradictions, especially those of gender. [xxii]

The film does, in fact, deviate significantly from the novel, but this can often be attributed to external factors (for example, the Hays code required that the murder committed by the male lead be downgraded to manslaughter), rather than the success of the various strategies Hitchcock employed to regain control (Hitchcock's commitment to 'cutting in the camera' was secured in this production for example, as it limited the changes Selznick could make post-production). Amongst the many features

[xxi] François Truffaut, *Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 127.

[xxii] Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory (Second Edition)* (London: Routledge, 2005)pp. 53 – 53. There are many excellent critical responses to the production of *Rebecca*, but see, for example: Kyle Dawson Edwards, *'Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Seiznick International Pictures' "Rebecca"' (1940*), *Cinema Journal* 45/3 (2006), pp. 32-58; Caroline Young, *Hitchcock's Heroines* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2018); John Billheimer, *Hitchcock and the Censors* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2019).

that film and novel can be understood to share, however, is a central narrative concerning a naïve (and nameless) young woman who finds that the great house she now inhabits remains under the influence of Rebecca, her husband's deceased and seemingly adored first wife.

Joan Copjec's approach to the film is to compare two sequences within it that take place in two different rooms. In the first, the new mistress of the house is granted a tour of Rebecca's bedroom by Mrs Danvers, the dead woman's 'devoted private maid, who keeps everything just as her mistress left it'. [xxiii] In the second she encounters her husband, Maxim, in a beach house that she has been forbidden from entering. There Maxim describes how he unintentionally killed Rebecca. For Copjec, both the beach house and Rebecca's bedroom have an exceptional status in the film, and it is through them that the house, Manderley, takes on its Gothic character. In this, the two locations oppose each other, however, as while 'the beach house marks a surplus, Rebecca's room marks an absence, a deficiency'. [xxiv]As a structure located at some distance from Manderley, the beach house is a 'supernumerary space', one that has subtracted itself from the main building. Rebecca's bedroom is the 'space whose primary function is to mark this emptiness'. [xxv] It is, for Copjec, a site of absence because Rebecca is absent. This is an absence registered in the symbolic: Rebecca's possessions are kept just as she left them, her hairbrush, for example, within easy reach, and thus calling upon the absence of the one to whom they relate: it is 'not the unique presence of Rebecca that we miss in this scene, but the way she fits in with other objects […] her absence [….] is registered as a matter of sense, of signification – not of being as such'. [xxvi] This is not the case in the second scene, Copjec contends, as there the viewer encounters something that falls outside any conventional system of relations, something that has, therefore, no place in the film:

[xxiii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 133.

[xxiv] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 133.

[xxv] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 133.

[xxvi] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 133.

> Max begins to narrate to his new wife […] the events of his final confrontation with Rebecca […] But this time […] the camera acts out, that is, it appears to 'follow,' the movements of Rebecca. The effect of this scene is quite different from the one in the bedroom, for here we have a sense not of the *absence* of something missing from its place but of the *presence* of something that is out of place. The scene is, in the precise sense, uncanny. What makes it uncanny is not the fact that we do not see Rebecca but the fact that the camera movement that indexes her presence *does not see us*, that is, it is a *unique* camera movement that does not 'respond' to any establishable pattern of movement. It cannot be placed into any differential system of movements, any field/reverse field, moving /stationary, or other system. Without any assignable position within such a system of differences, the movement is devoid of sense. [xxvii]

Copjec's reading of this move is premised on a collective response: 'we' inevitably have a 'sense' of 'presence'. This 'sense' is understood not to relate to anything else in the film, and it has no meaning. It is not differentially constructed by framing or the movement of the camera, but only 'index[ed]' by them. From this understanding, a 'final definition of the anxiety that attends the uncanny' is produced:

> an affect aroused in reaction to an existence, to *pure existence, without sense*. The camera movement that traces Rebecca's path is pure indication; it expresses a *purely thetic proposition*, "there is," and nothing more. If one were to fill this movement with meaning by inserting it into a differential system, the "there is," pure being would cease to be. [xxviii]

In its tracing, the camera is taken to be 'pure indication', but this also 'expresses', and the proposition that is expressed is similarly 'pure'. The proposition is that there is 'nothing more' than 'there is', yet this discounts the supplementary status of the expression: in so far as there is *expression*, there is always something more. In other words, for Copjec, movement must not be filled with meaning, as that would mark the end of 'pure being', yet this purity is guaranteed only within what I take to be a

[xxvii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), pp. 134 – 135.

[xxviii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 135.

'differential system' that includes 'tracing', 'indicating', 'expressing', and a 'proposition'. It is, however, perhaps because the movement expresses something that is not it – that is, because of a condition of difference - that it can be saved from the internality of meaning. In enjoying a relationship to something wholly other, the movement is understood not to be compromised in its seeming hard-impacted purity by a division within. 'There is' cannot be the movement's meaning, because it is, as it were, *over there* in relation to this movement. Because the one is taken to be so clearly separated from the other, movement is seemingly freed from any disruptive split, lacking lack whilst remaining an empty space, one that should then be defended against any meaning that might 'fill' it up. Movement can be 'empty' only because it is claimed to be radically independent of anything else, wholly uncompromised by what it indicates, and free from any enunciative excess.

v) 'establishable pattern of movements'

I understand the difficulty Copjec faces in her analysis of the beach house scene to be one of policing sense: how are we to ensure that movement remains 'unique' and untouched by signification? How are we to maintain 'purity'? My contention is that a reading of the sequence in question will only further establish the extent of the challenge. Take, for example, the shot of The Second Mrs de Winter that precedes the movement in question:

Fig 1. Alfred Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (United States: United Artists, DVD, Prism Leisure Corporation, 2004 [1940]).

This is a perspective on the young woman's looking, coinciding with the beginning of Maxim's spoken account of Rebecca's death: 'She [Rebecca] was lying on the divan, a large tray of cigarette stubs beside her". There is then the cut to the 'movement' shot discussed by Copjec that begins with the following image:

Fig 2. (Hitchcock, 1940)

If we were to think about this in terms of classic 'suture', what is missing from the first point of view shot - what is seen by The Second Mrs de Winter - is seemingly returned in the subsequent shot of the cigarettes and the divan, before the camera begins to move. [xxix] On these terms, the 'movement' is indeed 'seen', in so far as it 'responds' to the initial point of view shot, rather than 'indexing' a wholly independent 'presence'. Shot/reverse-shot introduces a difficulty in determining the location of the look, however. The initial framing shot cannot be The Second Mrs de Winter's seeing, as she is included in that shot, whilst what she sees is not. The subsequent 'movement' is not simply her seeing either, in so far as she is not in it: because the shot is only of a divan, some cigarettes, and the like, there is no guarantee that this is The Second Mrs de Winter's point of view. It follows that seeing does not come from any one place, and because of this it initiates what Kaja Silverman describes as an 'exclusion from the point of textual origin', bringing into question any appeal to a discrete

[xxix] For a critique, see the second chapter of Žižek (2001 [1991]) and chapters 2 and 3 of Copjec (2015 [1994]). For classic articulations of suture in *Screen*, see Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', *Screen*, 17/3 (1976), pp. 68–112; Jean-Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', trans. Kari Hanet, *Screen (Dossier Suture: Cinema and Suture)*, 18/ 4 (1977), pp. 35–47; Rose (1976).

subjectivity within the film. [xxx] What Copjec terms ‘pure indication’, expressing perfectly and only a ‘thetic proposition’, is constituted within a grammar of seeing, an economy of field/reverse field. As such, the camera movement that ‘indexes’ the ‘presence’ of Rebecca is caught up with the seeing of another: the shots of both The Second Mrs de Winter and the divan are necessary to constitute the seeing of the former, with each also framed from a third perspective that belongs to no one.

One familiar possibility introduced through the reverse-shot is that of a seeing subject uncannily caught in the gaze of the object of their vision: the result of the split within the look is that activity cannot keep to one side of the divide. In this situation, the necessarily open position of the onlooker, that is, the place of enunciation, is reinscribed as just one shot amongst many. Although I have suggested that the beach house scene largely remains within the familiar structures of cinematic seeing, such a reversal is not quite achieved within it. After taking in a window, the extent of the divan, a door, and some ornaments, the camera stops moving as it reaches Maxim, who, as indicated, has been speaking during the whole sequence, and is positioned in a way that might suggest the possibility that wife and husband are looking at each other.

Fig 3 (Hitchcock, 1940)

[xxx] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 39.

At the very end of this single shot, however, Maxim opens a door to reveal where Rebecca died, and as he does so, the camera moves from his face to his feet, and then there is a cut to The Second Mrs de Winter, who is now looking to the right of the frame, rather than to the left.

Fig 4 (Hitchcock, 1940)

Fig 5 (Hitchcock, 1940)

Maxim's looking at the place where Rebecca died is constituted in terms of the limitation on a third perspective on this looking. In other words, the perspective takes in Maxim's legs, feet, the rope, and the door, but not his head, as the camera moves from this immediately after Maxim turns in the direction of the rope. Here we might read a construction of the absence necessary to enunciation: in

terms of film grammar, Maxim must in some way disappear from the shot if he is to be understood to look upon the scene he is within. The movement from head to feet can then be read as a construction of Maxim's seeing, with the absence of his upper body from the frame being the condition of this, *and* the impossibility of the shot coinciding with this seeing, that the shot is precisely about a private seeing that escapes the frame. The subsequent cut to The Second Mrs de Winter might suggest that the point of view is in some sense also hers, although, of course, the logic of shot/reverse-shot as outlined previously necessitates that this ownership is achieved only through the absence of its object. The cut does not find The Second Mrs de Winter quite in the same position as the point of view shot with which the sequence began, however, and thus something further has gone wrong with the circularity of the filmic grammar. The repetition necessary to the structure, and necessary also to its potential reversal, has been compromised. It is not only that The Second Mrs de Winter is missing from the tracking shot that initially made up for a lack in the framing shot of her seeing, and that she must be introduced once more to fill the hole and start again the process of loss, but that when she returns she is not where she needs to be to seemingly seal the look. She begins by looking to the left of the screen, and the subsequent, supposedly 'unique', camera movement is what she sees, and, because she has surely been following this, or because the movement of the camera is indeed her look, the final frame has her looking to the right.

Certainly, this could be read in terms of the confusion of the moment: The Second Mrs de Winter is unsure of her social and romantic position, and it is this, perhaps, that is reflected in the shots. To develop this line of reasoning, one could add that the scene culminates in The Second Mrs de Winter's realisation that her husband never loved Rebecca, and that, for the first time, she sees him look upon her as someone he loves. It makes sense, within such an understanding, that the early stages of the beach house sequence contrast with this long-desired meeting, constructing her as unseen: a perspective shot on The Second Mrs de Winter frames a tracking shot that takes in Maxim, and the expectation might be that this is setting up the young woman as the object of her husband's vision. As we have read, however, he ultimately turns instead to the place of his first wife's death, and partially disappears from view; the cut from the tracking shot does not find The Second Mrs de Winter quite

where it left her, disrupting the mirroring structure that would potentially see her subject to its seeing. Maxim, we might say, is in his own world, not seeing his wife, lost in the tragic narrative of his past. Or, indeed, and in keeping with Kaja Silverman's celebrated reading of filmic suture as a structure that displaces male lack onto women, Maxim, through a grammar of metonymical displacement that cannot position him as the single source of vision, is understood not to see his second wife, because he is fixed on the body of the woman he killed, the body that is not there.

In one sense, then, the flipping of the first and last point of view shots protects The Second Mrs de Winter from the potentially disturbing effects of shot/reverse-shot, the threat, introduced above, that what is being looked at – even if is a divan, or nothing - might look back. It could be argued, however, that the very failure of this suturing sequence results in The Second Mrs de Winter ironically taking on an uncannily doubled position as both viewer and object of vision: she looks to the left, there is a cut to what is seen there, and then a further cut back to her looking right. In other words, she begins by looking one way, and ends looking in the opposite direction, with the panning shot now readable as an aspect of, or other to, her discrete or enclosed looking. Counter to Copjec's understanding of a radically independent tracking shot, the curve of the panning movement of the camera as it 'responds' to the look of The Second Mrs de Winter can be read to result in *her invisibility for a perspective that is and is not her husband's*, whilst positioning her also as *the object of vision for a perspective that is and is not her own*. In this understanding, the shot is not unique, indexical, or a point of pure presence.

vi) Spoken narration

The various cuts described above within the beach house sequence coincide with a soundtrack that is not subject to this kind of operation: as the visual frame moves from The Second Mrs de Winter to her husband and back, the narrated confession proceeds without alteration in any acoustic quality, despite the narrator of the scene being located within the frame at certain moments. Copjec does not address Maxim's spoken narration, and there is no sense in her account of the camera movement 'responding' to his account of events. Counter to this, I would suggest that this spoken narration can be understood

as a further frame for the movement Copjec understands to be placed within a differential frame only at the cost of its (non) self-identity.

As Maxim's narration includes within it the words Rebecca spoke to him before her death, the 'presence' of the dead woman is introduced through a kind of ventriloquism, although one that works without the use of the standard props**.** It also stages a dislocation of female body and voice: Rebecca does not physically appear, and whilst her voice is similarly absent, it is so through its repetition in the voice of another. This is an 'original' repetition, one for which there is no prior example. As linguistic, and also in so far as it negotiates oppositions, I take the loss to be constituted within the symbolic, and thus the movement that Copjec claims to simply index presence is framed by this loss. According to Maxim, what is lost is a scene in which 'she [Rebecca] was face to face with me'. [xxxi] It could be argued, therefore, that rather than indexing a presence that should not be there, the beach house scene not only constructs a loss through a repetition that nothing precedes, but mourns a fullness of reciprocal seeing, this through the staging of a failed visual encounter.

To question the radical independence and 'presence' of the camera movement still further, we might repeat Copjec in offering a comparative reading of two scenes within the film. Whereas Copjec is interested in the bedroom and beach house scenes, I would like to think about the relationship between the latter and the film's famous opening sequence. In this, after all, we have another 'disembodied' voice, and a camera tracing a movement that does not 'respond' to any visual element of what might be termed the 'diegetic' reality of the film: 'Last night I dreamt of Manderley again', the narration declares, as the camera moves through a gate, down a winding path, into a bank of mist, finally to emerge before the silhouette of the distant house. [xxxii] My first point is simply that the narration of a past event from an off-screen narrator, coinciding with a movement of the camera that does not 'respond' to anything in the visual field, is not something unique to Maxim's confession, and thus an argument can be made for 'correspondence'.

[xxxi] Hitchcock (1940).

[xxxii] Hitchcock (1940). 'Diegetic' reality is a term favoured by Slavoj Žižek (2001 [1991]).

The Second Mrs de Winter's opening narration is significant for a further reason, however, in so far as it suggests a difficulty with the central thesis of Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror*, that classic cinema embodies women in order to construct men as their opposite: transcendent; spiritual, present. Silverman's interest is specifically with how the voice is implicated in this operation, the way in which, for example, any persistently off-screen narrator is always gendered male, because seemingly free from the cuts and contingency of visual film. Counter to this, and thus in Silverman's defence, it can be pointed out that the voice that introduces *Rebecca* is eventually granted a body within the subsequent film narrative, and thus is not in the consistently transcendent position attributed to men. Such a line of reasoning only goes so far, however, as, in the case of The Second Mrs de Winter, this is a body that is always within the past, one that, for the initial spoken narration, is never present. Indeed, the spoken narration's retrospection is applicable to everything in the film other than (perhaps) itself: The Second Mrs de Winter is narrating a dream about a memory, but the dream is also a memory, as 'Last night I dreamt of Manderley again'. Nothing catches up with the voice narration. It follows that although Maxim absents Rebecca's voice during the beach house scene even in the repetition of her words, his narration is framed in turn by another female voice. At this point, then, we can conclude that the sublime yet immanent status of Rebecca, as understood by Copjec, her uncanny and wholly discrete 'presence', is constituted by the framing of a look (The Second Mrs de Winter in the beach house) and a voice (Max's narration in the beach house) and a further voice (The Second Mrs de Winter speaking about the past in the opening moments of the film). If the sense in which the rest of the film lags behind the initial narration suggests enclosure and control, it also produces alienation: The Second Mrs de Winter's initial narration coincides with nothing, and rather than simply conferring on it a transcendent position, this independence sets it up to repeat what is taken to be the condition of Rebecca herself: dead to the world, impossible to incorporate. [xxxiii]

[xxxiii] I would also suggest here that the opening sequence of Rebecca can trouble Copjec's analysis in a further sense. According to Copjec's argument, the beach house is an odd room for Manderley to lack as it is not a room within, but a building without, and it is for this reason that the grand house is constituted by lack. But what of the Selznick International Pictures building that appears in the opening shots of *Rebecca*? This building is

At this stage, we have analysed enough to call upon Stephen Heath's classic *Screen* article, 'Narrative Space' (1976), and its discussion of 'unique' movements. These movements do not precisely repeat that discussed by Copjec: Heath is responding to a scene in the second section of what might be taken as a quintessential *Screen* text, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's film *Penthesilia, Queen of the Amazons* (1974), in which 'Peter Wollen speaks/reads the words of the directors. As the speech develops, the camera gradually disengages itself from the speaker' and moves around a house, weaving 'a complex web around him/independent of him'. [xxxiv] The connection to *Rebecca* is that Heath's focus is on 'the development of camera movement as a kind of autonomous figure; what Burch calls "the camera designated as an 'omnipotent and omniscient' (ie manipulative and pre-cognitive) presence"'. [xxxv] For Heath, this 'camera has an autonomy – dancing high-angled circles round a table-top, for instance - ' but ' is at every moment taken up elsewhere, divided in its articulations within the political action of the film which is itself, exactly, a series of actions'. [xxxvi] In thus understanding, the autonomous shots that are of interest cannot keep to their right place but find repetition elsewhere within the film in question. If we are to understand *Rebecca* in such terms, then aspects of the politics of deferral might encompass a problematisation of divisions of gender - those that separate the ideal woman from her derided counterpart, for example - as well as those between the real and the symbolic.

vii) Reading the object *a*

---

ostensibly the site of production, the house that is constitutive of Manderley, but also wholly other to it. What is at stake here? Simply, perhaps, that houses (including the house that is supernumerary) are not 'unique' in *Rebecca*, but caught up in deferral, repetition, difference.

[xxxiv] Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, Claire Johnston, Paul Willemen, 'Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons', *Screen*, 15/3 (1974), pp. 120–134, p. 120.

[xxxv] Heath (1976), p. 107.

[xxxvi] Heath (1976), pp. 107 -108.

For Copjec, the idea that the object *a* might be caught up in such deferrals and divisions will not do. What the audience encounters in the beach house scene seemingly has no frame and is not part of a differential structure. If any such structure appears, it is an imposition: secondary; imported. Copjec's analysis is reflexive and complex, however, interested in the extent to which the real of Rebecca's present absence is implicated in, and necessary to, the structure it cannot touch. Indeed, it is the possibility of this coincidence that connects Copjec's general account of the beach house to the specific analysis of the unaccountable movement within it. For Copjec, with these two spaces *Rebecca* is understood to 'reveal[…] the paradoxical function of the forbidden room in Gothic fiction […] a surplus and a deficit, an outside and an inside, a particular room within the house and the house as a whole'. [xxxvii] The barred room, Copjec concludes, is, like Rebecca's uncanny movement, 'an extimate object […] not because it is a distillation of all its horrifying features but because it is without feature, the point where the house negates itself'. [xxxviii] As Copjec argues in another essay from *Read by Desire*, 'Lonely Room/Locked Room', this is the general operation of 'suture' as it is understood within the original essay on the subject by Jean-Pierre Oudart, and outside the somewhat reductive accounts forwarded by *Screen* theory:

> Suture, in brief, supplies the logic of a paradoxical function whereby a supplementary element is added to the series of signifiers in order to mark the *lack* of a signifier that could close the set. The endless slide of signifiers (hence deferral of sense) is brought to a halt and allowed to function 'as if 'it were a closed set through the inclusion of an element that acknowledges the impossibility of closure […] *the addition of a nonemprical object* (Lacan calls this the object *a*) *that closes the field*. [xxxix]

It follows that the beach house scene is understood to introduce the real in two senses. First, the beach house itself is the empty addition to the series of rooms that make up the house, the limit that

[xxxvii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 135.

[xxxviii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 135.

[xxxix] Copjec (2015 [1994]), pp. 174 - 175.

allows signification. Secondly, within the beach house scene there is a repetition of this structure at the level of filmic grammar. Something is added to the conventional process of shot/reverse-shot. This addition is taken to be empty, experienced by the audience as a strange sense of a presence that is out of place, and signifies nothing in itself. It is necessary to signification, however, as, for Copjec, it is the place of enunciation that can never be held within the filmic structure, the 'Absent One' for which film can never adequately account. [xl] It is the enabling outside space, the crucial gap or limit, that the conventional economy of shot/reverse-shot within *Screen* theory attempts to bring inside: the place of enunciation that, in the normal run of things, is seemingly sealed up by being allotted to a given character within the diegesis. The movement traced in the beach house scene can thus be understood, in the terms forwarded by Žižek in *The Fright of Real Tears*, as the effect of a filmic 'suture' that fails, the meaningless, excessive presence that cannot be incorporated into the symbolic structure it nonetheless inaugurates. [xli] Both the filmic movement and the space of the beach house are understood by Copjec as additions that reinscribe a constitutive lack, and in this allow for something that functions 'as if' a closed circuit: they allow the house to be itself, and film to stage the mutual exchange of a look. As additions, however, if looked at in the wrong way they have the ability to manifest as threatening, 'extimate' objects, objects such as the object *a* that are in fact not objects because instances of the very lack they work to counter. The force of Copjec's analysis is that conventional Film Studies echoes the logic of 'historicism' in taking suture merely as a flattening out process, one in which the enunciative is one element within an associative chain. For Copjec, such a conceptualisation cannot take account of the limit necessary to any such chain.

An initial problem with this understanding can be introduced: both room and movement are object *a*, but the latter is situated within the former. For Copjec, the object *a* is the beach house, and this is part of the house and the negation of the house, but the movement of the camera within the room is also

[xl] See Žižek (2001 [1991]); *Matthew Flisfeder, The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film (*New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Anthony Ballas, 'Film Theory after Copjec', *Canadian Review of American Studies* (2021) 51/1, pp. 63-82.

[xli] Žižek (2001 [1991]).

object *a*, and it has no relation to anything else. All that is not the unique movement of the camera in the beach house sequence is not the object *a*. Neither beach house nor object *a* can be within a differential structure, yet the object *a* is the beach house, and in this is absolutely not the object *a*, but the mundane symbolic structure it opposes. The beach house is the 'extimate object' without feature, yet also full of 'things [that] are as Rebecca left them'. [xlii]

All this opens a further and fundamental problem: how are we to abstract the movement of the camera from the environment of the beach house? In other words, how is the split between the movement and what it 'indexes' to be maintained? The difficulty I am reading is one of framing the beach house simply as either an 'element' within a metonymical chain of signification, or the manifestation of an absence within a metaphorical structure. The perspective on the beach house cannot be detached from whatever objects it frames. Here I am reminded of Stephen Heath's injunction that in reading film 'a political struggle is to be carried through in the articulations of "form" and "content" at every point of that process'. [xliii] The politics of the film - its readings of class, gender, and identity, for example – are caught up in questions of the frame, that is, the extent to which the various characters and settings within *Rebecca* are constituted by the perspective on them.

It is a challenge within the reading of perspective that is, I would suggest, not finally answered with the return of 'metaphor' to 'metonymical' structures as promoted by Ljubljana school critics. Copjec takes the 'flattening' out of suture to be limited because it avoids the enunciative, the dimension of lack or limit necessary to any series. The problem is seemingly resolved by introducing the object *a* to a reading. Again, this object *a* is taken to be the additional nothing that makes the 'series' – for example, the exchange of glances in a filmic sequence - possible. There are two ongoing issues here. In the first, as I have suggested, the object *a* produces its own kind of 'flattening' effect: Copjec's investment in the direct experience of the real requires the uncanny movement in *Rebecca* to be, as it were, *over there*, independent of any frame. The second arises from the claim that it is the addition of the constitutive nothing that produces a 'series' of 'elements', their value not 'determined empirically

[xlii] Copjec (2015 [1994]), p. 134.

[xliii] Heath (1976), p. 112.

but differentially'. [xliv] In terms of filmic suture, then, each shot *is an element in a series*, and it is precisely this understanding, I would contend, that allows questions of narrational perspective to be circumvented. Taken together, these claims result in the contention that positionality is held within the unique object *a* that, for this reason, transcends questions of filmic grammar, and, moreover, that this grammar is anyway a 'series' of 'elements', with series not itself subject to perspective, and 'elements' uncompromised by the positionality they can be read to differentially construct. In engaging the structures and objects of the real, Copjec, in my estimation, finds she must rely on structures and objects of a more straightforward kind. These structures and objects are not seemingly resistant to reading because they are real, but because they are what must be in place for the real to be encountered in its purity. What must be neglected in Copjec's analysis, and what I would argue must also be neglected in Žižek's wider analysis of the object *a* within film, is the kind of close and questioning engagement with common sense notions of structure that *Screen* theory specialised in bringing to the fore. [xlv]

[xliv] Copjec, (2015 [1994), p. 173.

[xlv] Here I am thinking especially of Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2011 [1992]), pp. 1- 10.