

The Essayistic Films of Olivier Smolders: Desire and Drive
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Abstract

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This thesis focuses on two short films by Belgian director Olivier Smolders: *Adoration* from 1987 and *L'Amateur* from 1996. As of the time of writing, there is no critical work engaging in depth with the director's work. By means of textual analysis both films are defined in this thesis as investigations produced by and about desire.

To flesh out this theme, the two films are placed in the context of the burgeoning field of study of the essay film. While not necessarily essay films in and of themselves, the films are highly personal works that have an essayistic dimension incorporated into their structure, and they can thus be thought of as investigations into the acquisition and presentation of knowledge and experience related to desire.

Several terms are borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis (filtered through Žižek, Fink & McGowan) and used not necessarily to explain the work psychoanalytically, but as dynamic elements that help reveal the structural components of desire that structure both films. The essayistic is imagined as stemming out of an essayistic drive, a compulsive attempt at gathering visual knowledge that causes the author to inscribe that very desire into the structure of the film.

Because these films are investigations into the use of the camera and cinematic practices as ways of mediating desire, they are important works that comment on the place and function of cinematic practices of the gaze, performance, and desire in contemporary visual culture.

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Introduction

This thesis consists of an analysis of two short films by Olivier Smolders: *L'amateur* from 1996 and *Adoration* from 1987. The first film is about a man who invites different women to his studio to undress before the film camera, and each encounter lends itself to reflect on the nature of desire, whereas *Adoration* is inspired by the Issei Sagawa murder/cannibalism case of 1981. Even though the subject matter of each film is strikingly different, there is a clear common motif: a man inviting women into a space defined by the presence of a film camera. Through the analysis of both films it becomes apparent that there are many more parallels and similarities through which we can begin to discover Smolder's authorial inscription in his own work, and furthermore think of these films as works that scrutinize image-making practices in general through the very structure they present to the viewer under the guise of fiction.

Olivier Smolders is a Belgian filmmaker born on January 4th, 1956 in Leopoldville in the former Belgian Congo, (presently the Democratic Republic of Congo). Relocated at a young age to Belgium, he graduated in philology from the Université Catholique de Louvain. He is presently a lecturer at Liège University and teaches at the Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle (INSAS). To date he is credited with 10 short films, 3 documentary shorts, and one feature-length film. While his name might not be immediately recognizable, most of his films have procured prizes at international film festivals and he has consistently produced films over the last 30 years. The video-distribution company Cult Epics compiled his first eleven short films into one collection entitled *Spiritual Exercises*.

His oeuvre is characterized by a sober style that pays careful attention to composition, often relying on a tableaux-like aesthetic where characters are isolated in closed spaces. While

sexuality, religion and desire are some of the prominent thematic concerns, the human body is the primary locus in which the morbid and the sublime are juxtaposed. The role of the body and human presence in cinematic images is crucial to this investigation.

To date, Smolders has written all of his films. Language is of great importance in his oeuvre, but only insofar as it is a means to explore the image. Because of this, any narrative sense is displaced from story to image causing language to operate as a reflection on the image. Instead of dialogue his films are often accompanied by eloquent, literary voiceovers. In Smolders' oeuvre, the voice is characterized by its potential for intrusion; it calls attention to itself as a force that intertwines with the image producing new meaning. My analysis of *Adoration* explores this effect of the character's voice. The resonance between image and sound, or more precisely, image and speech, results in a type of investigation that is inevitably linked to desire.

One of his most lyrical films, *Mort à Vignole* (1998), compiles old super-8 family footage shot by his father when Smolders was a child and images that Smolders then shot as an adult with the same camera. The film's themes are time and death, but as Smolders eloquently said in a 2011 interview during the Belgian Offoff festival, the film was born out of a desire to work with 8mm film because he realized that 8mm images inherently caused an emotion. With this in mind he wrote the voiceover for the film, exploring the aforementioned themes, but it is also an exploration of film as a medium.

'Exercise' is a fitting term to describe Smolders' films –they can all be read as attempts, or *essais*; each film is an exploration of a theme, object, or idea. I argue that Smolders encourages us to think slightly differently about the essay film. Instead of considering any finished film as an essay, there is an essayistic element operating at a structural level, which

can be uncovered through analysis. In this sense the filmic text is produced out of a desire for experience, or rather, as a way of creating experience through the gathering and creating of visual evidence. Because of this, I argue that Smolder's work in the realm of fiction contains elements that can blur the lines between fiction and documentary, a property which no doubt evokes one of Godard's maxims: "All great films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend towards fiction."¹

While I do not wish to make claims as to whether or not Smolders is making "great" films, I do think he is representative of an important approach to film whereby a given text is not only the product of hard and committed work, but more often than not contains elements that reflect on the nature of the medium itself. Their strengths lie in what they offer in terms of insight into cinematic representation.

The elements that can be pinpointed as Smolders' own authorial inscription are not considered in this thesis for their biographical value, but rather thought of as active elements structurally available within the text itself and open to the interpretation of any critical spectator who may confront the text. What is crucial then is the way in which these films elicit a potentially active spectatorial position, which is a necessarily contested site since any spectator or critic comes with her or his own baggage. The most obvious way in which Smolders' films elicit this active spectatorial position is done is through the implication of the camera in the fantasy of the text, calling attention not only to its function in the text's own production but also articulating the self-reflexive space that the camera occupies in the production of fantasy. As such both films analyzed here give valuable insight into the role of the camera and the cinematic text in producing and negotiating subjectivity and also allow us to consider the

camera's potential as a tool for gathering knowledge as an integral part of contemporary visual culture.

Both *L'Amateur* and *Adoration* are constructed according to precise formal elements and aesthetic choices, which is reason enough to submit these films to a textual analysis, but there are of course other reasons that justify detailed scrutiny. The simplest motivation is that as of the time of this study there is no critical writing that engages with the work of Olivier Smolders in depth. He is a filmmaker who has produced a consistent body of work over the past thirty years, often procuring awards at film festivals. But regardless of his degree of success or renown, I consider Smolders an important figure because his work has the clear markings of an independent auteur creating highly personal films, while at the same time working with elements of industry-standard production, albeit in minimized form (i.e. small crews). In this sense, Smolder's work (and work ethic) is worthy of acknowledgment and of dire importance in the current climate of image production practices where funding normally goes towards mainstream fiction projects and/or cutting edge technology extravaganzas. Smolders' work manages to be compelling precisely because it is not one of radical otherness; rather he produces films of an understated experimentalism often in short-film form, dealing mostly with personal interests and obsessions. This results in peculiar creations that as I argue carve out a liminal territory between fiction and documentary (even when they are mostly fiction), formalism and romanticism, minimalism and excess.

Throughout this thesis I contend that both *Adoration* (1987) and *L'Amateur* (1996) while in many ways primarily works of fiction, nevertheless retain a way of engaging with image-making practices as a way of gathering knowledge. Smolders has a particular fondness for creating images that blur the lines between fiction and document(ary). More so than

attempting to conceal the role of the camera in the production of fantasy, both *Adoration* and *L'Amateur* allow us to think of the camera as creating a *document* of the profilmic event that unfolds in front of it. That is to say that while the images may be constructed (i.e. a film set, artificial lighting, etc.) and the actions carried out by actors, they are presented in such a way that does not intend to conceal their constructed nature while at the same time safeguarding the fantasy of the text. In this sense both films respond to a desire for a kind of visual knowledge highlighted by the clear implication that both films are also about filmmaking—made clear by the fact that the camera is included in the texts themselves in a very specific way.

Smolders' particular style of mise-en-abyme is crucial to the fantasy of the text, and instead of distancing, it actually further implicates the spectator in the *phantasmatic* space. While he may use sound cues to indicate the presence of the camera, the most common device used is a character looking directly at it. I obviously do not mean to imply that the inclusion/acknowledgement of the camera or the returned look is anything new to cinematic practices or unique to Olivier Smolders (Godard uses similar devices extensively just to make the most obvious reference), however it is important to keep in mind that as a practice it remains either marginal/experimental or a marker of other types of non-narrative films that are not necessarily of interest here. What is significant in both *L'Amateur* and *Adoration* is that the implication of the camera is directly tied to an active form of desire and onscreen fantasy, and by determining the specific personal and/or objective elements recurring in Smolder's work we can better frame the importance of these practices not only for theoretical models and theoretical thinking, but also to further our understanding of actively confronting fantasy in cinematic moving images and in turn question how the production of such images fits in or responds to our current visual culture.

I will argue that both *L'Amateur* and *Adoration* are films that simultaneously define the camera and the cinematic text as loci of visual investigation and knowledge, insofar as the desire to make these films is infinitely intertwined with a desire for a special kind of visual knowledge (this is another parallel with experimental documentary), and the greater part of this thesis is dedicated to structurally analysing precisely the type of knowledge that these films contain.

Because of the personal dimension of Smolders' work and his literary background I argue that his films come into close proximity with the burgeoning field of study of the essay film. Insofar as the essay film comprises an understanding of film as thought (or a 'thinking form' as Farocki and Alter have called it²) Smolders' films are important objects of analysis. What is most interesting to me about the essay film (and what I contend that Smolders makes a good case study for) is not precisely the essay film as a possible genre, nor a concern with how written language gets transferred to film (be it through voiceover or other related devices) but rather how thought is inscribed in what we see onscreen and explored through bodily presence. In the case of *Adoration*, for example, the soundtrack is predominantly absent of voice and the dominant sound overall is only that of a running film camera or projector, and instead we are for the most part left to confront the image of two lonely individuals in a minimalist setting. *L'Amateur* on the other hand is built around a voiceover that serves to further articulate the images we see on screen, so while language plays a crucial part in the film it exists first and foremost because of the images themselves; it is primarily a series of reflections on what we see on screen and thus becomes a way of encountering the essayistic element already contained there. If the essayistic is tied to the voice, it is primarily insofar as the cinema conforms to

Michel Chion's definition of the cinema as a place of images and sounds; simultaneously produced and not as easy to separate as one might think.

The logical conclusion to this line of reasoning is that a personal cinema of essayistic qualities is not necessarily conceived in terms of genre, but rather in relation to an essayistic element present at the creative moment (i.e. the writing or shooting of the film which is then structurally implied or reinvented in the final product) and in the actual image on screen. To refer to this element I propose the term essayistic drive, playing off the psychoanalytic concept of the drive. Drive is an extremely complex concept. On the one hand it denotes a certain compulsive force that cannot be controlled, but at the same time it is a non-biological formation (so as to not be confused with an instinct) that 'can never be satisfied, and does not aim at an object but rather circles perpetually round it.'³ The element of repetition is central to the drive, and as this study will show, the repetitive element is intimately tied to the desire to create images to such an extent that it manages to place itself within the diegesis of the film (this factor plays a part in the parallels between *Adoration* and *L'Amateur* since both film are products of this kind of desire). And it is important not to forget that desire is bound by repetition as well, insofar as desire 'is never simply the desire for a certain thing, it's always also a desire for itself. A desire to continue to desire.'⁴

Chapter breakdown.

Chapter 1 is divided into two parts. The first section gives a brief overview of critical writing on the essay film, selecting the research and critical thought that is most relevant to this study. Elements related to the personal dimension of essay films, the essay film as a thinking form and certain aspects of self-reflexivity that a thinking form implies are given special attention since these are the most relevant concepts. The idea of an active, self-reflexive form inherent in a personal cinema is re-framed in relation to an almost compulsive desire that motivates the creation of a cinematic image.

Chapter 2 offers a textual analysis of Smolders' 1996 film *L'Amateur*. I argue that the film can be understood as an exercise of desire that foregrounds Smolders' tendency to construct a film around the idea of the camera as a witness. Smolders' cinema prefers a camera that implicates itself in the fantasy of the text, weaving its way in and out of the diegesis. The film is constructed as a series of reciprocated looks, and the spectatorial position is determined through this very network. The camera as witness and the active act of looking at the camera clearly establishes the camera as locus of desire, and it occupies this position simultaneously at the level of production and at the level of fantasy (that is to say, within the diegesis of the fiction Smolders constructs). The result is that his work not only blurs the lines between fiction and documentary in a unique way, but in the case of *L'Amateur* also produces elements akin to conceptual art that allow us to view filming as an act of collecting. Collecting is a significant manifestation of the essayistic drive insofar that a collection entails a kind of repetition. This tendency to repeat (the repeated encounter with different women) is linked to desire, but can never be fully satisfied. Because of this the collecting act is compelled to be carried out

indefinitely or otherwise destroyed. This element of destruction occurs at the end of the film, when the initial pattern is upset; the visual space is transformed and bodies become fragmented and desubjectified. In this way *L'Amateur* opens a series of interrogations about desire itself, and actively questions the subjective roles within its structure.

Chapter 3 travels back in time to focus on one of Smolders' earliest pieces, a 1987 short film about the murder and cannibalization of a young woman at the hands of Issei Sagawa. *Adoration* is problematic in that it refrains from offering moral judgment on the violent crime on which it is based; instead the gruesome event undergoes a process of stylization and becomes a meditation on extreme desire. Even though it is a work of fiction, it is once again constructed around the idea of the camera as witness and enabler of desire, and this is its most interesting aspect for the film as an object of study.

On the one hand the male character in *L'Amateur* is constructed in such a way that you cannot help but think of him as a fictionalized incarnation of Smolders himself. On the other hand, *Adoration* presents us with a psychopath whose structure of desire is greatly similar to that of the character in *L'Amateur*. It thus follows that a strange link exists between Smolders as authorial figure and a cannibalistic psychopath. But this parallel should not be taken at face value—it does not by any means denote that Smolders is a psychopath, but rather the parallel is a result of showing us what naked desire looks like. The parallel between both films reveals the structural auteur in its perverse reality. In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* Slavoj Žižek tells us that “cinema is the ultimate pervert art: it doesn't give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire.”

Chapter 1 - The essay film and the essayistic.

This thesis is primarily interested in the essayistic as a dynamic component of film. While I aim to define this term in relation to the idea of a drive or compulsion, it was originally taken from the idea of an essay film. For this reason, it is important to briefly consider the most salient elements of critical writing on the subject of the essay film.

The essay film has gained some prominence in film studies, particularly with the appearance of two monographs on the subject: *The Personal Camera* by Laura Rascaroli (published in 2009) and the aptly titled *The Essay Film* by Timothy Corrigan (2011). Both books are attempts at carving out an understanding of what an essay film is, and both authors adeptly carve out a critical history of the term and propose a corpus of films to further elucidate the subject. Despite their learned positioning and comprehensive lists, both authors are aware of the difficulties inherent in the subject matter. Rascaroli writes “Most of the existing scholarly contributions acknowledge that the definition of essay film is problematic, and suggest it is a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction cinema.”⁵ One of her main strategies consists in attempting to discover the personal dimension of film, giving particular importance to an essay film’s power to enact a “constant interpellation”⁶ of the spectator. This idea is central to my own understanding of the essayistic, albeit worded somewhat differently. It is important to keep in mind that Rascaroli gets her idea of interpellation from Althusser, whom developed the concept borrowing several ideas from Lacan). I envision it as the structure of desire in the film that actively elicits subjective positions of desire in the spectator. This is basically a form of active spectatorial response to the structure of desire already present in the film.

Corrigan offers a similar definition to explore the essayistic element of certain films, which he defines as “a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negotiation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience.”⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly this definition resonates with certain aspects of Lacanian subjectivity, where the subject is understood as coming into his or her own subjectivity through the realm of the Other, and in this sense it is a presentation of one’s own subjectivity as a re-presentation of the subjectivity and desire of the other. Both of Smolders’ films studied here consist of confronting different positions of desire: that of the authorial inscription, the characters, and finally the spectator.

As for the origins of the essay film, Timothy Corrigan goes so far as to trace it back to Griffith’s *A Corner in Wheat* (1909). He quotes an editorial on the film, originally quoted by Tom Gunning and now re-re-quoted here:

The picture is an argument, an editorial, an essay on a vital subject of deep interest to all... [yet] no orator, no editorial writer, no essayist, could so strongly and effectively present the thoughts that are conveyed in this picture. It is another demonstration of the thought and power of the motion pictures as a means of conveying ideas.⁸

In these lines over a hundred years old it is already suggested that the cinema has the power to render visible a form of thinking, a thought process, an intellectual/social problem, and as a consequence of this, a personal point of view. It is undoubtedly contestable that motion pictures have the power to convey thoughts in such a way that surpasses the power of any orator, editorial writer or essayist, however it is hard to deny the potential for persuasion (both rational and emotional) that can be achieved through the coming together of image and sound.

A desire for the cinema to be visibly linked to forms of thought has one of its earliest champions in Hans Richter with his 1940 article “Der Filmessay: Eine neue *Art* des Dokumentarfilms” (The film essay: a new art in documentary films). Richter muses on an essay cinema where “the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequence” are no longer determining elements. Whereas Richter’s thoughts on the essay film can lead to unabashed experimentalism, the dominating trend in conceptualizing the essay film is somewhat more conservative.

Rather than completely freeing the image from temporal constraints and from the discernibility of external phenomena, the essay film is often thought of as the cinematic equivalent of the written essay. Corrigan’s monograph is committed to tracing the literary lineage of the essay film, starting from Michel de Montaigne. This way of thinking entails imagining that the filmmaker is to the essay film what a writer is to a written essay. This type of analogy is expressed as early as 1948 in Alexandre Astruc’s *La caméra-stylo*, now a classic piece of writing on the cinema and which is often cited by essay film theorists. In this piece Astruc envisioned a time when filmmakers would use the camera much in the same way as a writer uses a pen. The parallel to writing is significant because other than writing itself, the cinema is seen a vehicle for expressing thought, not only through the temporality of its images but also because it is a medium that can naturally incorporate language. Needless to say, cinema as a popular form of entertainment goes hand in hand with the inclusion of spoken language. The most important difference is that in the case of mainstream cinema, language is normally focused on the creation of narrative and not so much towards eliciting or embodying thought.

Phillip Lopate, for example, takes a dogmatic stance regarding language in an essay film stating that “an essay film must have words, in the form of text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled.”⁹ There are many ways to complicate this definition of an essay film; perhaps the simplest being the cinema more often than not relies on writing in its initial stage of conception. Whether or not there are words in the film, it has in many ways already gone through an early stage of verbalization (lest we forget most films have at least their own title). Speaking to this to some degree, Godard claimed that the writing he and his colleagues at Cahiers du Cinema did “was already a form of making films, for the difference between writing and directing is quantitative and not qualitative.”¹⁰ But to steadfastly hold to a dependency on words is definitely worth problematizing (and definitely has been problematized both in critical thinking and through films themselves).

A crucial question is to determine the ways in which thought can occur in film but also to consider its relation to the way it occurs in written and spoken language. The moving image very quickly offers information to the eye (like the plastic arts), while at the same time retaining the temporal linearity of thought in the form itself (like transmitting an idea through writing or the spoken word), with the advantage (or disadvantage) that this linear/temporal dimension occurs independently of the spectator’s own agency (as opposed to written language where the reader can pause and easily re-read). Corrigan acknowledges this kind of resemblance between thinking in written language and thinking in the cinema, elaborating on a 1930 piece “The Camera as Essayist” by Henry Luce:

The construction of images can itself assimilate the role and language of-the essayistic commentator since the camera "is not merely a reporter. It can also be a commentator. It can comment as it reports. It can interpret as it presents. It can

picture the world as a seventeenth-century essayist or a twentieth-century columnist would picture it. A photographer has his style as an essayist has his"¹¹

Because of its hybrid nature (it includes elements of photography, sound, movement, established temporal duration, etc.), the cinema has the potential to include elements of other art forms rather easily. But perhaps it is not (only) a question of the cinema's ability to remediate other media. One of the most significant differences or maybe even unique aspects that the cinema had to offer as a rendition of thought was the ability to present itself to a large number of people simultaneously when a film was viewed collectively in the cinema theatre. While this trait is still part of the cinematic experience, it has become much more contested not only because of television but also due to other devices that (potentially) render the viewing experience one of unitary isolation, such as computers, mobile devices, etc. Corrigan, nevertheless, considers this social aspect as central to the essay film and comes back to this element again and again throughout his monograph. Corrigan argues that the essay film entails "(1) a testing of expressive subjectivity through (2) experiential encounters in a public arena, (3) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as cinematic address and a spectatorial response."¹² While there is logic and even beauty in this line of reasoning, it also seems quite plausible that this logic can be extended to any kind of film. How could we not think of the work of Lars von Trier in this way—I think a clear case could be made for *Antichrist* (2009) and especially *Nymphomaniac Vol. I & II* (2013), as exercises in submitting a personal and expressive subjectivity to a collective arena where individual experiences come together, clash and redefine themselves in relation to the film.

We can also see how Corrigan's equation for an essay film applies to both films considered in this thesis: I start by defining both *Adoration* and *L'Amateur* in relation to desire. In this sense the films are the product of subjective desire that is structured into the film (culminating in the film as text). The film as text is then subjected to the desire of an other (un autre), be it the individual spectator or a collection of them; in this case my own reasoning using Lacanian concepts as an attempt to engage in its structure of desire. My own encounter with the work is not only mediated through the discourse of other thinkers and critics that I encounter and cite in this work, as well as by countless other films and an almost infinite number of additional experiential factors, but it also opens itself to the encounter with other subjects (e.g. both spectators of the films and readers of this thesis) in various positions of desire.

It could be argued that this process exists for any film, especially if we are to interact with the film through a process of critical, clinical or analytical thought. Over-inclusiveness has given way to some of the most common critiques of the essay film¹³ however it is not necessarily a negative trait. The key difference resides in the way that the “expressive subjectivity” behind the film is able to elicit an active subjective position, i.e. another expressive subjectivity, individual or collective. For Lukács, for example, the essay form moves the essayist “to become conscious of his own self” but this consciousness is productive in that the essayist “must build something out of himself.”¹⁴ Adorno seems to complete this thought by adding that the thinker through the essay “does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena for intellectual experience.”¹⁵

Curiously, the most staying definition is already implied in the word itself: understanding the essay as an attempt (essay coming from the French *essai*). Adorno gives

several lines of useful insight regarding the essay as a tentative try or attempt. In “The Essay as Form” he states that the essay is highly dependent on experience, a category with which theory has great difficulty. As theory tends to dissipate the value of experience through ever-increasing levels of abstraction, the essayistic form addresses this loss:

Higher levels of abstraction invest thought neither with a greater sanctity nor with metaphysical content; rather, the metaphysical content evaporates with the progress of abstraction, for which the essay attempts to make reparation.¹⁶

What is always hiding behind the use of the term is that there exists an “expressive subjectivity” that is associated with the voice and vision of the author of the film, in other words, an auteur. In this sense most theorizing on the essay film is dependent on the auteur figure and one could argue that therein lies the hope of resurrecting (albeit in a different form) the field of authorship in the cinema as a useful producer of knowledge.

Essayistic drive and psychoanalysis

Both of Smolders’ films under discussion here lend themselves quite well as testing grounds to begin developing the concept of an *essayistic drive*, a central concern in this thesis, which I argue both films contain. Insofar as *essayistic drive* is a neologism, it is not meant to become a clearly delineated term that directly defines a given object. Rather, it is meant to always circle around a central void or even a *point de fuite* within a work, in repeated attempts (essais) to seize or approach this impossible center. It is a form of desire that should be thought of as a structuring principal, in which desire becomes linked to a compulsive drive and each film that contains this essayistic drive is an attempt at attaining visual knowledge linked to

desire: a desire for and through the image, a desire to experience through the scopic field. The term also plays off the idea of the essay film, and while Smolders' films would perhaps not be considered essay films from the start, they nevertheless contain a strong essayistic component intimately related to desire. For this reason, the conceptualization of an *essayistic drive* is a useful tool to engage with his work and adds to the discussion of essay films in general as a parallel line of thought that intercuts with the essay film at different moments. Thus the concept of an 'essayistic drive' is meant to run in parallel to the burgeoning field of film studies that focuses on films considered to be essay films.

The word 'drive' alludes to the compulsive dimension of desire, one that is intimately tied to the desire to use the moving image as a tool to gather knowledge, especially in the case of films that would not necessarily be considered as essay films from the outset. This desire is one that is highly personal, and is structurally contained within the film to varying degrees. The personal dimension of a film (be it fiction, documentary, experimental or otherwise) is of primary importance to the idea of an essay film, but even more so to those that contain and are produced by an essayistic drive. Thus the first step is discovering the way this personal, subjective dimension is inscribed in the filmic text (in that which we see onscreen—and also in that which we hear), and to do this I have decided to employ various elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In its purest form, psychoanalysis is an attempt, or more precisely a series of attempts to engage subjectivity through language, and because of this tradition it allows us to put words in strategic places to delineate visual events that remain otherwise ineffable or at least very difficult to represent through a different code. In other words, this methodology can provide structural anchoring in the analytical confrontation of the subjectivity already elicited by the

filmic texts and their own structure. Despite the fact that Lacanian concepts have taken over a large part of my theoretical landscape, this thesis is not meant as work of psychoanalysis, at least not primarily. What I take from Lacan is the repeated attempt at engaging with that which is beyond language but somehow only attainable through language itself. In his excellent blog on post-structural and cultural theory *Larval Subjects*, Levi Bryant writes that “Lacan’s writing performatively enacts his theory of “oracular interpretation”—interpretations that can be taken in a variety of different ways –making the reader, like the analysand, responsible for what they find in the text.”¹⁷ What strikes me the most in my encounters with Lacan is the fact that many of his concepts can at times occupy the position of other, allegedly different concepts (such as the gaze becoming a stain or objet petit a), or at the very least deeply resonates with other concepts. In this sense Lacanian jargon can be thought of as a series of attempts through language to approach the ineffable core of entities of such violent irrationality as the Real and drive. To think of Lacanian concepts as mobile *attempts* nicely aligns itself with the analysis of films which I argue are built upon a tentative, essayistic core or drive. In this sense I am not interested with dogmatic definitions or explanative powers but rather in using the structural mobility of Lacanian concepts to encounter the structural elements of subjectivity existing within the *Adoration* and *L’Amateur*. In other words using these concepts as attempts of referring to something that exists in the realm of moving images through the expenditure of words.

The primary terms that I have borrowed from psychoanalysis are those that link most directly to the notions of desire and drive and the push, pull, and overlap between those very terms. Because we are speaking of a largely visual medium, desire is most directly linked to scopophilic drive, which leads us to speaking of looking and the gaze. This latter concept is of

particular importance to the field of film studies ever since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (and the work of suture theorists in general). Over time, but particularly in the last decade, several scholars and psychoanalysts have taken issue with Mulvey's understanding of the gaze.¹⁸ The present study engages with a different understanding of the gaze, primarily informed by Slavoj Žižek and by Lacan himself, also paying attention to some important insights of the gaze in film studies offered by Todd McGowan. I must reiterate that while psychoanalysis is pervasive in this work, the primary goal is not by any means to claim dogmatic, "correct" understandings of the practice. Just as Bryant suggested that the reader is responsible for what they discover in their encounter with Lacan, one cannot necessarily fault Mulvey for "misunderstanding" Lacan; rather she was able to create a productive piece of theory from her own encounter with Lacan applied to a specific problem, and any posterior criticisms are a way of keeping the subject matter lively and relevant. In many ways it is as if there were something of the essayistic already inscribed in Lacanian thought which results in repeated attempts (or essays) to circle around an object of interest and particular field of inquiry (this also fits in nicely with the many changes that Lacan made to his own theories over the years, and a constant, conscientious refusal to clearly define many of his concepts). Precisely because of the dynamic nature of his ideas, it is possible to activate concepts and beacons of meaning within the filmic text and create a conversation with other such elements. I argue that somewhere at the crux of concepts of the gaze, the real, desire & drive we can discover key components of an essayistic film born out of the desire for a certain kind of visual knowledge.

Chapter 2 - *L'Amateur*

Thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there

-Sigmund Freud

Woman does not exist

-Jacques Lacan

The cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world

-Gilles Deleuze

In the simplest possible terms, *L'amateur* (1996) is a film about women undressing in front of the camera. A total of fifteen women perform this act for a nameless, male director. There is no dialogue in the film, except for an epistolary voice-over addressed to a lost love. This narration is constructed from the point of view of the male protagonist, and since this character is a director he in turn stands in for Olivier Smolders (who also wrote the voice-over). Because of this the film is a personal foray into the realms of desire, gender and mediation that oscillates between fiction and documentary. I will refer to him mostly as 'D' (the initial of both drive and desire).

During the first half of the film the voice-over describes the encounter with each woman. Each woman is framed from D's point of view (as he operates the camera). Because of this authorial control, the voiceover (written by Smolders of course) is attributed to D in the film. We often see D setting up the camera, and we hear the spools turning. He and every woman look directly into the camera: there is no attempt to conceal the presence of the camera. Partly because of this the mechanics of the cinematic image are always readily available to be put into question. Halfway through the film, D paints the walls and drapes the windows,

allowing the women to be framed against a black void. This action can also be read as an *attempt* to visually map psychological space by producing a new visual landscape that is no longer anchored in the material world. This is the point in the film in which two forms of fantasy divide the film against itself.

L'amateur intermingles high and low art, generating a somewhat uncomfortable text that cannot be readily located in a specific tradition. In an interview during the Belgian *Offoff* festival (11/21/2011), Smolders admitted to having been an avid reader of Georges Bataille as a teenager, whose work dealt to a large extent with the “shock of opposites.”



Pensées et visions d'une tête coupée, 1991 (dir. Olivier Smolders)

Figure 1. Six frames from *Pensées et visions d'une tête coupée* (1991)

From Bataille he learned that “the sublime always has something of the ridiculous just as something that is horrible can also be something beautiful or just as a sacrilege is also an act of faith.”¹⁹ His filmmaking often confronts his own brands of minimalism and excess. An excellent example of this is his 1991 film about Belgian painter Antoine Wiertz *Pensées et visions d'une tête coupée* (figure 1), contrasting images of romantic painting, pornography and a pig being slaughtered, punctuated by a nude child carrying a dead piglet. In *L'amateur* this

juxtaposition is of a subtler character. When the film transitions from the studio to the black box (fig. 2), the simplicity of the action leads to a reinvented space of fantasy, disrupting the documentary aspect of the film and also accentuating considerations about the nature of images and mediated seduction.



Figure 2 - The transformation of space in *L'Amateur* (Three frames).

On the director's website, *L'Amateur* is described as '*L'histoire d'un homme qui embaume la nudité des femmes* (the story of a man who embalms women's nudity)'.²⁰ This statement is more than just a poetic attempt at describing the film. In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" André Bazin suggests that a "mummy complex" may have been key to the creation of the plastic arts. As civilization evolved, the arts divorced themselves from this anthropocentric utilitarianism. "Civilization cannot, however, entirely cast out the boggy of time. It can only sublimate our concern with it to the level of rational thinking."²¹ If embalming does in fact lie at the heart of *L'amateur* it is only insofar as it is sublimated by (to quote Bazin) "the power of an impassive mechanical process." While Bazin is seemingly more concerned with time itself, Smolders shows us that time gains importance only insofar as there is a human body subjected to it. This "sublimation" can be better understood as an attempt to say something about the mechanics of desire motivated by an essayistic drive, explored through a series of codified repetitions. Every woman documented corresponds to one of these repetitions.

Because of this series of encounters with different women, the 26-minute film is an interesting instance of the filmmaker as collector on two primary, interrelated counts. One

could mistakenly say that the filmmaker is acting as a collector of women, but I argue that the filmmaker is actually a collector of experiences. So while the film could be seen as a collection of women, it is superseded by a collection of experiences in which each woman reveals something about this particular cinematic experience. Through different encounters with women, all following similar protocols (i.e. carried out like an exercise or ritual), the camera is used as an investigative tool. This experience is a consequence of desire mediated by the image and the camera. As stated earlier, I argue that the desire for images (or rather, the creation of images) is an integral part of the essayistic drive. In an interview with Richard Olivier, Smolders expressed his belief that there are fewer subjects more essential to the cinema than death, the body, sexuality and eventually, God.²² Once we leave narrative motivations aside, a new set of recurring themes arises for the cinema, and the aforementioned tropes are the usual suspects. *L'amateur* is indeed a collection of images mainly about the body and sexuality, but what is interesting is how these elements explore the cinematic medium in and of itself and contextualize its place in time. *L'amateur* is also a collection of looks, and in this way it foregrounds the machinery and scopic drive on which the cinema operates.

The repetitive action of women undressing in front of the camera works as a ritualistic formal structure. The schema is subtle in that it is not obsessively repeated as if following a set of unbreakable rules. For example the first woman lies on the couch after she undresses, the second one does not (fig. 3); some women are filmed on the street before entering the studio while others aren't, and so on.



Figure 3 The first and second woman.

However, the compulsory aspect is inscribed in the film, and insofar as this element is present we can also liken the film to conceptual art, led astray by the author's own romanticism and other essayistic tendencies.

The first minute-and-a-half of the film is comprised of very different images: super 8 hand-held footage taken from trains showing tracks and moving urban landscapes (fig. 4).



Figure 4 Super 8 images taken from trains

The footage is rather ordinary, very much like a home movie shot by an amateur (quite fitting with the film's title) - a cliché even. Through the voiceover Smolder tells us: "*Je film avec application les paysages et les gares. Il me semble juste de me plier à cette convention*" (I carefully film landscapes and train stations, it seems right to me to adhere to this convention). Smolders is aware of the clichéd nature of the images, of their conventionality and the voiceover offers an explanation for why these images are so common. The narrator says "*On a*

toujour filmé les trains avant de filmer les femmes (We have always filmed trains before filming women).” If one considers that the film normally referred to as the birth of cinema, was a shot of a moving train then in a historical sense, trains *were* filmed before women. Through these reflections Smolders justifies the use of what would otherwise be incongruous images in the overall context of *L’amateur*, at the same time continuing the implicit exploration of cinema itself. The narrator explains to his lost love that trains can lead him to an encounter with fiction, which he equates to the encounter with women. After these words are uttered a white flash of light abruptly cuts the images of the train and we see the main character setting up a film camera. The spool of film turning becomes audible, and the man slowly backs away from the camera. He stops and poses for a second, then continues backing up to sit on a table, another camera mounted on a tripod by his side (fig. 5).



Figure 5

L'amateur can be understood as a film about desire and loss: a man has lost a woman, and thus he searches for her; however, as the voiceover indicates, these encounters are equated with fiction (*Je sais que les trains peuvent encore me conduire à la rencontre de la fiction, c'est-à-dire, à la rencontre des femmes*). The statement retains enough ambiguity to refer either to the real world or the filmed encounter, or both for that matter. This remark is a good example of a verbal utterance that opens the filmic text to the essayistic. Fiction is not only something not real; it is a creative force, a reconfiguration of so-called reality. Some of this reasoning can be wrested out of the following passage by Deleuze:

What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real or fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to 'make fiction', when he enters into 'the flagrant offence of making up legends' and so contributes to the invention of his people.²³

In *L'amateur* the scopic encounter is of this order. It does not seek out to invent a people in the same political sense that Deleuze refers to, but seeks to invent a way of seeing a possible subject. On the one hand there is desire and drive, compelling the subject to seek out an object of desire, yet desire cannot be fulfilled because the ideal other/object has already been lost. In a certain sense the film sets out to test the reality of this loss by creating a work of fiction. Freud explained that a certain type of reality-testing linked to desire consists in searching for a lost object. "The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is not to find an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there."²⁴ Regardless of whether or not such a feat is actually possible in our everyday life, the mechanisms of both cinema and photography allow for a virtual re-framing

of this perpetual search through the preservation of ephemeral instances. Elaborating on this very idea Bazin wrote:

The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually represented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.²⁵

So in a certain sense, the cinema offers itself as a vehicle of re-enactment and re-encountering, since it conjures the presence of an absent object. Bazin continues: “Every image is to be seen as an object and every object as an image. Hence photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact.”²⁶ For Roland Barthes the photograph denotes a *having-been-there* of the thing whereas the cinema operates around a *being-there*.²⁷ Barthes also acknowledges the photograph as creating a new form, although he claims that it is in radical opposition to the cinema. While there are several paths to reconcile Barthes and Bazin concerning the still image, what is readily apparent is that they both agree on the capacity of the cinematic image to re-present an object as *being-there*. Smolders’ quest for the lost woman through a series of encounters with different women attempts to re-frame this ‘cliché’ as the cliché of the cinema itself. Every woman stands in the place of a structuring absence, and the essayistic drive operates around the ambiguity that this positioning enables.

The voice-over resonates with this ambiguity. D explains that he has devised a method to keep desire at bay: “*J’ai inventé une nouvelle méthode pour tenir à distance les femmes que je veux approcher. C’est une sorte d’écran que je place entre elles et moi.*”²⁸ He leads us to believe that it is inevitable to film women, but the screen (or the act of filming) acts as a

barrier. However, his statement acts as a ruse since *L'amateur* is a document about desire itself and how it relates to mechanical mediation. It would be a mistake to think that there is a negation of desire, since every encounter is sought out due to desire. The desire for the lost love is the “narrative” device that triggers the desire to film women. By filming different women as an offering to the idea of this “lost woman,” the visual exercise emulates something akin to that finding and losing described by Freud, implicit in the process of reality testing.²⁹ Yet when he claims to place a protective screen between himself and an object of desire that he does not desire right then and there, a denial of negation is taking place, which reveals the concealed object of desire. By repeatedly subjecting bodies to the translucent barrier that is the screen (i.e. the film), his commentary pulls something out of the sea of images to the surface of language. This is the first allusion to the essayistic drive contained within the film.

Objects and the gaze.

*That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths
of my eye, something is painted*
-Jacques Lacan

In an interview with Richard Olivier for the project on Belgian cinema entitled *Big Memory* Smolders said: “*Souvent un film démarre sur l’envie de filmer tel ou tel objet. [...] Nuit Noire [...] a été construit à partir de l’envie de filmer des insectes. Une autre fois ç’aura été l’envie de filmer des femmes.*” If the women in *L'amateur* are in any way objectified it is no doubt largely because of this fascination with objects. However this objectification is neither limited to women nor is it absolute. The object exists only insofar as it enters the frame, as one possible profilmic element amidst any other. In most of Smolders’ work there is an immanent

material sense etched in the frame. In a certain sense, *objectness* is immanent to the visual field. Once the ‘object’ is in the frame and is given its own duration, it is free to become something other. This fascination with the ‘object’ is already evident in *L’amateur* through the various *actual objects* that populate his mise-en-scène: furniture, a music box, a mirror, a phonograph, a puppet/dummy, a knife, etc. (fig. 6)

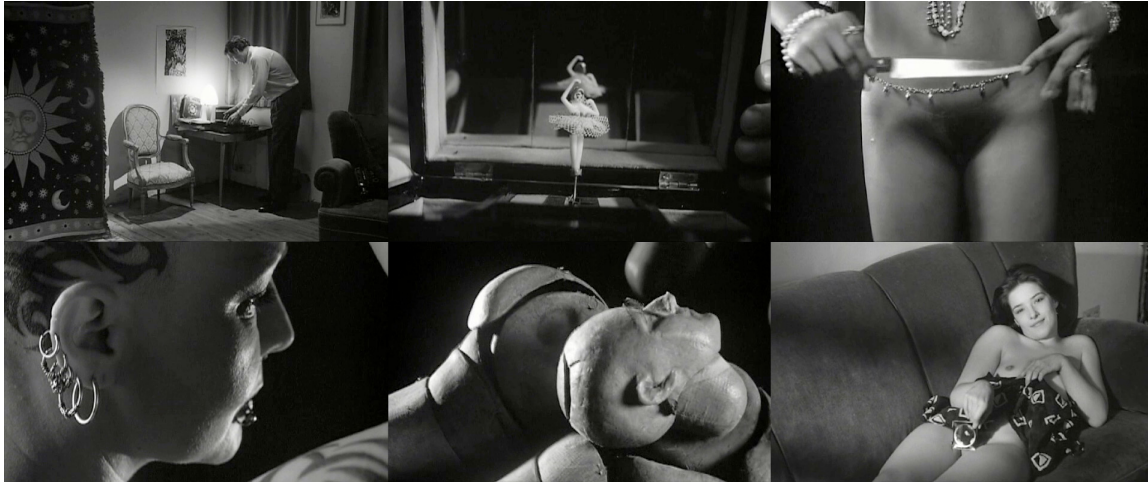


Figure 6. Various objects in L'Amateur (6 frames)

The mirror often doubles or extends the camera’s function as a means of framing within the frame. Contrary to its function of multiplying space, it is an object that imposes a limitation by reducing space, prior to choosing the frame. Depending on what the director wants to achieve, the mirror determines where the camera can and cannot be.

Empedocles thought of the eye as a lantern, casting light on the outside world. There is one instance in *L’amateur* where the mirror acts as this kind of eye. As the first woman plays with the mirror she finds the angle where it reflects one of the set lights directly into the lens. The mirror thus reflects what normally is hidden, actually casting light into the lens. This conception of the eye is interesting in that it allows us to understand the gaze as a stain, insofar as we can actually see it. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek explains it as follows: “The gaze marks the

point in the object (in the picture) from which the subject viewing it is already gazed at, i.e., it is the object that is gazing at me.”³⁰ The part of this explanation that remains troublesome is the almost uncanny *object that is gazing at me*, which clearly is a disruptive experience. Is the mirror not gazing back at me here? (fig. 7)



Figure 7. The mirror returns the look and in so doing becomes a stain on the image (3 frames).

Despite any potential fetishization we may attribute to this sequence, the action is quite banal and carried out casually. However, the rays that are returned to the camera take on the dimension of an intrusive gaze (what we see is an actual stain that disrupts the visual field) as they obfuscate the woman’s genitals by distorting the image.³¹ Lacan defined the gaze as a stain: a spot or wound that disrupts the symbolic order of, in this case, the frame.³² Žižek elaborates: “the gaze functions thus as a stain, a spot in the picture disturbing its transparent visibility and introducing an irreducible split in my relation to the picture.”³³



Figure 8. The void reflected between flashes of light. (2 frames)

The uncanny element of the stain is strengthened when we catch a glimpse of the image in the mirror, between the blinding flashes of light. The void contained within the mirror is out of

place but also gives an image of exaggerated depth as if the vaginal cavity extended beyond reasonable limits. This moment is fleeting and fittingly concealed by flashes of light that engulf the frame within the frame. Fittingly, the image that follows is of the male protagonist covering his face in such a way that he reveals only one of his eyes. The way his eye mirrors the mirror in the previous shot is interesting and quasi didactic. Lacan claimed that the eye and the gaze were in a relation of antinomy, or as Žižek puts it, they are “constitutively asymmetrical” (125). So while a character gazing back at the camera does not constitute this definition of the gaze, the inverted eye (as conceived by Empedocles) casting light out that would eventually blind us offers an interesting inversion. The second eye, an eye that looks back at us, is carved out and isolated by the hands, and becomes monstrous or disembodied eye.



Figure 9. The disembodied eye. (2 frames)

If the gaze qua object appears as a stain, the procession of eyes that follows is simultaneously an echo and a normalization of the gaze, through which it eventually vanishes. Fifteen minutes into the film a new object reactivates the logic behind the gaze. The male character/director holds a music box with a small ballerina (of course there is a mirror in this music box). At first we see a close up of the music box, presented as an offering to our own gaze, for us to look upon it. The sound of the music box fills the sonic space. The man backs away from the camera, the space opens once again, he sits on the couch and the music stops as he closes the box (fig.10).



Figure 10. Music box.

The music box is a feminine object, and also an object of nostalgia. Žižek argues that nostalgia allows for an extraction of the gaze-object in its pure, formal status.³⁴ By creating the illusion of *seeing ourselves seeing* it “conceals the antinomy between the gaze and the eye.”³⁵ So far we only see the man looking into the camera. After he has painted his studio black, we see three of the women rotating in this dark space, clearly emulating the ballerina in the music box. The idea is slightly tawdry, but it is important in that it visually maps a psychological space. Thought of in this way, the music box not only acts as *mise-en-abîme*, but it presents the structure of the gaze as constructed through nostalgia. In contrast to the first apparition of the music box, while it did take over the entirety of the screen, it was only us who looked at it. In this second instance, we see the music box, but we also see the man looking. It is an instance of seeing ourselves seeing. Nostalgia is upset insofar as he is clearly not a child, and the women are not children.

Collecting

Among the objects that fascinate and/or inform his obsessions, Smolders has made special mention of entomology and insect collecting; and while insects do appear in some of his work in prominent ways, what is more striking is that to a large extent all of his films resemble an insect collector’s shadow box. Smolders has a large collection of shadow boxes, most of them made by him, and his feature length film *Nuit Noire* (1995) was born out of his desire to

film these objects. It is not surprising that his production company is named *Les Films du Scarabée* (Films of the Beetle). Keeping this in mind, the basic premise of *L'amateur* resonates with the collecting of insects to be placed in a shadow box. Is the 'embalmed nudity' not somehow echoed in the insect placed in the shadow box? And if that is the case, is not the music box a kind of *phantasmatic* clash of the two?

Following this logic, what are the implications of suggesting that *L'amateur* collects women (or embalms their nudity) much in the same way that an *amateur* entomologist collects insects? How can we not picture the insect collector as the man in solitude (because literary tropes have taught us that the insect collector of our imaginary is always male), pushing phallic pins through the butterfly (or beetle) of femininity? Any number of books and films offer this image, such as *The Collector* by John Fowles (1963). However, the previous analysis of the mechanics of the gaze shows that *L'Amateur* troubles this rather simple interpretation since it enables a unique play of power between different subjectivities.

The impulse to collect is reframed through the essayistic drive that circles around the desire of images. Before fully exploring this idea it is necessary to further *unpack* the concept of collecting. Propitiously, in *Unpacking my Library* Walter Benjamin suggests that the object should not be considered in isolation, and it is not even the collection as a whole that is important, but rather the relation between collector and collection. Thus, a collection implies a dynamic interdependence. Benjamin writes:

This [referring to books] or any other procedure [of collecting] is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges towards any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories.³⁶

Does this not resonate with the voice-over claiming that he has devised a method to keep women at a distance, to be protected against the *spring tide of memories* that the ideal woman he is addressing could release? Is this not what happens through the screen, through the image itself? The act of collecting borders on a liminal experience, on a chaotic eruption that can dismantle the collector's very identity, and it is precisely this liminality that is implicitly explored in *L'amateur*.

L'Amateur explores subjectivity through both the act of collecting and the object itself (i.e. that which is presented before the camera). We are cast (against our will) into the position of desire that the filmmaker has made for us in assembling such a collection of bodies, shots, sounds, etc. He has also created a stand-in for himself in the form of D who in turn carries out his desire to film women under the guise and logic indicated by the voiceover. It could be argued that *L'Amateur* offers the perfect setting for the male gaze to take over the structure of the film. A male gaze presupposes a male viewer that identifies and partakes in this gaze, however, the film allows to think of this quite differently. Earlier I quoted Žižek explaining that the gaze is not someone looking at the picture, but the picture looking back at the one looking. Keeping this in mind I contend that instead of a male gaze what is most significant to the structure of desire in *L'Amateur* is that a potentially active spectator is cast into a specific position of desire (one that mirrors the filmmaker's own desire as articulated by D) and can then react to that desire as it occurs in the visual field. The encounter with desire is marked by the presence of the gaze. In the next part of this chapter I will further elaborate on the function of the gaze, but for now suffice it to say that any potential objectification of women through the exploitation of their bodies in *L'Amateur* is reconfigured through their own performativity in relation to the visual field, especially in relation to the way they look into the camera. Even if

the different women have been arranged by an external agency into a “collection,” it is the spectator who is cast in and out of the position of object and from here we must strive for our own subjectivity.

The position of the voyeur is crucial for understanding this development. The voyeur is a continuous threat to the text of *L'amateur*; he lurks behind every frame, between every word as a potential disruption of the film's structure of desire, which is in fact much more versatile. Žižek writes: “There is something extremely unpleasant and obscene in this experience of our gaze as already the gaze of the other.”³⁷ Potentially, we could share D's look, insofar as he continually looks at women and the camera constitutes a hiding place; a place from which to peek through an orifice onto a scenario that unfolds on the other side of this protective barrier. This male figure dangerously approaches the pornographic, despite the voiceover that wants to tell us otherwise. As Žižek explains:

Contrary to the commonplace according to which, in pornography, the other (the person shown on the screen) is degraded to an object of our voyeuristic pleasure, we must stress that it is the spectator himself who effectively occupies the position of the object.³⁸

What this means is that precisely because of the performative dimension of the individuals on screen, tied to our consumption of this visual text (we are consumers after all) we are cast into a structurally inevitable place.

Every woman in *L'amateur*, for the most part, is performing in one way or another for the camera. Žižek elaborates that “the real subjects are the actors on the screen trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators, are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze” (110). But then again, *L'Amateur* is not intently a pornographic text; first of all there is no sexual intercourse

displayed, and furthermore it is clear that not all the women are trying to rouse us sexually. While some elements of seduction make their way into the film, the performance of every woman is first and foremost an act of confronting the other's gaze; a gaze is in turn attempting to learn something about desire itself. Because of this, the spectator can fall in and out of the object position more readily. So what is D's role as agent, as a stand-in for the authorial voice?

If we think of him as a collector, Benjamin explains that "Inside him [the collector] there are spirits, little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be--ownership is the most intimate relationship that he can have with objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."³⁹ The fact that Benjamin first speaks of ownership seems like a very negative trait if applied to *L'Amateur*, but once again the true revelation comes rather counter-intuitively. Ownership becomes linked to a creative force, the authorial voice is only there to further indicate that that which has the status of object in the visual field is in fact that which can give life to the subject looking at that visual field.

Of the look and of the gaze

The minimal elegance that could be attained by systematically repeating a very simple procedure eventually devolves into a more complex and somewhat excessive experiment: the film goes from the simple action of inviting women to face the camera to the moment where D paints studio black, transforming the space and the approach to filming the women. Close-ups fragment their bodies and we see parts of wooden, life-size dolls strewn across the black visual field. However, it is through the look of every character that is directed at the camera that *L'Amateur* remains consistent. The act of standing in front of the camera becomes a systematic

ritual of visual investigation to which the ‘collection’ is subjected; however, this ritual reciprocates and engulfs not only D but also the spectator. The importance of the idea of the gaze is that it reveals that the spectatorial position is structurally determined by the text, and is then encountered by any actual spectator. In Seminar XI, Lacan states: “The eye and the gaze—this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field.”⁴⁰ In the succession of looks that make up *L’amateur*, and specifically in the instance with the mirror discussed earlier, there is a split between eye and gaze, a split that gives the film “the ability to stage a traumatic encounter with the gaze and with the real as such.”⁴¹ This alignment of looks is an invitation to examine the mediating apparatus in relation to desire, which is the true subject of the film. Through the figure of the collector, the director has (perhaps instinctively) attempted to systematize the structure of desire itself by means of repeated encounters that are kept at bay by the impenetrable force field that the camera produces.

Needless to say, we instinctively align the idea of the gaze with the act of looking out of linguistic habit and association, but Lacan’s definition is something altogether different: the gaze reveals itself as a stain, a disruption of the visual field, and this stain is the place that the spectator occupies within the filmic text as long as he or she goes along with its fantasy. “The existence of the gaze as a disruption (or a stain) in the picture—an objective gaze—means that spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself”⁴²

The gaze is not someone who looks; it is what structures the visual field around a point of possible disturbance (the intrusion of the other) since its power was always stemming from the realm of the virtual. What this means is that the symbolic order of the film, or the world of fantasy as a coherent world that can be (at least partially) interpreted by the spectator is

(potentially) disturbed by the appearance of the gaze. That being said, this is a welcome confusion in *L'amateur*, since the act of looking acts as decoy that signals the presence of the gaze elsewhere in the visual field.

The look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. During an attack men who are crawling through the brush apprehend as a look to be avoided, not two eyes, but a white farmhouse which is outlined against the sky at the top of a little hill.⁴³

The organ of sight is the gaze's birthplace (or for Sartre, the look) but it is not always dependant on it. This is why Lacan construes the gaze not as a seen gaze (ambiguity intended) and thus not necessarily someone looking. That being said, the role of looking in film is not to be dismissed. The way in which *L'amateur* highlights the act of looking by having characters look directly at the camera enables the mechanisms of the gaze but always as a kind of feint. *L'amateur* is a film about desire. Collecting, in and of itself is a structuring of desire. Lacan sustained that the object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*) present in the visual field is the gaze. Yet its presence is something fluid, even paradoxical. As Todd McGowan explains, "this object is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field."⁴⁴ Once again the idea of a structuring absence comes into play, and is present on many levels. The lost or ideal woman and the fluctuating place of the spectator correspond to these levels. It is around these elements that the symbolic order and the structure of the film is elided, but only insofar as evidence of it is displaced elsewhere in or around the visual field. The film compulsively produces repeated encounters with onlooking individuals presented as paradoxical objects of desire: while on the one hand they are presented as the object cause of desire (*objet petit a*) kept at a safe distance

through the mediating screen of the camera, they are also presented as stand-ins for an original, first but lost woman. In both cases, the authorial voice is aware of a necessary barrier.

Thus, in the film we see a male actor who is the ‘hero’ of the film, constructed in such a way that he stands in for the director and the authorial voice. Even though we never see him speak, the film is narrated from his point of view and his main action throughout *L’amateur* is to look. Even though the film is for the most part a meditation on male desire, the image that opens and closes the film--that of a monkey--parodies the male gaze, or rather, the looking male contained within the film. While D is the only one that looks at a spectacle (bodies, objects, the room itself) at the film’s end we once again see the ape alone in the room. The presence of an African ape can be read as an allusion to Smolders’ birth in the Belgian Congo, as one of the various “exotic” elements that surface throughout his films. Other moments attest to the self-awareness of a problematic, gender-biased gaze, but the film interpolates the spectator and elicits an active response precisely because it foregrounds the act of looking. Even when the film’s premise is *grosso modo* the offering of the female body to the male gaze (the looking male), the female face and body effectively act as site of resistance rendering *L’amateur* a series of visual negotiations. The film is very much about the female body (it is subtitled *Un film en form de poire – A pear-shaped film*) and the act of undressing before the camera. However, the bodies that are captured onscreen are attached to faces that in turn have eyes that *seemingly* look directly at us, an act that stresses these bodies as the simultaneous sites of disruption and resistance. It is important to note that a large part of Smolder’s oeuvre depicts individuals looking directly at the camera, but *L’amateur* implements this most notoriously as every single character in the film returns the look enabled by the machine. Not

only is this part of the formal consistency of the film, but it is also an action that threatens to tear through the veil created by that very formal consistency.

The returned look is often referred to as a Brechtian technique of estrangement for its ability to pull the spectator out of the grip of fantasy/illusion, since the look potentially acknowledges the presence of an otherwise invisible camera. However, it would be a mistake to think that the returned look always has this effect. Indeed, there is a moment of estrangement potentially inscribed in the look that is returned--just as when in everyday life we are forced to sustain eye contact with a stranger--but that potential can very well be contained within the phantasmatic world of a film, and in certain cases can even pull us deeper into the fabric of fantasy.⁴⁵ *L'amateur* and its series of looks require that we buy into this fantasy, and I would argue that it (inclemently) submerges us in this realm. This does not mean that every spectator must encounter this fantasy and its corresponding drives and desire in the same way, but the mechanism at its core is one and the same. This structural core is made manifest at the level of the gaze, since the gaze structures the subject's relation to desire (i.e. the way he or she desires) in the visual field through what Lacan called the objet petit a. This object "is not the look of the subject at the object, but the gap within the subject's seemingly omnipotent look. This gap within our look marks the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see."⁴⁶ In other words it is an elusive marker that exists only insofar as we organize the structure of desire around it.

So far we have suggested that the filmmaker acts as collector, and what he has collected is a series of looks. We have attempted to partially outline the mechanisms of desire inscribed in this act of collecting as presented through a cinematographic medium. Godard wrote that "all great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward

fiction... each word implies a part of the other. And he who opts wholeheartedly for one, necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey.”⁴⁷ Is this not precisely the realm of the essay film? Speaking of the essay film specifically, Nora Alter seems to paraphrase Godard: “the filmed essay shows and tells us that we can view and hear a feature film *as* a documentary, a documentary *as* a feature”.⁴⁸ *L’amateur* subtly oscillates between fiction and documentary (here I understand documentary as the visual document of the performance of real individuals, whether or not they are playing a fictional character). Firstly, if we accept that Smolders is acting as a collector, what is he doing if not documenting this very collection? The narrative aspect of the film, the tale of lost love, is there to mask its origins in documentary (the documentation of a collection, regardless of whether the collection be fictional or not, it is there on screen as such).

At the beginning of the chapter I suggested that there was an element of conceptual art in the film articulated through its repetitive pattern of women disrobing. Thought of in this way the work is partially a formal exercise of encountering/documenting this action. This element is complicated by the performance of a fictional character vs. the performative nature of the actual individual who may or may not be performing a character. Other elements also complicate a formal reading and insert disruptive noise of their own; the use of different cameras, the propensity of hand held footage, the images of trains, and the voiceover itself. The most notorious variation, no doubt, is when D transforms the studio into a black box. At one point we see three of the women presumably standing on a rotating platform which clearly suggests a link to the moment earlier in the film where D holds a small music box (see figure 10). By the end of the film, new women appear filmed in an entirely different style. It could be argued that this black box is literally the space of D’s actual fantasy. Objects that appeared

mundane or sentimental before the room was painted black, such as the record player and the music box, are now invested with mystical powers in this new space. Other objects appear, such as knives, snakes and jewellery, once again altering the film's initial minimalist approach with a kind of *objective* excess.

The power of the returned look lies in actualizing the moment that allows recognition of the visual field (the frame) looking back at us (fig. 11).



Figure 11 A collection of looks (15 frames from *L'Amateur*)

More than indicating the artifice of the filmic text, the look in *L'amateur* has the potential to makes us aware of the limits of our own subjectivity by further involving us in the realms of fantasy and desire, or conversely, tear us out of them. In a certain sense, this is Lacan's definition of the gaze. "The gaze marks the point in the object (in the picture) from which the subject viewing it is already gazed at, i.e., it is the object that is gazing at me."⁴⁹ While it is almost impossible not to confuse the notion of the gaze with the act of looking, as mentioned earlier, it is important to keep in mind that the gaze is not specifically a person looking. Rather, as McGowan puts it, "the gaze is not the spectator's external view of the filmic image, but the mode in which the spectator is accounted for within the film itself."⁵⁰ The act of looking within the film can elicit the presence of the gaze, but always as a sudden jolt or haunting after-effect. Thus the act of looking activates the gaze only insofar as it constitutes a disruption of the visual field in relation to the structuring of desire.

"The eye and the gaze – this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field."⁵¹

In *L'amateur*, it is this encounter of male/female/mechanical visions that opens the field of signification and reveals the inner workings of desire through the (attempted) re-presentation of the lost object (woman as structuring absence). Needless to say, the lost object cannot be presented as presence, but only re-presented as absence.⁵² The lost object is a ghost, an after-image, a structuring absence that disintegrates as soon as we attempt to actually attain it. Thus on the surface *L'amateur* is an attempt to find this lost object -an effort to come to terms with

its absence.⁵³ In other words, there is a seeming paradox at play. Let us examine the audible evidence actually contained in the film. The narrator's confession comes as we see him on screen for the first time and in the voice over we hear him say: *J'ai complètement perdu le gout de séduire*. The male protagonist walks away from the camera to sit on a table, his eyes fixed on the camera, as the retreat of his body opens the visual field transmuting the fixed frame from portrait to tableau. Next to the table on which he sits is another camera. The voiceover continues: "*J'ai inventé une nouvelle méthode pour tenir á distance les femmes que je veux approcher. C'est une sorte d'écran que je place entre elles et moi* (I invented a new method to keep away the women I want to approach. It is a kind of screen that I place between them and myself)." This phrase is indicative of the ambiguity that permeates the film as a whole, since it denies the earlier negation when he says that he has lost the desire to seduce. In *Denial, Negation and the Forces of the Negative* Wilfried Ver Eecke writes "A denial is thus a very ambiguous performance. It undoes one crucial aspect of repression in that a denial labels the repressed. A denial lets a careful listener know precisely what the object of an effort of repression is."⁵⁴ However, due to the element of fiction of the film (i.e. fiction as a space to let fantasy unfold), *L'amateur* is revealing what is repressed. The film can be seen from two different limits acting in contradictory ways: sometimes in complete opposition while at other times overlaying and fusing into one another. As mentioned earlier, one way to understand the film is as a formal exercise with a set of rules that determines what happens before the camera (i.e. women undress in front of the camera). Following this set of 'rules' enables an exploration of different bodies in a visual experiment. Even when the film opens with two young and attractive women,



Figure 12. The first two women

it proceeds to other feminine types as well. This variation causes both desire and the desire to seduce to spread over a vast and varying visual landscape, and in turn we can think of desire as diluted. *L'amateur* becomes an open space populated by any type of body. It suddenly shifts away from seduction and becomes an almost clinical documentation of different behaviours and how they may be predetermined by factors such as age or body type. It moves beyond the desire for this or that woman as it foregrounds the element of performance. This is why we can think of the film as a visual exploration; at this level desire is relocated from the body to the camera. What is sought is that very variation in performativity that different bodies produce, and in this sense it is now the camera that compels the filmmaker to film different women and as a result the standard archetypes of beauty and filmed nudity are partially challenged.



Figure 13. Different bodies. Different standards of beauty. Different performative drives.

And this brings us to the second way of understanding the film. If on the one hand *L'amateur* is a formal exercise, desire itself is the other limit. In any personal film, desire is present as the desire to make the film. Secondly there is the desire to film all of the specific women to make

the film. But desire is not intelligent or considerate. It is a force that does not adhere to this or that way of thinking. Because of this, *L'amateur* does not remain clinical at all times. In other words desire disrupts the clinical aspect of the film. While it challenges certain preconceptions of male desire by showing us bodies that can disrupt or alter pre-established standards of beauty, it simultaneously delves into those standards and its consequent clichés once again bringing seduction back into play. The woman bearing jewellery with a snake is a good example of this (see fig. 14 below); it is a cliché of exotic beauty and it raises the question of agency and conformity, questions such as who is this image for and why is it filmed at all? But this apparent inconsistency is not purely negative, rather it serves to highlight the fact that sexuality and causes of desire are fluid and variable, and reveals the inconsistency of both the filmmaker and the spectator engaged by the fantasy unfolding on screen. For the most part what Smolders has achieved is the rechanneling of desire through the act of filmmaking, since desire is inherent in the scopic machine itself. Thus at this level we do not need to explain why this image exists or where agency lies, rather the image justifies itself as desire mapped on to the visual field (i.e. the frame, the shot, the film itself).

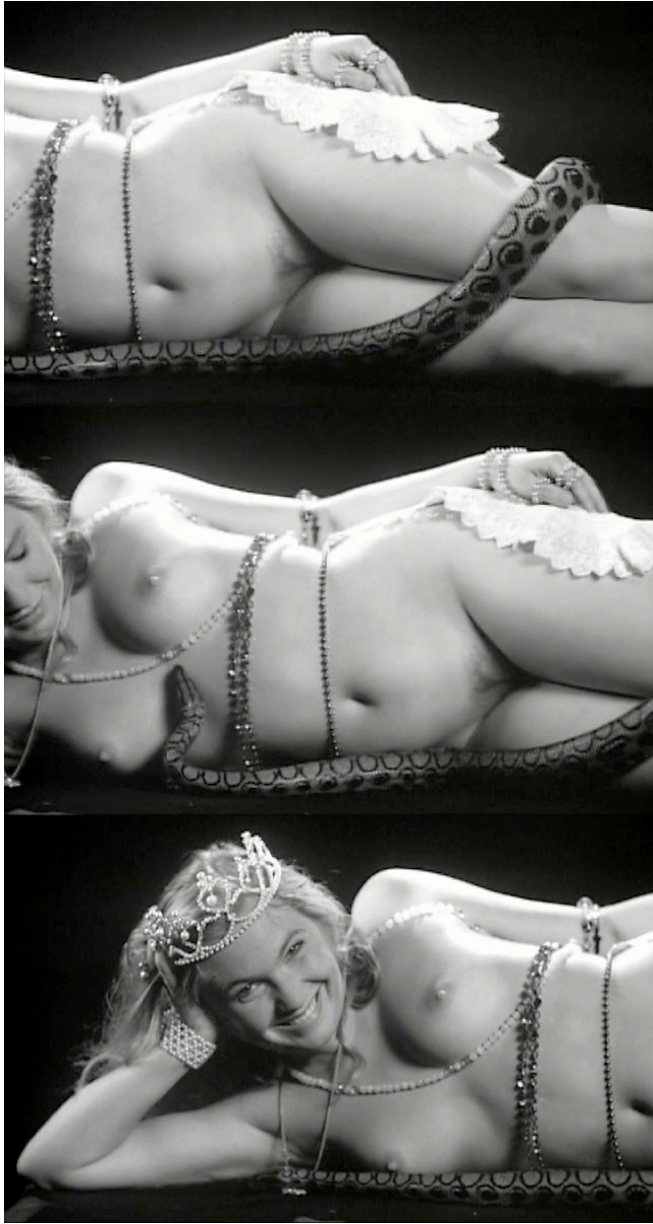


Figure 14 conventional beauty standards and clichéd performativity of beauty and male desire (3 frames)

Keeping in mind this ambiguity, filming does not act entirely as a substitute for desire, since—if we are to believe the narrator’s words—the act is meant to keep women at bay. The main character (as attested through the authorial voice) is aware that for the mechanism of desire to continue, the object must remain out of reach. In *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič writes: “The moment the subject attains the object she demands, the *objet petit a* appears, as a marker

of that which the subject ‘*has not got*’, or *does not have*, and this constitutes the ‘*echte*’ object of desire.”⁵⁵ If any heed is to be paid to these confessions, the original woman was always already lost, and the importance of the cinematic machine as mediator, locus of desire and space of simulacra is magnified exponentially. The female body becomes a simulacrum in and of itself as it distracts the filmmaker from the drive behind this desire, which is the mediating machine of the camera. Yet there are actual bodies, actual performing subjects that are stepping into the place of this void. This is the crux of our paradox: on the one hand there is something that is always already lost yet on the other there is a presence that invades the machine itself. The body also has the potential to resist and disrupt the frame itself. It is when the cinema turns its mechanical eye to such dimensions of the body and its interrelations that the essayistic drive is engaged.

L’amateur is a film primarily about desire and its vicissitudes (needless to say it is also a film about the act of filming and the cinema in general). The film, despite its shortcomings, also understands something crucial about desire: “Desire does not desire satisfaction. On the contrary, desire desires desire”.⁵⁶ This apothegmatic phrase nicely sums up an important dimension of Lacan’s conceptualization of desire that is definitely at play in *L’amateur*. Desire is a (vicious) cycle, very much akin to a drive that endlessly circles a void. This void is the space of paradox, opened by the object of desire but always already as lack/absence. The authorial voice/main character of *L’amateur* hopes to keep the void present while at the same time real bodies step into this empty space. The act of filming as mediation and defense mechanism is an attempt to bypass this circuit through mediation. He would hope that it is not a substitution that is enacted, but the transfer of unaffected lack. Thus the screen, activated by a series of returned looks and continually shifting bodies, becomes the battleground where the

narrator, the women and the spectator must continually struggle and perpetually (re)find and (re)lose their subjectivity. It is of capital importance that the screen is conceived by the authorial voice as a kind of barrier before ever being thought of as a mediation (when the voice over says: *une sorte d'écran que je place entre elles et moi*). This utterance can be read as a protection against non-verbal seduction (bodily seduction), in that it suggests that the image might once and for all surrender to the authority of the spoken word.

By saying that filming women acts as a barrier to curb desire it is clear that there is a level of self-reflexivity, but it does not necessarily mean that this is true at all times. On the one hand this belief is already symptomatic of the inherent tension between language and image, where narrative attempts to dominate the behaviour of the image (often successfully). On the other hand it indicates the director's awareness of this very issue and brings it into the open. In many ways, the images do conform to the utterances of the authorial voice, but nonetheless there is always a gap, a point of escape. However, psychoanalysis tells us that for the lost object to be re-encountered, it must always be kept at a distance, and this is the operating logic that configures subject-object relations in relation to a hypothetical original, ideal object.⁵⁷ Earlier I said that the series of visual encounters turns the screen into a battleground. What is at stake in this arena then is something related to the notion of the gaze, insofar as the gaze disrupts the visual field and allows a 'subject' to perceive him or herself as object in the field of the other. I argue that *L'amateur* renders the notions of subject and object fluid, problematic, and pertinent. On this very same topic Freud writes: "The division between subjective and objective is not automatic, it is forged out of a process of repetition where the original lost object must not be found, but re-found."⁵⁸ Thus the compulsion to repeat is inscribed in this quest and *L'amateur*

enacts this compulsion through the encounter with a series of women. This creates the foundation upon which the act of collecting can be built.

The prefix 're' is of particular importance. Originality and difference are the illusory by-product of a series that follow from repetition. This idea is implicit in Freud's discussion of subjective and objective: "Experience has shown the subject whether a thing is there in the external world, so that he can grab a hold of it whenever he needs it. [...] all presentations originate from perceptions and are repetitions of them."⁵⁹ This 'rule' is echoed in the process of *L'Amateur* as a whole. As mentioned earlier, the film implies that there is nothing new about filming women when the narrator remarks "*On a toujours filmé les trains avant de filmer les femmes*". Thus (through the lens of the amateur/lover) the cinema can be understood as the same pursuit continuously re-enacted.

As different women enter the visual field, *L'Amateur*'s fiction is confused with the objectivity of documentary. The female body/face acts as a sight of resistance by subverting the film's mode of enunciation. On the one hand the film presents itself as a biographical account of the author, transfigured into a projected fiction. The serial aspect, the compulsion to repeat encounters with women, propel the film further into the territory of fiction. Yet I claim that the performative aspect of the women's bodies escapes this realm at very particular points. These points are the ones that challenge our ability to speak of the film. Certain giggles, certain smiles, certain hesitations and accidents of countenance reveal what for now we might very well call the 'documentary' aspect of the film: the presence of a camera in a moment that transgresses the very fiction it wishes to create, offering something that seems rather difficult to stage, to act for the voice of another. It is of little significance to the viewer whether or not these actions are in fact 'performed' (on one level, everything is performance of course), but in

a very tangible way these minute gestures add a violent subjectivity to the women. It is violent insofar as it creates a disturbance. In other words, a different 'voice' emerges that redistributes the relations of power in the film: it is the silent agency of the individual subjected to the camera. On the surface the film is an attempt to re-encounter the lost object (the woman that left, died, betrayed, etc.) but doubles as an exercise in activating bodies as simultaneous sites and sights of resistance that re-configure our relation to the visual field.

Chapter 3 - *Adoration* (1987)

Adoration is an important case study for uncovering the essayistic drive because for the most part it is a “silent” film. The sound of the rolling camera plays throughout most of the film, drowning out other sounds. This is significant because most thinking of a film as an essay or containing essayistic elements is anchored by the presence of language as a vehicle for thought (usually a voiceover). There is one moment when *Adoration* briefly uses voice both diegetically and as a self-reflexive artefact which I shall analyze in detail later in the chapter.

Adoration’s central motif is desire, and while there are considerable differences between it and *L’amateur*, both films share important structuring elements: a male character operates the camera, and has invited a woman to his home where he films their evening together. Much like the apartment/studio in *L’amateur* the main character transforms his home into a performative space –a visual landscape in which the human body enacts a ritual for the mechanical eye of the camera. Both characters also acknowledge the presence of the camera, implicating it in the diegesis, generating another active form of self-reflexivity. A woman elicits D’s desire, but once again it is the camera and its ability to produce visible evidence that triggers an investigation into the realm of desire and its subsequent performativity. In this sense there is always a potential displacement of desire onto the recording machine.

The differences between both films are also striking. Through its subject matter *Adoration* sets out to visually explore the wreckage that desire can impose on the human body. Desire is visually mapped through the profilmic physical interaction of two bodies; it is ritualized and carried out through action. This is in stark contrast to the *modus operandi* in *L’amateur* that instead used the camera as a screen or barrier, foreclosing contact, and in so doing questioned the possibilities of desire in the abstract, more as a meditation on the nature of

images in relation to desire. *Adoration* shares this concern, but also asks if it is possible to sustain desire through the image. Instead of exposing the camera as tool to investigate desire, the camera in *Adoration* serves as a witness in that it shows a performance of desire, but it is also a performance for another, an external gaze which is simultaneously the camera's point of view but also the enabler of another, impersonal gaze. This difference in method is partially due to the fact that *Adoration* is inspired by a true event. Before subjecting the film to a detailed analysis it is necessary to offer a brief overview of the notorious event that inspired it.

In 1981, a young Japanese man by the name of Issei Sagawa was pursuing his studies in literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, France. During this time Sagawa brutally murdered, defiled and cannibalized a young Danish woman named Renée Hartevelt.

Sagawa was a small man, of a stature beneath 5 feet plagued by complexes about his appearance. He had for a long time fantasized about tall and beautiful Western women. Renée Hartevelt was also studying in Paris at this time. She was a tall, healthy and attractive young woman. Hartevelt was known for her friendly demeanour and had developed a friendship with Sagawa, whom hitherto had been unable to ascertain any other relationships. Something that Hartevelt did not know was that several years ago while still in Japan Sagawa had attempted to eat a German girl's buttocks, sneaking into her apartment while she slept (armed with an umbrella and a Frankenstein mask). His plan failed when he accidentally woke the girl with his knee and was easily overpowered by her.

The incident remained in obscurity since the German girl was silenced through bribes from Sagawa's wealthy father. Sagawa had been of frail health since birth, and he expected to gain strength from eating healthy women. So on June 11th, 1981 Sagawa invited Hartevelt to his apartment to aid him with the translation of some German poetry, a language Hartevelt spoke

natively. Hartevelt accepted the invitation. At one point in the evening Sagawa requested that Hartevelt read out loud into a tape recorder. As she read, Sagawa left the room only to return with a rifle. He shot the unsuspecting woman in the back of the neck. He had purchased the rifle months earlier precisely for this action, but the murder was only the first stage of his fantasy. After he regained consciousness (he claims to have passed out from the shock of killing her) he proceeded to cannibalize and have intercourse with her corpse, documenting each stage with a photographic camera. After removing a considerable amount of flesh and storing it in his refrigerator for later consumption, he went on to pack the remains of the body into two suitcases. He called a taxi and asked to be taken to the Bois de Boulogne. The driver found it strange to drop someone with two large suitcases in an isolated location, far from any trains or airports, but the driver kept his thoughts to himself and complied with Sagawa's request. Sagawa was barely able to move the suitcases and finally gave up, abandoning them in a rather conspicuous location. Later in the evening, a couple stumbled across the suitcases, discovering the grisly contents. They alerted the authorities and once the news came out the taxi driver recalled the peculiar individual and the address at which he had picked him up, and immediately offered this information to the police. Sagawa was arrested soon after. Police found Hartevelt's remains in his refrigerator. They also found the roll of film taken by Sagawa that documented the evening. Not surprisingly, it was determined that he was mentally unstable and was placed in an institution. His father stepped in once again and hired one of the best lawyers available, who proceeded to convince the authorities that it should not fall upon the French taxpayers to pay for the upkeep of this foreign individual.

After four years, it was decreed that Sagawa be sent back to Japan to be placed in a mental institution there. His father arranged for a fake pickup with the mental institution as a

kind of show for the media. The cameras witnessed Sagawa being picked up at the Japanese airport to be driven straight to a mental institution; what they did not see was that he was released immediately upon arrival at said institution. Sagawa had not been tried in Japan so this was quite easy to arrange. Sagawa has remained free ever since. As if the events that took place on the night of June 11th in 1981 were not peculiar enough, Sagawa became somewhat of a notorious character in Japan. He eventually wrote around twenty books, some of which described Hartevelt's murder in detail. He has appeared as himself in pornographic films and has openly expressed his desire to kill and cannibalize again. And perhaps in what is the most vulgar form of media-induced irony, he actually became a food critic for some time.⁶⁰

Amidst the many existing documents about the crime, a 30-minute interview with Sagawa produced by *Vice* and appositely named *Interview with a Cannibal* is of particular interest. *Vice*'s interview structurally extols our fascination with the morbid through the aesthetic choices it employs. Most of the interview basically allows for Sagawa to retell his story in graphic detail, which makes for an uneasy viewing experience (and it is indeed quite strange to see this awkward man reflect upon his actions), but there is one moment where the producers indulge in their own pathologies, albeit in the virtual world of images. Three photographs of the butchered victim are displayed and accompanied by loud piano thrashes and the sound of voices that are both dissonant and agonizing. In one sense it is perfectly natural logic: violent images call for violent music or sound –and *Vice* is not necessarily known for taking a subtle approach in their reporting. But if we pause and think about this it is immediately revealed as an unnecessary choice: given that the images already have a context provided by Sagawa himself, why was it deemed necessary that the ghastly images of the actual murder be accompanied by a soundtrack that already say on their own: these are frightful

images!?! While the rest of the document is successful in producing a relatively straightforward record of events (albeit one that is somewhat redundant because the information was already widely available), the moment when the photographs appear is one of excessively cheap aesthetic character on the part of the production. The choice of music resonates with the clichés surrounding gore and shock culture, and of course, horror cinema. Because of this the interview imbues the overall document (morbid though it may already be) with rather uncouth shock value: by choosing to accentuate a moment of violence with violent sounds the overall effect becomes vulgar. This choice produces a form of incomprehensible cruelty unique to itself as a re-presentation of a transgressive event. I offer this brief analysis of the interview to raise once again a point that has been in question ever since photographs depicted the wreckage of human flesh, particularly for journalistic purposes, and become particularly relevant for a film that recreates them: How can we speak of these events? How can we document them? How can we represent them? And finally, how do they relate to the idea of an essayistic drive?

Taking many cues from the actual event, *Adoration* is a visual fantasy exploring the events that might have taken place within the confines of Sagawa's apartment on the night he murdered Renée Hartevelt. Sagawa is played by Takashi Matsuo and Hartevelt by Catherine Aymerie.

I will be referring to the characters in the film as S (Sagawa) and H (Hartevelt) for indexical purposes and ease of expression only. The film, it could be argued is not interested in the specificity of the actual individuals but rather aspires to explore desire itself and to a significant extent this frees the characters on screen from their originating identities. In a certain sense the specific event is rendered general, yet no film exists in a vacuum. Smolders

has repeatedly pointed to the Sagawa case as the origin of the film, and while the film never names the characters there is one direct allusion to its origins. The very first image is a simple title with black text on a white background that presents the case file on Sagawa. It reads ARCHIVES SAGAWA No. 448B/81/436. Needless to say this code remains obscure if the spectator does not put in some legwork; but is this not already the *demand* of any essayistic work?

As stated earlier, desire plays a central role in the film. The film's title already indicates an intention to make the film about one of the strongest forms of desire, which is to adore. Aside from the various stylistic elements that parallel *L'amateur*, *Adoration* overtly deals with the traumatic dimensions of desire. A film that is essayistic always implies a process of analysis at some level, and we can think of *Adoration* as enacting its own analysis of the killing. Renée Hartevelt's violent murder is a site of trauma both in the actual desecration of a body (a physical trauma to a body) but it is also traumatic as an event because it is a transgressive act; it implies a (temporary) breakdown of our ability to understand the everyday world. Lacan writes: "Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is inassimilable in it—in the form of the trauma."⁶¹ While it is possible to map the path of trauma within the filmic text, it is significant to note that the traumatic event led to the creation and process of analysis of the film itself. *Adoration* occupies itself with mapping this trauma across the visual field and in so doing is always at the limit of the real. The real is that which "is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order. This character of impossibility and resistance to symbolization lends the real its traumatic quality."⁶² *L'amateur* was also motivated by trauma, albeit in much more subtle form—a trauma related to a loss that was impossible to assimilate, veiled by the actual

images of different women. The voiceover told us that the screen was a barrier keeping desire at a distance, and this suggested that desire could not be fully embraced. In a rather perverse way, *Adoration* seems to show us what the consequences of desire are when we go through with our fantasy and arrive on the other side, perhaps jokingly offering us the protection of the screen (I say jokingly because we see the murder from a presumably safe distance, but as I argue, the film is structured so as to draw us in to that very structure, potentially effacing that safe distance). The succession of narrative events in *Adoration* places desire in front of the camera as a profilmic event in and of itself, anchored in and by the traumatic moment of murder. Comparatively speaking, it becomes clear why *L'amateur* employs a voiceover and why *Adoration* does not: in the former desire is paradoxically attached to something which we never see (even though the nude female body is constantly shown, desire is linked to the lost woman—the woman we do not see) and thus the voiceover makes up for this lack of visibility, whereas in *Adoration* what we see is the playing out of an event clearly motivated by desire where trauma is visible on screen.

In the previous chapter I argued that the performative dimension of the women in *L'amateur* blurs the divide between fiction and documentary, somewhat along the lines of Godard's own claim that fiction tends toward documentary and documentary toward fiction.⁶⁴ Through their performative dimension and the inclusion of the camera within the fantasy of the text what we see onscreen seems to be a spontaneous occurrence, an impression that is reinforced through the use of voiceover and the constant looking into the camera (the voiceover is presented as an exploration of the image). Whether or not this is a rehearsed performance or a relatively spontaneous “in the moment” reaction to being in front of the camera is not of

primary importance. What matters is the effect the image produces in the context of the filmic text and how it relates to the structure of desire.

While *Adoration* is presented to us in different terms, there are at least three moments in the film that resonate with the performativity in *L'amateur*: when H sees the camera for the first time, later when she covers the lens of the camera to shelter herself and finally the reversal of this action when she covers her own eyes to hide from the gaze of the camera (See figures 16, 18 and 19).

While both films include a character making the film that we are watching, *Adoration* is significantly different in that it plays as a hybrid found-footage film. What we see onscreen suggests that S filmed himself and H and we have somehow become privy to the material. S's character embodies an overlapping of intentionality that authorial also takes place in *L'amateur*, achieved by implicating the camera and including a character that operates it and stands in for the filmmaker's own desire to make a film. A consequence of this approach is that at some level of the fantasy created by the film, the montage acquires a form of agency that is aligned with the gaze that structured the fantasy itself. This gaze operates on two levels; on the one hand, it is of course a consequence of this film being a fiction created by Smolders; the level at which his authorial inscription is made manifest in the structure of the film. But this authorial inscription takes on a new life within the fantasy we see onscreen, and becomes a pure manifestation of the structure of desire and drive that the film's fantasy/diegesis implies. That is to say, the gaze of the fantasy is aligned with the creative force behind the film, but it goes beyond this. Even when the film is edited by Thierry Knauff and Kayt Schneider under Smolders' supervision, the fantasy of the film disrupts that reality: the agency of the filmmakers is aligned with the desire of the character and they become entangled in such a way

that the elements that would be otherwise reflexive aspects of the film become overly charged. This alignment produces a kind of resonance between both levels of desire and is intimately tied to the essayistic drive in film and the desire to see.

This potential for the fantasy of the film to take over the agency of authorial desire is paradoxical because it is constructed into the film by Smolders himself. As mentioned earlier this is linked to the presence of a character that emulates the function of the filmmaker. The film is constructed as *huis clos*, a secret space completely isolated from the world (of course we might say that the camera becomes a window into this secret chamber). While the diegetic universe portrays the isolation of both characters, the agency of the production is present as an ambiguously subtle disruption of this very intentionality: the subtle focus pulls that make sure S is always in focus no matter what point of the focus plane he may occupy (i.e there is no autofocus in a film camera). The fact that Smolders foregrounds cuts as abrupt interruptions – the white flicker between scenes (as in *L'amateur*) or the hand that reaches to the camera (the male character in the film often does this, or the more notorious moments when the female character reaches out to cover the lens)--should be kept in mind not only as crucial factors in revealing the *constructedness* of film, but also as resonating with the notion of a tear in the imaginary (the level of images) that disrupts the symbolic order and disrupts fantasy and are the perfect signifier of the potential intrusion of the gaze. These interruptions (white flashes, hands) are the markers of montage, points of rupture that create fragments from the larger reel (the real) of film, yet Žižek writes:

What is often overlooked, however, is the way this transformation of fragments of the real into cinematic reality produces, through a kind of structural necessity, a certain leftover, a surplus that is radically heterogeneous to cinematic reality

but nonetheless implied by it, part of it. That this surplus of the real is, in the last resort, precisely the gaze qua object.⁶⁵



Figure 15. The character S. Three frame grabs from the opening sequence.

The title fades into a white flash that reveals S setting up the film camera, he walks back and forth, away and towards the camera, as if he were measuring the frame and verifying the proper placement of the camera (fig. 15). He looks at his watch. After a moment, H walks in and sees the camera, and S is not at all shy to point out its presence. Even though we see them talking, the only sound we hear is that of the film rolling through the spools. It is important to keep in mind the artifice of the sound, the agency involved in choosing it. It accentuates the presence of the camera by resonating in this small, box-like room, it is as if the camera were to say: “look at me,” even though in this case we cannot see it. So when S and H approach the camera until they are framed in a medium close-up, we cannot help but to be drawn to it too, although our recognition of the camera is one step removed since it happens through their faces. S offers to take H’s jacket.



Figure 16. S and H in the opening sequence (Order: Left to right, top to bottom).

At this proximity to the camera H's expression goes from jovial and friendly to one of discomfort as S leaves her alone. Diegetically this seems only natural: she cannot help but be estranged by the presence of this documenting machine. All of a sudden she needs to be aware of herself as subject, which is another way of saying that the "I" is in the field of another (i.e. the visual field created by the camera). What is this if not the moment that Rimbaud alluded to in saying *Je est un autre*? For Deleuze, this is aligned with 'becoming,' where the formula of *Ego=Ego* is replaced by Rimbaud's *I is another*. But more than a full-fledged becoming, what Smolders has managed to put on the screen is an image of the hesitation between the two poles,

and in so doing makes questions about identification become more about recognizing multiple possibilities for subjective vantage points.

This hesitation is accounted for in the Lacanian view insofar as there is no such thing as a specific moment in which the subject emerges. The subject is either always too late or always too early. Paul Verhaeghe explains that the subject fails to fill the gap between subject and object, “hence, the continuous movement from signifier to signifier, in which the subject alternately appears and disappears.”⁶⁶ The camera, by representing the desire of *an* other (the other) splits H’s own subjectivity as character. We could say that the signifier that masters her notion of self, i.e. her subjectivity, is under constant change. So beyond the diegetic predetermination that we as spectators can immediately recognize (i.e. woman walks into apartment, is surprised), this moment of estrangement is a visual representation of the stain: it is the transgression that occurs when the surface of the world as we know it is momentarily pulled out from under our feet to reveal the gaping wound of our split subjectivity. Is this not the moment when we must struggle with our own objectification? The stain is visible to us only insofar as it is visible to her; however, we already knew that the camera was there. By recognizing her own hesitations we confirm that at some level of cognition we have perhaps failed to notice the racking focus that has taken place (clearly evident in the images above), which from a technical point of view is the product of an external agency. Or to put it differently: her being in the apartment with S fits well into the symbolic order as it relates to everyday experience, but the unexpected presence of the camera points to the locus of its collapse. Considering that the unexpected presence of the camera corresponds to the momentary apparition of the stain in relation to the black hole of *jouissance*, H takes the presence of the camera rather well.

S reaches out to the camera, white flashes take over the image and the film cuts to the next scene. With S still facing the camera it is difficult to immediately tell that he is in a different room. This has the effect of making H seemingly disappear from the frame. As S backs away from the camera H is revealed sitting at the table where they will have dinner. Prompted by S, they toast looking at the camera. H follows along, seemingly accepting the camera's presence. S takes H's hand and kisses it, which prompts a swift look at the camera; a signal of her own hesitations (fig. 17).



Figure 17. S Kisses H's hand which prompts a quick look at the camera.

S turns to the camera, and as if he were attempting to naturalize the situation leaves the table and fetches the camera. His tactic could be described as an effort to alleviate discomfort through forced familiarity. He approaches H and films her in a medium close-up.



Figure 18. H covers camera with her hand.

She is shy but playful towards the camera (after all, it is the object that can potentially cast her as an object in the scopic field), and finally opts to cover the lens with her hand (fig. 18). The scene ends here, once again through a visible, rough cut, concluding the second instance of a moment where the difference between rehearsed and spontaneous image becomes indiscernible.

In the next scene they are both seated on the floor, as S records H's voice. H reads *Apparition* by Stéphane Mallarmé. The fact that Smolders selected to replace German expressionistic poetry for the symbolist poetry of Mallarmé not only accentuates the personal dimension of the film, but is also significant insofar the Symbolists were interested in indirect representation of truth. Is this not conceptually fitting with representations of drive and desire, and the notion of the stain, which defy direct representation?

S picks up the camera once again and makes his way back to H. As he encroaches on her, it is clear that the camera troubles her. She turns away from it, refusing its gaze. The playfulness of the previous scene has entirely disappeared. She turns to find that the camera is still pointed at her and in (oddly –at least for me) the most striking moment of the film covers her own face with both her hands, as if the world around her were to disappear with this gesture. If this film had a *punctum*, this for me would definitely be it.



Figure 19. Punctum.

Barthes' notion of *punctum*—that which reaches out and pierces me, as the most personal and intimate aspect of an image—is obviously closely related to the idea of the gaze and the stain. In his guide to Lacanian concepts, Sean Homer elaborates on this correspondence, explaining that “Barthes’ detail that pricks us, bruises us and disrupts the studium (the symbolic) of the photograph is that fleeting glimpse, or encounter with the real as objet petit a.”⁶⁷ The first time I saw this film, years ago, it was in fact this image of H covering her face with both hands that remained with me the most strongly, for reasons that were quite obscure

considering the general subject matter. While different moments may in fact have similar effects on different individuals, the puncturing quality of this moment can be partially brought to the surface through analysis (however, in its ultimate form, it resists analysis).

What we see here is a negation of H's desire—we see her clearly while she wishes this look to be removed from her--and to a great extent this is what makes this image so compelling. She refuses to see what renders her visible, and she is seen all the more strongly because of this. Of course there is that paradigmatic childish aspect in the gesture, as if covering the eyes would make the outside world disappear, or inversely, cause her to disappear from it. It is also a synaesthetic moment: in a relatively silent film the eyes have taken over in their own ability to speak; at this moment she has silenced her eyes, and paradoxically they become all the more audible for it, since the visual drive is enhanced by its very obstruction. Rancière, writing about Barthes, elaborates on this very effect: “[the Punctum] tells us that the image *speaks* to us precisely when it is silent, when it no longer transmits any message to us.”⁶⁸ When H covers her face with her hands there is something of the punctum. The face as source of messages is interrupted. But of course the image still *speaks* to us as we have a new image. It speaks through silencing the face, that visual element which has hitherto given us most of the information about the character. This moment acts as a punctum precisely because it is a moment of collapse, where the sought after image is refused yet produces a new image. Rancière elaborates that the messaging quality of the image is replaced by a “raw, material presence.” Is it not then this raw, material quality that latches on to the very possibility of a subject emerging or disappearing before our eyes, and is this not precisely what H is performing before the camera? When she lowers her hands the camera is of course still there; but we know that at some level she has not experienced a respite but instead the black and

formless weight of the void that separates her from the world. This time she reaches towards the camera lens to cover it with her hand, leading to another cut.

This approach to filmmaking consists not only of a play for the camera, but also a play with the camera, not so much interested in revealing the artifice of filmmaking (which does happen on some level), but rather embeds the camera and the production of images into the very text it produces. And this is of course at the heart of the essayistic impulse.

There is of course much more to say about these concepts and this particular moment of the film, which I intend to come back to, but for now what I wish to point out is that these three moments offer an image that resonates much in the same way as the images in *L'amateur* in relation to performativity. The last instance when H covers her face introduces a new variable to these images, but overall the parallel holds. I contend that whether or not these images are the product of a rehearsed performance, improvised or scripted, their performative dimension produces an image that resonates with our real world expectations of such a moment, and because of this immerse us in the fantasy of the text. Of course this could be said of most fiction filmmaking, but there is a difference. The beauty of this immersion lies in the fact that the camera has also been immersed, not only as an object that is present diegetically but through the gaps negotiated by looking directly at the camera, and as such it has inscribed the creative drive related to desire into the text itself, and because of this, produces a text that is also an investigation of its medium. If the camera is thought of as the object that produces fantasy, it is as if the object of fantasy intrudes upon reality. If the camera is in fact the investigative tool, a tool for thought insofar as it drives the construction of the visual field, this moment is exemplary of the essayistic drive piercing the realm of the imaginary.

The Camera and the Relation to Enjoyment (Jouissance)

Through the analysis of *L'amateur*, we spoke of the gaze as a disruption in (or of) the visual field, indicative of a split or wound in the subjectivity of the observer. The gaze is a product of looking insofar as it is an occurrence in the visual field. However this does not necessarily imply that it is someone's look because insofar as the gaze is aligned with a drive it is impersonal. As Anne Dunnand puts it, "the gaze is already there, [...] determining the subject, subjecting him to the Other's signifiers."⁶⁹ The precedence of the gaze imbues it with an uncanny potential, which is why it is produced as a disturbance. Lacan's example of the sardine can in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* where a sailor boy pointed out to the young Lacan that a sardine can floating in the water could see Lacan was offered as an example of the uncanny gaze that occurs when the visual field looks back at us. Lacan explained that he was out of place in that world of fishermen, and while he had not seen the can, the can was "seeing" him. This gaze reveals our *out-of-placeness* or the gaps in our own subjectivity: we suddenly realize that we do not fit into the world we took for granted. Is this not the moment when H confronts the camera for the first time, escalating in intensity up to the moment when she finally covers her face? (If there were a voice, this gesture would correspond to the silent scream). Generally speaking, because the gaze is immanent to the scopic field, it may align itself with the look of the characters also bound by that space, but it takes somewhat of a transcendent dimension insofar as it is indicative of something not representable, something beyond or before language and representation (the original murder and aftermath is of such excess that in many ways it approaches the limits of human comprehension, maybe even surpasses them).

The event itself hinges on its own proximity to the notion of *jouissance*—a compulsion carried out by traversing fantasy--and any degree of pleasure obtained in viewing the film is no doubt concomitant to that very *jouissance*, or as Bruce Fink puts it “a pleasure that is excessive, leading to being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination and because of it produces equal amounts of outrage and fascination.”⁷⁰

This proximity to *jouissance* through violence raises the question of aestheticizing violence (and particularly a violent event that actually took place in the world). However, I claim that it counters its morbid subject and potentially gratuitous elements with its style and its essayistic drive. Once again, we could invoke Smolder’s invoking Georges Bataille’s visions on excess: what is sublime contains an element of vulgarity and vice versa.⁷¹ This juxtaposition produces an excess or surplus, which for Bataille corresponds to the logic of transgression but in Lacanian terms it is more a matter of overzealous identification with the structures of fantasy.⁷² While Bataille could be used to understand the mechanisms reconciling the apparent disparity between the violent subject matter and the formal aspects of the film’s style, Lacan offers insight into the structures of desire insofar as they pertain to fantasy: the desire to see and the desire (or drive rather) to be seen. Žižek explains, “Lacan redefined the Freudian *trieb* (drive) as reflexive. For Lacan visual drive is not what I want to see—I want to see is [a form of] desire--but [rather] the drive to make myself seen.”⁷³ *Adoration* presents a series of tableaux or visual landscapes in which desire clashes with drive.

The camera has dominated the relation of the subject to enjoyment insofar as it negotiates the relation to desire and drive within the scopic field. In this sense the film touches upon a fundamental kernel in the act of filming (i.e. the desire to see and drive to be seen). S can only “enjoy” insofar as the existence of the camera structures the possibilities of his space

and his desire to see and to be seen. Near the end of the film he carries the camera and hovers over H's dismembered corpse. He has to see the event in close up through the eye of the camera. The camera is S's way of seeing: it is the object that channels his desire to see. But it is also the object that embodies the drive to be seen. Throughout most of the film the camera is fixed on a tripod. The "dead" gaze of the camera functions as a disembodied gaze which is "phantasmatic, non-existing, impossible".⁷⁴ This overseeing gaze determines the ritualized tableau structure within the diegesis. S's actions are performed for the phantasmatic gaze of a non-existent other, and it is only under this gaze that he gains substance as a subject.⁷⁵ One of the main questions the film raises is who can occupy the place of the phantasmatic gaze and/or be seen by it?

In *Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative*, Clifford T. Manlove explains that for Lacan "the gaze extends into the symbolic and imaginary from the real, a third order, prior to the others."⁷⁶ The gaze is precisely a kind of worm-hole to the pre-linguistic real –the pre-symbolic site of pure enjoyment (jouissance) that precedes subjectivity altogether. Because of this, the encounter with the real is invariably linked to a form of trauma or destabilization of the subject, since the Real can never be assimilated into the symbolic or the imaginary. I claim that Smolders work is precisely about encountering the Real, and as a filmmaker he is best equipped to do this in visual terms. But to see the essayistic dimension of his work it is necessary to frame the film as its own kind of investigation into desire insofar as it is linked to the visual (to the imaginary). The visual field is structured around the lacuna or structuring void of the gaze and the drive (remember that drive continuously circles a void). The essayistic dimension emerges from the attempt to align the camera's point of view with that of the impersonal non-existent and traumatic gaze. This alignment is reinforced because the characters act for the

camera, often interpolating its dead, mechanical gaze, and in so doing the film is constructed around an attempt (*essai*) to make visible that which is invisible, aligning it with Hans Richter's early definition of the essay film which should "render visible that which is not visible".⁷⁷

The sound of the camera which is audible for most of the film (except for the very last sequence) is partially akin to what Michel Chion calls ambient or territory sounds, referring to "sound that envelops a scene and inhabits its space, without raising the question of the identification of the visual embodiment of its source."⁷⁸ While the sound of the camera calls attention to the camera as object, its implication in the diegesis 'naturalizes' the sound in the space we see. While it does "raise the question of the embodiment of its source," we never actually need to see the camera—sound lets us know its presence and furthermore establishes its primary role in the filmic text while all the same letting it become natural through the continuous ambient drone that characterizes the sound itself. The peculiarity of this type of sound is that it refers to that which is never seen, yet enhances our ability to see that very object. This is why the camera enables the presence of the gaze as a structuring void and its sound is indicative of the camera's central role in the performance of desire that we see on screen.

Interestingly, the lack of audible dialogue in the film incites reading language into the body. Overall the role of language is transposed to the image, be it by reading lips during the inaudible dialogue or simply by interpreting body language itself as S and H interact on screen. Speaking of the gestural quality of the silent image Pascal Bonitzer writes that in silent films "the protagonists are generally immortal, violence is universal and without consequences, there is no guilt."⁷⁹ The silence in which *Adoration* initially unfolds indubitably imbues the actions of

the film as a meditation on universal themes, where the characters are immortal and guilt-free. Žižek elaborates on Bonitzer's analysis claiming that the voice introduces trauma to the image, a fissure that operates "as a strange body which smears the innocent surface of the picture, a ghost-like apparition which can never be pinned to a definite visual object."⁸⁰

Since the film has played out in the absence of diegetic sound (except for the sound of the camera itself) the voice marks a point of rupture or intrusion, a ghost-like apparition indicative of an interesting shift within the structure of desire in the film. The two moments when voice becomes audible are when S asks H to read and finally shoots her in the back (the gunshot and consequent thud punctuating this moment), and later when he plays back the recording of her voice during the consumption of her body, an action that becomes ritualized not only because of framing but also because of the playback of the voice. When the voice becomes audible the soundtrack momentarily shares the function of the camera in structuring desire and as indicator of fantasy. Diegetically it once again points to S's obsessive desire to document the events (a desire to see/hear and a drive to be seen/heard is conflated with scopophilic drive and its production of desire). Structurally it also represents the artifice of film/fantasy: when we finally hear H it is because we also see a tape recorder, and we are shown the necessary artifice involved in the process of rendering sound. Because we are born into language, and as Lacan claims, separated from our *jouissance* by this mapping of the body through signifiers,⁸¹ there always remains a kernel of anxiety in relation to language as something that is external and alienating. However this also implies that there is an erotic quality to language that is in excess of the body (what Lacan referred to as the invocatory drive). In his book *A Voice and Nothing More* Mladen Dolar writes:

The voice stands at a paradoxical and ambiguous topological spot, at the intersection of language and body, but this intersection belongs to neither. [...]

The voice stems from the body but it is not its part, and it upholds language without belonging to it, yet in this paradoxical topology, this is the only point they share—and this is the topology of *objet petit a*.⁸²

In *Adoration* it is clear how the camera itself partakes in the gaze in the visual field –it structures S’s desire through the construction of his fantasy around the scopic drive through the desire to make oneself seen. It is important to remember that *objet petit a* is always out of reach: every time S reaches for the camera a white void overtakes the frame and the image disappears (the cut/montage of the film itself). When S plays the recording of H’s voice it momentarily partakes in the organization of S’s desire. The voice cannot be pinned down to H’s body, and even when we might say that it emanates from a tape recorder (albeit one with no speakers) this serves to strengthen the notion of the voice as detached (or detachable) from the body. In the case of the film, the uncanny potential of the voice that can reveal it as *objet petit a* takes place through the following three-step procedure: a) the recording of the voice, b) displaying the recording device onscreen and inscribing it in the fantasy of the text, c) the playback of the voice once H is dead.



Figure 20. Recording the voice and eventually the sound of the shot and the thud of H’s body.

The voice becomes linked to an object and thus separated from the body, and in a gesture that reasserts this *objective* quality, the voice is then played back to us; hovering over

the body from which it once came. The voice has been linked not only to its partial aspect (a partial drive), but insofar as it carries on –unstoppable even after the demise of the subject- it is also ultimately aligned with the essence of all drives: the death drive.⁸³ Žižek eloquently explains the death drive in the following way:

[The death drive is] the very opposite of dying—a name for the “undead” eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian “death drive” is therefore that it is Freud’s name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an “undead” urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption.⁸⁴

Not only does the voice persist beyond H, but at the level of the image, the tape recorder’s reels keep spinning even when the voice ceases. The tape circles the central void embodied by the spool providing a nice visual analogy for the circuitry of the drive.

The brilliance of both scenes with the tape recorder resides in how we are first allowed to realize that we can hear the voice only through an external agency (i.e. the tape recorder), and secondly that this voice has been brought back into full resonance with the realm of the other as object of desire (*objet petit a* is always found in the other). If the white flashes were a “disruption” of the image, the gunshot and subsequent thud are its aural equivalent. As H reads, S walks up behind her and shoots her; we hear the rifle and the thud of her body through the same medium that gave us her voice. This is the brute force of drive, and the motivation behind recording it is the brutality of a hypothetical constant playback that could prolong desire forever (fig. 21).



Figure 21. Two frames repeated over and over. I offer this re-mix as a visual representation of S's impossible fantasy: to perpetuate enjoyment forever around a specific object.

The series of repeated frames shown above is a visual representation of the fantasy that the recording act promises to perpetuate. While it is not part of the film itself, it illustrates the

drive that compelled S to film the evening. The camera allows for the hypothetical repetition of an ephemeral event; the event is recorded and there is the possibility of playback. The above image is a fantasmatic image that never occurs in the film but it is nevertheless aligned with S's desire for repetition; a compulsive repetition produced by the brute force of the scopic and invocatory drives. S attempts to experience the real of his fantasy through H's body and voice. He fragments the body not only by dismemberment, but by rendering it image: an object in the visual field. The voice is also separated from the body as an uncanny appendage that becomes visible/audible through the agency of external machines. By fragmenting the body and separating the voice they become partial and prone to the compulsive motion of the drives insofar as the drives themselves are always partial. The drive is an eternal circling of a void, and thus an infinite set of repetitions, and in this sense S's performance for the other—the overseeing/overhearing gaze—is motivated by the drive itself and is an attempt at perpetuating fantasy. However there is a split in that he cannot simultaneously create the image and see the image that the camera is producing. That the film ends with S committing suicide (the real Sagawa never committed suicide) becomes a clear indication of this impossible gap. The knowledge that he is recording the events is the manifestation of the drive, but there is an unbearable pain at never being able to simultaneously act out and see the act taking place. That is why the image remains fantasmatic. The fantasy of the unseen image is in many ways stronger than the actual image, and the split between these two images is that which the drive seeks as its central axis. A film motivated by an essayistic drive is an attempt to bring the actual and virtual images into the closest possible circuit (a crystal image—to usurp Deleuze's own usurped term) while also bringing together desire and drive. The bringing together of desire and drive enables the overlap of images driven by fantasy and the brute force of drive (drive as the

compulsion to see through making oneself be seen). Repetition is a way of approaching this ideal, producing a document that endures beyond the event itself. The fantasy of the video recording is that it promises the potential for infinite repetition.

On H and her fantasy.

Adoration explores desire through these various fantasmatic incarnations of the void. The primary examples I have offered are those that are constructed through the gaze in relation to the camera and the voice in relation to the drive, which is then inscribed into and against the scopopic field (i.e. the visual space created by the frame). All these events occur within the realm of fantasy, which takes place at different levels of the text. While fantasy is most easily understandable diegetically, there is another level of fantasy that remains somewhat elusive but is of no less importance. This is the level of fantasy that corresponds to H and the strange agency the filmic text itself affords her.

The information available about Renée Hartevelt portrays her as an attractive, down to earth creature. Her beauty and almost painful innocence adds a sense of horrific pathos to the murder. The film, however, complicates this notion by constructing a structure of fantasy enabled by the character of H.

When H confronts the camera for the first time, she hesitates. S joins her and they talk, he points to the camera, H laughs and the camera is presumably normalized or at the very least accepted as the third guest for the evening. But the decision that H makes in accepting this situation is to give a performance of herself as if she did not know the camera was there. In other words she redefines herself in relation to this impersonal gaze of the other by paradoxically playing herself. She accepts to play a part in a fantasy in which she is clearly out

of place, even though that role is strangely similar to herself. The moment when she walks into the room is not unlike Lacan's description of the gaze through the story of the sardine can. When petit Jean told the young Lacan "The sardine can sees you!" it was a way of saying that the young Lacan was out of place in the picture, and that the visual field that made up the picture actually looks back at him. In a very similar sense H is out of place in the apartment and the camera reveals this very fact. But on the other hand it is her out-of-placeness that holds the room together and gives foundation to the fantasy. The title of the film makes allusion to the real world event: tragic and foolish love for a revered other. A tragic dimension arises because the revered other is never aware of this love, and desire is defined in terms of the drive of one person towards an object of desire. Hartevelt became the promise of original, lost jouissance. Sagawa differed from most individuals in the fantasy he created to attain that kernel of pure enjoyment, and it is precisely because of this desire for jouissance itself—the kernel of pleasure in pain that precedes signification—that it seems strangely fitting that Sagawa's abhorrent actions involved dismembering/fragmenting the body (the drives attach themselves to parts of the body) in search of the elusive object of jouissance. The image of the naïve and kind-hearted girl of complete innocence does not fit in this event, it is too much to bear, and Smolders rejects it entirely. When H arrives, she sees the camera. Her brief hesitation is crucial, but instead of refusing the presence of the camera or leaving the apartment all together she decides to carry on and allow the fantasy to take place.

The notion of traversing fantasy is interesting to further scrutinize H's implication in the realm of fantasy contained in *Adoration* and her agency therein. At the diegetic level there is definitely a traversal, a going beyond: not only is the gruesome murder carried out but S commits suicide. The space of fantasy has been orchestrated as an attempt to master jouissance,

or at least to approach it as closely as possible. We then have to ask whether or not *jouissance* is ever domesticated through the play of fantasy contained within the film? Furthermore, it is clear that Smolders is not necessarily interested in producing a document of the event, but rather, as I claim, in exploring the trauma that such an event reveals in the world and how it resonates at the level of the image. The name of the film transposes the brutality of the act to a different territory: that of extreme love and in so doing confronts both extremes. S followed his pathological desire to the point of materialization by carrying it out in the world. Does the moment he eats H's flesh reveal what is behind his fantasy, or is this more likely represented by his own death? Žižek would say that Lacan offers an answer:

Beyond fantasy there is no yearning or some kindred sublime phenomenon, 'beyond fantasy' we find only drive, its pulsation around the *sinthome*. 'Going-through-the-fantasy' is therefore strictly correlative to identification with *sinthome*.⁸⁵

The *sinthome* is “the signifying formation in which an individual subject organizes its relationship to enjoyment, or *jouissance*”⁸⁶ The moment when H confronts the camera has all the clear markings of this *sinthomatic* formation. That brief moment in which something is suddenly revealed as out of place is now structured as a moment in which H's relation to enjoyment is restructured. Her visible anxiety, clearly justified in diegetic terms, is also a marker of the structures of desire. Žižek explains that “anxiety is precisely the reaction to this overproximity of one's *sinthome*,”⁸⁷ an anxiety which is no less than “the anxiety of being confronted with the abyss of our freedom.”⁸⁸ Even if it happens below the surface of her conscious self, H realizes that she has the freedom to enjoy and is compelled by this void to remain in front of the camera, the organizing principle of desire. We are confronted with a

double image of H: H as victim and H enjoying the abyss of her freedom. Because of this fluctuating position, in a strange way, a way that is uncomfortable to us, there is a dimension of H's death that fascinates or that even seems fitting. This is not entirely our fault; this is the way the film is structured. At the same time we can feel repulsed and lose interest because of an ending filled with gore or due to the sorrow for an innocent victim and pointless violence. The lack of background information of both characters in the film, the silence, the isolation, all of these elements are devices that allow us to encounter these dimensions of desire more clearly, although there is the risk of not seeing because there never was a story designed to make us care for one or the other character. In a way, we just see. We see because a camera is placed there for us to see, both for making a film and within the realm of fantasy, and that positioning of the camera is in a way the primary fantasy after all.

Conclusion

In my attempt to conceptualize an essayistic drive, I have come to interpret Smolders' directorial agency as corresponding to a desire not only to see through the image but to make us see (and that is to make the other see). The nature of the scopic drive is, as Žižek put it, not so much the "I want to see" but "I want to make myself seen."⁸⁹ Whereas *L'Amateur* is on the surface organized according to scopic desire (the main character wants to see), *Adoration* presents us with characters motivated by the scopic drive (S & H both perform for the camera which enables their fantasy). However, scopic drive and desire exist in a state of continuous tension and can at any point give way to one or the other force. Consequently both films include a kind of reversal through which they move from desire to drive. In *L'Amateur* the character D wants to see in order to protect himself from desire, and desire ends up being displaced, primarily to the camera and finally disrupted by the strong subjective agency of desire that the women enact. The repetitive schema it follows, and the final collapse as we enter the black box and are shown fragmented bodies, both hint at the idea of a pulsating drive. *Adoration* subsumes the power of the scopic drive to its narrative structure, and plays out rather didactically until the punctual moments upset this structure (be it the white flashes, or moments such as the covering of the face, hesitations, etc.) and finally through the return of the voice as partial object.

The essayistic drive behind the films is linked to the pull and play of scopic desire and drive: the desire to gather knowledge or experience through the image and the scopic field and the drive to make oneself seen (the drive to make the image seen). Through these mechanisms the filmmaker inserts this structure of desire into the film itself, where desire acts as an

interpellating force insofar as it positions the spectator and elicits a reaction within this space of subjectivity. Both Corrigan and Rascaroli argue that the essay film is a kind of dialogue with the spectator. Corrigan thinks of this dialogue in the context of collective experiential encounters⁹⁰ facilitated by the filmic text whereas Rascaroli goes from dialogue to the notion of interpellation and focuses much more on the idea of the individual.⁹¹ We can easily reconcile this apparent disparity by the simple fact that the collective and the individual are categories that flow in and out of each other: the collective is comprised by individuals and multiple individuals constitute a collective. Corrigan imagines the cinema in its collective dimension whereas Rascaroli focuses on the idea of direct, personal address. Both actions can happen simultaneously and can inform each other through further dialogues.

One of the primary ways this is made manifest in the films studied here is through the drive and desire related to an imaginary gaze of the other. That is to say, the films are addressed to this other gaze. This is evidenced through the male characters in both films: they have made a film because of a desire to see or because of drive that compels to make oneself seen. In more general terms what this means is that if I am to make a film, I already imagine it as seen: before the film there is usually a script or treatment (an idea), perhaps a storyboard, and other elements such as location scouting or building a set, casting, etc. all of which indicate a prior interpellation of the image on its creator. What this means is that at a more primal level imagining an image implies that I imagine others, either known or unknown, experiencing the image that has yet to become. Even if I imagine it myself, as myself seeing the imaginary image in my mind's eye (so to speak), I have become other as that gaze operates. Actual spectators eventually engage and contest this position, which is the equivalent of a dialogue related to desire.

The essayistic drive is the means by which this image (the image that exists only for the eye of another) makes its way into the structure of the film and points back to its origins in scopophilic drive and desire. This is what motivates S in *Adoration*; he structures his fantasy and tries to perpetuate desire through the act of filming. The case of *Adoration* is particularly interesting in that S's act is a performance for a gaze that only comes later (when the film is viewed), but S always imagined this gaze just as Smolders did (this is how they have overlapped positions). The apparent paradox, that he can never experience this gaze since he commits suicide at the end of the film, actually fits in well with Lacan's definition of the temporal status of the subject. Fink explains:

Lacan more commonly uses the future anterior (also known as the future perfect) in discussing the subject's temporal status. "By the time you get back, I will have already left": such a statement tells us that at a certain future moment, something will have already taken place, without specifying exactly when.⁹²

If we were to take this logic and make it speak for S, we could simply say: "By the time you see this, I will be no more." The subjective position is rather difficult to locate chronologically, and in a certain sense has always already happened or is about to happen. However Fink elaborates by adding "that a first signifier does not [...] suffice to create an effect of subjectification until a second signifier has appeared on the scene." *Adoration* represents this well through the fantasy of the subject and the overall structure of desire of the film.

However, there is some ambiguity in my use of the term gaze here, in that it risks becoming merely a look that is given or a subjective look. However, it is important to remember that the gaze primarily occupies an objective (and not subjective) position. In my

analysis of both films I have made the attempt to approach the gaze as interpellating the spectatorial position. If any of the onscreen characters are interpellated by the gaze it is only insofar as they have a potential to become subjects themselves and in this sense can challenge or elicit our own subjectivity. Earlier in this thesis I referenced a brief passage from McGowan's *The Real Gaze*, on this aspect of the gaze. I offer the passage in full here as it is a very eloquent account of this dimension of the gaze:

Lacan comes to conceive of the gaze as something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze. Lacan's use of the term reverses our usual way of thinking about the gaze because we typically associate it with an active process. But as an object, the gaze acts to trigger our desire visually, and as such it is what Lacan calls an *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire. As he puts it in *Seminar XI*, "The *objet a* in the field of the visible is the gaze." This special term *objet petit a* indicates that this object is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field. It is not the look of the subject at the object, but the gap within the subject's seemingly omnipotent look. This gap within our look marks the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see. What is irreducible to our visual field is the way that our desire distorts that field, and this distortion makes itself felt through the gaze as object. The gaze thus involves the spectator in the filmic image, disrupting the spectator's ability to remain what Metz calls "all-perceiving" and "absent as perceived."⁹³

So more than a subject looking, the gaze becomes the object that looks back at us, and in the case of film, it is the visual field looking back at us. Precisely because of this, the gaze

has the power to activate or challenge a spectatorial position. I am not comfortable looking at a picture as an “all-perceiving” and “absent as perceived” subject, but in a certain sense I am being looked at (or seen) by the image. The self-reflexivity of these films operates by pulling us into the realm of fantasy through the interpellation of the subjects we see on screen, but it can also happen in relation to objects. In *L'Amateur* the collection of looks that is offered to the camera (very literally an image that looks at us) operate to reveal and displace the gaze, but we also encounter it in the mirror reflections for example.

The process of desiring an image by imagining an external gaze resonates deeply with Corrigan's assessment of the essayistic in film, where “a performative presentation of self” results from the “self-negotiation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience.” The mental projection of an image I described earlier can be thought of as a potential embodiment of this performative presentation of self. Not only is the camera alluded to, but there is also a character that plays the part of director in both films. But this is not a character that is interested in the making of a film but in encountering desire through the fantasy of an external gaze through which one could see oneself acting as oneself.

The essayistic drive is intimately linked to a subjective, personal cinema and inasmuch is linked to a desiring subject. One of the primary motivations in undertaking an analysis of *Adoration* and *L'Amateur* was to begin the attempt (*essai*) of conceptualizing the essayistic in relation to desire. Even when desire is fully dependent on language (insofar as the desiring subject has entered the symbolic), this point of view allows us to shift focus away from the primacy of actual language that the essayistic often relies on. By giving our attention to the

realm of the imaginary and the image, we uncover the structures of desire and drive involved in articulating the image.

Endnotes:

¹ Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard; Critical Writings* (Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo Press, 1986), 132.

² Nora Alter, "The Political Imperceptible in the Essay Film," in *New German Critique*, No. 68, Special Issue on Literature, (Spring - Summer, 1996).

³ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, (London; New York: Routledge. 1996), 47.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, DVD. Directed by Sophie Fiennes, (Zeitgeist Films), 2012. 15'00"

Žižek, who is the leading voice throughout the film, continues that thought with: "Perhaps the ultimate horror of desire is to be fully filled in, met so that I desire no longer."

⁵ Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* Vol. 49, No. 2, (Fall, 2008), 24.

⁶ Rascaroli, "Essay Film," 36.

⁷ Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

⁸ Corrigan, *Essay Film*, 56.

⁹ Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film" in *The Threepenny Review*, No. 48 (Winter, 1992).19.

¹⁰ Godard, *Godard on Godard*, 171.

¹¹ Corrigan, *Essay Film*, 21.

¹² Corrigan, *Essay Film*, 30.

¹³ For this reason I think we need to pay more attention to the use of the adjective 'essayistic' as a rich field of inquiry that runs parallel to but also intertwines with what we might at some point call primarily an essay film.

¹⁴ Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay in *Soul and Form*, eds. John T. Sanders, Katie Terezakis (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1974) 15.

¹⁵ T. W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *New German Critique*, No. 32, (Spring - Summer, 1984), 160-161.

¹⁶ Adorno, *Essay as Form*, 158-59.

¹⁷ Levi Bryant, "Lars Watch" in *Larval Subjects* (blog),
<http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2006/11/19/lars-watch-2/> (last accessed July 10th, 2014)

¹⁸ Good examples of these critiques of the use of the gaze in film studies can be found clearly expressed in Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture*, in Todd McGowan's *The Real Gaze*, Slavoj Žižek in *The Fright of Real Tears* among others.

¹⁹ Oliver Smolders, "Offoff Cinema Festival interview,"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbJKZWcvUio> (last accessed July 9th, 2014)

²⁰ Olivier Smolders website, http://www.smolderscarabee.be/oli_films.php, (last accessed May 5th, 2014).

²¹ André Bazin, *What is cinema?*, (Montréal: Caboose, 2009), 10

²² Video interview with Olivier Smolders by Richard Olivier for the project *Big Memory* (2011),
<http://vimeo.com/37179538>, (last accessed July 9th, 2014).

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 150.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, compiled by Ivan Smith (electronic resource), p. 4143

²⁵ Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 13-14

²⁶ Ibid. 16

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 45.

²⁸ I translate these utterances as: I invented a new method to keep the women I *desire* at a distance. It is a kind of screen that I place between them and myself.

²⁹ Freud, *Complete Works*, 4143

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 125.

³¹ In "The Gaze as an Object" Antonio Quinet explains the ways in which the gaze might be alluded to or represented visually. He writes: "The gaze as *object a* or cause of desire can be represented, and we can see how this can be accomplished. For instance, a beam of light, a glint in someone's eye, a reflection in someone's hair, a jewel which shines can represent a gaze which is not in you. In many representations in the philosophical tradition, light is equated with the gaze. It is common knowledge that, in such philosophical traditions, many comparisons have been made between light, vision, and knowledge which, in retrospect, evoke Lacan's notion of the gaze. In Freud's work, the whiteness of Frau K.'s body evokes the gaze which attracts Dora for, as we know, the object of Dora's attraction was Frau K., and her white skin, which I am identifying as a manifestation of the gaze, added to that

attraction. In another example, a spot of light can represent the object cause of desire as a presence that makes one feel gazed at. Feeling oneself subjected to the gaze cannot only produce desire but anxiety, which is another manifestation of object a.” (Antonio Quinet, *Reading Seminar XI*, ed. Bruce Fink, 143-144)

³² For a full discussion on the gaze both as stain and disruption see Lacan’s take on Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* in *Seminar XI*, 85-90.

³³ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 125.

³⁴ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 111.

³⁵ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 114.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* [Selected works. English], (New York: Schocken Books, 1969; 1968), 60.

³⁷ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 108.

³⁸ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 110.

³⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 67.

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Norton, 1981), 73.

⁴¹ Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film theory after Lacan*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 20.

⁴² McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 7.

⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 346.

⁴⁴ McGowan. *The Real Gaze*, 6.

⁴⁵ A good example of this is first person point-of-view (POV) pornography, where the actor looks directly at the camera, which in turn stands in for the spectator. This is a very basic example, in that the mechanism is not intended to cause any distraction from the fantasy of the text.

⁴⁶ McGowan. *The Real Gaze*, 6.

⁴⁷ Godard, *Godard on Godard*, 132-133.

⁴⁸ Alter, “Political Imperceptible,” 172.

⁴⁹ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 125.

⁵⁰ McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 7-8.

⁵¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 73.

⁵² See Freud’s discussion of the lost object in *Negation*.

⁵³ Traditional psychoanalysis dealt with this under the guise of the predetermined accident. That is to say, when the subject was unaware of this game of repetitions. It is important to acknowledge that this type of film is aware of this absence, and makes it its own territory of exploration.

⁵⁴ Wilfried Ver Eecke, *Denial, Negation, and the Forces of the Negative: Freud, Hegel, Lacan, Spitz, and Sophocles*, (New York; SUNY Press, 2006), 13.

⁵⁵ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan, Radical Thinkers*, (London; New York: Verso Books, 2011), 20.

⁵⁶ Mark C. Taylor, Esa Saarinen, *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*, (London; Routledge, 1994), 11.

⁵⁷ Keeping the desired object at bay is a way to enable the circuitry of desire to continue to desire, as a way of prolonging desire. If this tactic is employed effectively it becomes a case of desire that desires desire itself.

⁵⁸ Freud, *Complete Works*, 4143.

⁵⁹ Freud, *Complete Works*, 4142.

⁶⁰ There are multiple sources recounting the tale of Sagawa and Hartevelt. For further information there is a 2007 television documentary titled *The Cannibal that Walked Free* available on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdXPJWODzjo> Vice also produced a short documentary entitled *Interview with a Cannibal*. (last accessed July 9th, 2014).

⁶¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 55.

⁶² Lacan.com, <http://www.lacan.com/zizekchro1.htm> (last accessed July 10th, 2014).

⁶⁴ Godard, *Godard on Godard*, 132

⁶⁵ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 116.

⁶⁶ Verhaeghe, Paul, "Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On The Lacanian Subject," in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York; Other Press, 1998), 168.

⁶⁷ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge Critical Thinkers, (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 94.

⁶⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, (London; New York: Verso Books, 2009), 11.

⁶⁹ Anne Dunnan, "The End of Analysis," in *Jacques Lacan*, ed. Slavoj Žižek. (London; Routledge, 2003) 219.

⁷⁰ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1995), xii.

⁷¹ Interview for the Belgian Offoff festival November 21st, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbJKZWcvUio> (last accessed July 9th, 2014)

⁷² Slavoj Žižek 2004 lecture "The Spectator's Malevolent Neutrality," 14'22"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QhRxhzVU7Y> (last accessed July 9th, 2014).

⁷³ Žižek, "Spectator's Malevolent Neutrality," 22'55"

⁷⁴ Žižek, "Spectator's Malevolent Neutrality," 19'20"

⁷⁵ This means that there exists an ambiguous reciprocity and overlap between diegesis and production. Obviously mise-en-scène is a fundamental element of filmmaking and the fact that this is a film could explain why there is an aesthetics of space and action unfolding on screen. However, the diegetic structure retroactively compels the mise-en-scène, as if there were some discrete force at work that does not allow it to be done in any other way.

⁷⁶ Clifford T. Manlove, "Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock & Mulvey," In *Cinema Journal* 46, No. 3 (Spring 2007), 90.

⁷⁷ Hans Richter, *Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokurmentarfilm*, ed. Christa Bliirnlinger and Constantin Wulff, (1940; Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 197-98.

⁷⁸ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, (New York; Columbia University Press), 75.

⁷⁹ Bonitzer, Pascal. *Le Champ Aveugle*, (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema; Gallimard, 1982), 49-50.

⁸⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. (New York: Routledge. 1992), 1.

⁸¹ Fink explains that for Lacan "the body is written with signifiers and is thus foreign, Other. Language is "encrusted upon the living," to borrow Bergson's expression. The body is overwritten/overridden by language." (Fink, Lacanian Subject, 12). In this split, by falling into meaning and the symbolic, we are separated from the original jouissance of being. "It has been a good thing for subjects to be oriented towards meaning (and thus to desire within the pleasure principle and oedipal law) rather than to being (and thus to drive and jouissance [...])" (Mellard, *Beyond Lacan*, 182).

⁸² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 73.

⁸³ According to Lacan all drives are in the end death drives (See Lacan's *Écrits*, 848): drives became partial through the imposition of language; mapping drives onto different parts of the body, thus fragmenting it.

⁸⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 62.

⁸⁵ Žižek, *Parallax View*, 24.

⁸⁶ Tony Meyers, *Slavoj Žižek*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 86.

⁸⁷ Žižek, *Parallax View*, 89.

⁸⁸ Žižek, *Parallax View*, 89.

⁸⁹ Žižek, "Spectator's Malevolent Neutrality," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QhRxhzVU7Y> (last accessed July 9th, 2014).

⁹⁰ Corrigan, *Essay Film*, 6-7, 13, 14, 23, 30.

⁹¹ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, (London, Wallflower Press, 2009), 32-43.

⁹² Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 64.

⁹³ McGowan, *Real Gaze*, 5-6.

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