



AHMED
ELBESHLAWY

**WOMAN IN
LARS VON
TRIER'S
CINEMA**

1996 – 2014



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Ahmed Elbeshlawy

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Ahmed Elbeshlawy
School of Professional and Continuing Education
Hong Kong University
Hong Kong

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Lacanian Woman and Lars von Trier's Cinema

In a book entitled *Everything Is Connected: The Power of Music*, Daniel Barenboim starts with a paradoxical statement that immediately negates itself. He writes: “I firmly believe that it is impossible to speak about music” (5). He doesn’t use a more nuanced verb to describe his position like, for example, ‘I think’, ‘I assume’, ‘I fathom’ or ‘I feel’. He *believes, firmly*, that it is *impossible* to speak about music. The statement negates itself because, right after it, Barenboim seems to make the impossible possible by writing a sizeable book of more than two hundred pages on precisely nothing but music. The paradox of the (im)possibility of speaking about music is, of course, most appropriate considering the subject matter, which is by its very nature a paradoxical event. Music “says everything and nothing at the same time” (5). It seems to present the world, yet it also presents naught. Defining music, to Barenboim, is even more problematized by the “physical phenomenon that allows us to experience a piece of music, which is sound”, since “music expresses itself through sound, but sound in itself is not yet music” (7). It is because of sound that music must be limited in time, yet it puts the listener “in direct contact with timelessness” (10). In music, “joy and sorrow exist simultaneously” and it can “help us forget and understand ourselves simultaneously” (20).

The writer of this book—or more accurately this writing project—feels more or less in the same situation. If I attempt to write about woman, it is precisely because I believe that I cannot write about woman, and not least because I happen to be a man. The project, unwritten as it stands, seems impossible to embark on. Have I any right at all to write about woman?

Considering the fact that Barenboim is a celebrated musician, musicologist and philosopher who claims that it is “impossible to speak about music” (5), my task seems to be far more difficult as a man trying to speak about woman. Upon hearing that I wanted to write a book about woman in Lars von Trier’s cinema, a feminist intellectual friend of mine seemed to have already taken a critical position towards the unwritten idea, giving me an unforgettably cynical look, as if to say: ‘in cinema or outside cinema, how dare you speak about woman in the first place?’ Of course, I dare not. That is, I dare not claim that I am going to write something about woman that can be understood in terms of defining what woman is or is not for von Trier, or even for this writer, in cinema or outside. In fact, I cannot even claim that this writing project will constitute anything in the course of a message communicated to its reader. In order to explain this awkward start, which may prove quite discouraging to some readers, I would say that this already declared failure to communicate is precisely the subject matter of this book and what constitutes the secret of its enjoyment on the part of the writer as well as, hopefully, the reader.

In this sense, there is already a resemblance between what constitutes enjoyment in writing this book and what constitutes enjoyment in watching Lars von Trier’s distinctive cinematic works, which, even though created to be enjoyed, always seem to question what is enjoyed by the viewer. For what is enjoyed, in this case, simultaneously makes the viewer ill at ease. And, unlike in mainstream cinema, it is neither the violent nor sickening elements that are solely responsible for the viewer’s enjoyment of such grotesque scenes of female torture as the ones in which the heroine of *Breaking the Waves* is slashed by two sadistic sailors, or the heroine of *Dogville* is raped in cold blood by all the men of the township, or the heroine of *Nymphomaniac* experiences an orgiastic moment while being violently whipped by a cat o’ nine, or the heroine of *Antichrist* mutilates her own clitoris with a pair of scissors. In spite of its notorious legacy of visible misogyny, there is something in Lars von Trier’s cinema that goes beyond its perceived gender division and violence against women.

This book, therefore, discusses the corpus of Trier’s cinematic production from 1996 to 2014 in order to raise some questions about woman, the deployment of female sexuality, desire, and the idea of subjectivity. It takes into consideration the evolution of film theory and its departure from figures such as André Bazin (*What Is Cinema?*), Christian Metz (*The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*) and Laura Mulvey (*Visual and Other Pleasures*), who established certain universalizing assertions about

filmmaking and the viewing experience, as well as from the idea of cultural contextualization that deals with the filmic text and its spectator as unique phenomena peculiar to their local circumstances. Instead, it turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis and a number of its contemporary exponents such as Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan, Jacques Hassoun, Frances Restuccia and Anna Kornbluh, who offer new Lacanian aspects of ideas of subjectivity, female sexuality, the gaze, melancholy and love, based on which the whole theoretical perspective about the cinematic experience has significantly changed in recent years according to the evolution in Lacanian theory itself and its relation to analyzing cinema.

In light of this, this work adopts the view that the era of looking solely at form or stylistics when analyzing film, based on the popular postmodern notion that a film “should not mean but be” (Abbas 18), is over. The contemporary viewer, whose life is largely spent in front of various screens, now demands more from a cinematic film than visual effects, graphics and digital tricks, which can, after all, be found in other, more interactive, leisure-time activities such as story-based video games on the touch screens of advanced computers and smartphones.

The elements giving value to a cinematic film can be located in either its content or its stylistics, without giving a consistent advantage to one over the other. This, however, should not be understood as the kind of regression into cinematic identification on the part of the viewer that was thoroughly looked at and staunchly attacked by Theodor Adorno in the mid twentieth century. To Adorno, one of the most dangerous characteristics of mass culture was that it took reification beyond its metaphoric sense. It was not just that the products of mass culture illusively reified objects of dreams and fantasies, but that people themselves “resemble[d] products [...] they assimilate[d] themselves to what is dead” (*Culture Industry* 95). What was reified came as a result of searching for identity in the wrong place and, in the course of this, acquiring some sort of a pseudo-identity.

That is why Adorno wrote to Walter Benjamin in one of his letters that the “reification of the cinema is all loss” (*Complete Correspondence* 129). While the character on the screen defined the human subject strictly in terms of his/her function in a capitalist society, the spectator assimilated himself/herself to what he/she saw on the screen. That is to say, first, that the human was transformed into dead material. The dead material was then endowed with humanness. Products of mass culture were not exactly seen by Adorno as anti-auratic. The lost aura of high art was compensated for by what he saw as the seriously flawed over-identification

with products of low art or mass culture, giving them a “human aura”. Human subjects as victims of their own capitalistic drive develop a fetishistic attitude towards the very same conditions that tend to be dehumanizing them. The more they are gradually being transformed into things, the more they invest things with a human aura (*Stars Down to Earth* 100).

Instead, the experience of viewing cinematic films in our contemporary time of visual overproduction, interactive video games, social media, speedy flow of information and instant news should be a search for that which is beyond both interpretation and simple enjoyment; beyond both looking for the constitution of some totality of meaning—either in the film’s content or its form—and visual pleasure. McGowan argues that “cinema is first and foremost a site for the revelation of the gaze” (172). The gaze, in Lacanian theory, is defined as the “objet *a* in the field of the visible” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 105); in other words, the ultimately unattainable object-cause of desire, or the real of desire in what is viewed, which, however, “is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field” (McGowan 6), which destabilizes the viewer’s position as viewer.

The nothingness of the object-cause of desire traumatizes the viewer as a desiring subject, as the encounter with this uncanny voidness directly puts the subject face to face with its own condition as a mere product of language, an “effect of the signifier” or, as Lacan explains, as that which has nothing to do with ideas of either subjectivity or individuality (*My Teaching* 79). The nullity of the object is itself the nullity of the subject. In other words, the subject at this point is not only threatened by the realization that the object is always already lost but by the prospect of the traumatic loss of desire itself, which is the very condition of the subject’s existence. The (non)existence of the objet petit *a* in the field of the visible is an abyss which instantly corresponds with the destiny of the subject as that which never finds its own tangibility in existence.

In the viewing experience then, the gaze, as McGowan argues, is “not to be located in the spectator” but “in the film itself” (5). The spectator’s voyeuristic gaze is disrupted by “the real gaze”, which constitutes a “gap within the spectator’s seemingly omnipotent look” (6). It is a point at which the viewer feels that he faces something in the visual field that looks back at him, which objectifies him, which marks his death as a subject by virtue of being “subjected to the gaze” (7). The gaze is not something that can be seen on the screen, but makes itself felt through the negative effect of an overpowering unseen seer, or “appears to offer access to the unseen” (6). It does not belong either to the imaginary register or the

symbolic order, but to the Real defined as a *fracture in reality* or, as Lacan puts it, “a hole in the symbolic” (*Psychoses* 156).

The gaze is that “inexplicable blank point in the image” that “the Other cannot embody” (McGowan 86–7); therefore, it cannot even be defined as the eye of God in a religious sense. God, in the language of institutionalized religion, is God in language or God *of* language. The gaze, however, neither belongs to language nor can it be fully expressed or defined by it. The Other cannot be entirely foreign since “it is in the Other that the subject is constituted as ideal” or “constitute[s] himself in his imaginary reality” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 144). The Other belongs to the “imaginary reality” of the subject because knowledge as such, to the subject, resides in the Other; it is the Other that “knows”, and this Other itself is “posited [...] at the outset” by the subject. Without the Other, “nothing indicates to us that there is a dimension of truth anywhere” (Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 96). This is why Žižek argues that:

The most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing [that the subject is barred/crossed-out] but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. (*Sublime Object* 122)

The name of this “traumatic kernel” in the context of the cinematic experience is the gaze. Based on this, in order to continue to be relevant to the highly screen-addicted lives of modern subjects, film viewing should not be marred by taking critical positions or maintaining a sense of resistant reading. On the contrary, one “should not be conscious or critical in a cinematic experience”; one “should submit totally to the logic of the cinematic or dream image” in order to “meet the gaze” (McGowan 13). A film should no longer be viewed and enjoyed as a temporary imaginary escape from the realities of daily life but as a medium carrying possible chances for the viewer to encounter moments in which reality itself is revealed as imaginary. It is only in this sense that a fictional film can be more interesting than a documentary.

For example, Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*’s secret of success is not that it offers a certain dramatization of aspects of the Iraq War but that it contains scenes in which the absence of traditional villains, the absence of face-to-face conflict, the camera’s disconnected and queasy motion and the soundless moments before bomb explosions seem to internalize the

drama and make the main characters' internal struggles loom larger in their unseen presence than the presence of the images and sounds of the actual war. In turn, the viewer's feeling of sympathy towards the victims of war, on both sides of the conflict, as well as awareness of their own mortality and the nearness of death can be much more genuine in the case of watching Bigelow's film than in the case of watching the surreal images of the actual war in BBC or CNN footage.

By contrast, a recent 'realistic' four-minute *Frontline* documentary entitled *Life in Baghdad: Joy Amid the Chaos of War*—which was made at the time when television and computer screens were flooded with news about the notorious terrorist group ISIL's spread in Iraq and Syria—had an unexpected alienating effect on many of its viewers, though it was clearly made with the intention of showing that, in spite of the news reporting and appalling images of the brutal killings and beheadings conducted by ISIL, there were ordinary people in Baghdad leading ordinary lives just like everyone else. In it, one can see children joyously diving in an irrigation waterway surrounded by heaps of debris, pedestrians and commuters making their way through the shambles of Baghdad, people eating ice cream in a big, carnival-like gathering in the open, et cetera. The first reaction to this short video is to observe the optimism in the faces of Iraqi people laughing and enjoying the simple pleasures of life in spite of the constant fear they are living in.

One scene, however, seems to spoil everything: a decorated limousine carrying a newlywed couple is caught in traffic and surrounded by a group of dancing young men. Somehow this scene does not chime easily with the other scenes of Baghdad. My first reaction was that it was hard to imagine there are still decorated wedding limousine cars on the streets when all one gets nowadays out of Iraq is the sleek, spotless and Hollywood-like images of the carefully directed beheadings of ISIL. This, however, was followed by a moment of deep sorrow for the city, which has transformed over the centuries from being the ultimate cosmopolitan capital of the world in the early middle ages to the contemporary devastated capital of today's Iraq, a land of limousine car weddings and media stunt beheadings.

It is at this moment that one can see the resemblance between the glossy surface of the limousine and the glossy surface of the long knives that ISIL members display in front of the camera before slaughtering their victims. The joyous dance suddenly appears to be more hysterical than joyous; more like a dance of death than of life. The fact that one can hardly see the silhouette of one immobile figure inside the limousine through its closed

dark windows seems to question what everyone outside it is celebrating exactly. There is no sign of life inside. The deadly silence of the decorated luxurious limousine amid all the noise seems to betray the sense of constant danger lurking behind the joy and festivities of the Iraqi people, and the car becomes the unintentional dark spot of the short documentary; an object seeming to symbolize all of Iraq's fears and desolation.

If cinema is the usual, most popular, or easiest site for the deployment of ideological mandates, the viewer's ability to subvert those mandates depends on his recognition of the gaze at the moment it shows or the "real point at which [ideology] breaks down" and not on his aptitude for "conscious reflection" upon the ideological structure or message of the film. This requires "allowing oneself to enjoy and to pay attention to the moments of one's enjoyment" (McGowan 15) in the cinematic experience. It is precisely this position of non-critical and non-reflecting enjoyment of the filmic image upon which the current writing project is based. It does not seek to read any of its analyzed filmic texts but to look at certain moments of traumatic enjoyment of certain scenes in those texts in order to show that what is still enjoyed in the cinematic experience is the viewer's occasional loss of his voyeuristic power through recognizing his own presence in what he sees.

As can be understood from the title of the book, its idea is delimited to analyzing the figure of woman in the distinctive cinematic production of the Danish director Lars von Trier, who is one of the most successful, as well as one of the most controversial, directors in the history of cinema. The book's argument goes against both the popular view that von Trier's films are misogynist in nature and the feminist view that they seek to empower women or advocate femininity. Instead, the book argues that woman in the cinema of Lars von Trier stands for the very impossibility of becoming a woman in the Lacanian sense. In other words, woman as portrayed by von Trier's cinema is always an attempt at presenting the viewer with an image of a genderless subject par excellence who is not inhibited by the confines of ideology and culture, and that this attempt itself is always already a failed one. This failure is precisely what constitutes the element of enjoyment in watching the films of Lars von Trier. It is also what gives them their political importance, elevates them above accusations of misogyny, and elevates the director himself above the accusation of being a mere provocateur.

Since this book takes a psychoanalytic approach, certain pitfalls must be illuminated from the start in order to be avoided. The subject of woman

is not dealt with here in terms of gender, but in terms of what cannot be encompassed by the idea of gender difference. In her essay 'Freud on Women, Nancy Chodorow writes:

We are still not able completely to evaluate [Freud's] theory of femininity; indeed, many evaluations find it to be extremely problematic. By contrast, Freud's understandings about male attitudes toward women and femininity do not seem to be shadowy and incomplete at all. They are specific, informative, persuasive, precise, and clear, covering ingeniously a variety of sexual, representational, and neurotic formations. They illuminate for us with passion and empathy, and in full daylight, the mysteries of the male psyche. (246)

Freudian psychoanalysis, therefore, cannot be adequate to discuss woman because Freud, even when his psychoanalytic references to "woman" are in dialogue with an emphatically plural account of a multitude of "women" (224), clearly deals with woman solely as the 'other gender' or that which is the opposite of man. Thus, "theoretical woman in the developmental theory" revolves around the "centrality of penis envy" (226–8), while "clinical woman" serves as Freud's "beginning understanding of the implication of sexual desire [...] and sexual trauma [...] in the genesis of hysteria" (232), which, in Freud's thought, is a particularly female illness. "Woman as subject-object", which is discussed in terms of the adversarial "mother-daughter relationship", is still strikingly marked by "penis envy" as the daughter "believes either that her mother has chosen never to give one to her and hasn't got one herself, or that, although she doesn't have one, could have arranged things so that her daughter did" (234).

Freud's "defense of the morality and upstanding qualities and capabilities of the women contemporary neurologists and psychiatrists considered degenerate, morally and mentally contaminated, and inferior as a result of their heredity", which Chodorow looks at in her view of "women as they are socially and historically located" in Freud's writings, is framed as a "defense of hysteria" (234–5), defined as something peculiar to the female psyche. While all of the previous accounts seem to alienate as well as subordinate the feminine from a male point of view, they constitute what Chodorow sees as "woman as subject" (226–37) in Freudian thought. Other Freudian accounts, from Chodorow's point of view, constitute "woman as object"; among these, Freud's "manifest, explicit, treatments

of women as objects”, his depiction of woman as “implicit, latent object in the male psyche” and his account of female “subjectivity and character [as] imagined in the masculine psyche” (237–46).

Freud’s position with regard to woman, which is described above by Chodorow, is evident not only in his writings where he deals directly with woman as the other gender, such as ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’ (*On Sexuality* 313–22), ‘Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes’ (*Standard Edition* 248–60), ‘Female Sexuality, with a letter from Freud to Carl Mueller-Braunschweig’ (*Freud on Women* 321–41), and ‘Femininity’ (*New Introductory Lectures* 139–67), but also in his sporadic discussions of the female in *Art and Literature* and *Civilization, Society and Religion*.

For example, Freud believed that “sexual life lays down the pattern for the exercise of other functions” and, in the female sex, the historical sexual suppression of the female and society’s stress on the importance of her chastity resulted in women whose “upbringing forbids their concerning themselves intellectually with sexual problems [...] and frightens them by condemning such curiosity as unwomanly and a sign of a sinful disposition”. Therefore, women are “scared away from *any* form of thinking, and knowledge loses its value for them”, resulting in their “undoubted intellectual inferiority” (*Civilization* 50–1). Although Freud clearly stated that the supposed ‘intellectual inferiority’ of women had unnatural reasons and that Moebius’s “physiological feeble-mindedness”, which is attributed to women, is “disputable and its interpretation doubtful” (231), he nevertheless seems to structurally read a host of female fictional characters in *Art and Literature* whose beauty or best quality seems to reside in their ‘dumbness’ or silence in the eyes of their suitors or lovers and, by implication, *readers*—a dumbness that also represents death to Freud. Those fictional characters include Cordelia and Portia from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice* respectively, Cinderella, Psyche in Apuleius’s story, Aphrodite in Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*, the girl who kills her 12 brothers in Grimms’ ‘Die zwölf Brüder’ (‘The Twelve Brothers’), as well as the girl who restores her brothers to life in his ‘Die sechs Schwäne’ (‘The Six Swans’) (*Art and Literature* 235–47).

In his analysis of Christoph Haizmann’s depiction of the Devil with female breasts, Freud argues that “there is nothing strange about depicting female devils” as anonymous or multitudinous, but it is unusual to feminize “*the* Devil, who is a great individuality, the Lord of Hell and the Adversary of God” in art (405). This cannot be taken as evidence that

Freud himself believed that the Devil, as a “great individuality”, cannot be female, or, one can quite justifiably add, that the female cannot be a great individuality, as Freud was merely detecting representations of the Devil in art. However, he does seem to indicate that femininity in itself is a problem or a stigma, since he sees that it must have been the adversarial relationship between the painter and his father as a castrating figure that impelled Haizmann to paint the Devil—a father substitute in Freud’s analysis—and project on him the very femininity that the father invokes in the son through the effect of the castration threat. Two things, then, seem to debase/humiliate the father in Freud’s reading: the devilish image and the female breasts. In a way, masculinity is associated with “great individuality” while femininity is reduced to an anonymous pair of breasts.

In his analysis of Stefan Zweig’s story ‘Vierundzwanzig Stunden aus dem Leben einer Frau’ (‘Twenty Four Hours in a Woman’s Life’), which relates the story of a widow (mother of two sons) who tries to save a dedicated young gambler from committing suicide after losing all of his money by casually offering herself to him in bed, Freud considers only male sexual fantasy—in this particular case a “boy’s wish that his mother should herself initiate him into sexual life in order to save him from the dreaded injuries caused by masturbation”—as the means by which male imagination “brings the unattainable woman”, which is the mother, “within easy reach” by equating her with a prostitute (459). As for female sexuality, Freud dismisses “sudden and mysterious impulses”; therefore, he sees the impulsive behavior of Zweig’s heroine—who up to the moment of coming across the young gambler remained faithful to her dead husband—as being caused not by anything related to her own sexuality but by her inability to “escape her quite unconscious transference of love on to her son” (460), embodied by the young gambler.

Generally speaking, the feminine or femininity in Freud’s thought does not seem to assume a life of its own and is mostly talked about as a component of the male psyche in terms of the feminine attitude that the boy adopts towards his father as an effect of the castration complex in the course of his psychosexual development.¹ “Being the actual vehicle of the sexual interests of mankind”, women, according to Freud, “are only endowed in a small measure with the gift of sublimating their instincts” (*Civilization* 47). Unlike married men, who “very frequently avail themselves of the degree of sexual freedom which is allowed them” (46), women, “when they are subjected to the disillusionments of marriage, fall ill of severe neuroses which permanently darken their lives” (47). The woman as mother becomes the child’s “first protection against all the undefined dangers

which threaten it in the external world", yet she is "soon replaced by the stronger father, who retains that position for the rest of childhood" (204).

Although Freud criticizes the field of psychology, in which "the contrast between the sexes fades away into one between activity and passivity, in which we far too readily identify activity with maleness and passivity with femaleness, a view which is by no means universally confirmed in the animal kingdom" (295), in his discussion of the early history of the Oedipus complex, he describes the boy's identification with the father as a "typically masculine" attitude rather than a "passive or feminine" (134) one, clearly himself equating passivity with femininity. Yet, it can be argued that Freud's writing does inadvertently point to the problematic position or the ultimate indefinability of woman. For even though Freud tends to place woman on the side of nature and sexuality and man on the side of culture and civilization, his fundamental question, "what does a woman want?", seems to originate from a position that is unsure about locating woman unequivocally on either side.

To Freud, women "come into opposition to civilization" and adopt a "hostile attitude towards it" as a result of being abandoned by man, who has to make "an expedient distribution of his libido" and "withdraws from women and sexual life" for intellectual activities and cultural aims (293). Although this squarely puts woman on the side of nature and sexual life and man on the side of culture and civilization, Freud nevertheless puts a brother on the side of perversion and sexual activity (which is, in this case, healthy, good and positive) and his sister, "being a woman" and thus "possess[ing] a weaker sexual instinct" (43), on the side of neurosis (which is negative and unhealthy).

Thus, the foundation of the family historically depended on man's unwillingness to be "deprived of his sexual object—the women" and woman's unwillingness to be "deprived of the part of herself which had been separated off from her—her child" (290). In this sense, wouldn't it be more appropriate to say that it is man who belongs more to nature due to his elevation of the demands of his sexuality and pathological desires beyond the social bond and with no regard to, or no real concern towards, the family as an institution of civilization, while woman is more committed to the idea of the family, if only by an attachment to that "part of herself"? Putting man on the side of perversion and woman on the side of neurosis seems to destabilize the idea of woman as an enemy of culture and civilization since neurosis is the very mark of culture. It is perhaps more accurate to say that culture is neurotic by definition.

That is why it can be understood from Lacan's analysis of the moral law that the history of religion is marked by a movement from the imaginary to the symbolic; from gods that can be seen to God who cannot be seen but is only manifested in language. The second commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (*The Bible*, Exodus 20:4), "excludes not only every cult, but also every image, every representation of what is in heaven, on earth, or in the void"; it eliminates the "function of the imaginary" and establishes a "relation to the symbolic" in the sense of "speech" (*Ethics* 81). Civilization starts with a "primordial law" that "superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature" (*Écrits: The First Complete Edition* 229).

To Lacan, the neurotic subject not only identifies himself in language, he loses his own being in the signifying chain; he transforms himself into a signifier and becomes language (*Psychoses* 155). The Neurotic phenomenon thus seems to be inherent in culture since the 'normal' human subject does transform himself or herself into a signifier on a daily basis. Transforming oneself into a signifier maintains the whole system of symbolic exchanges that define one's daily life and regulate all his or her relations with others. By displaying a cultural code, the subject sends a message to the other, which means that he turns himself into a signifier. That makes neurosis the very condition of culture, and it is perhaps most obvious in the case of the religious person who "looks like or behaves like the neurotic" (*My Teaching* 38–9).

The development of psychoanalytic theory by Lacan changes psychoanalysis's relation to the feminine significantly. In accordance with Freudian thought, Lacan asserts that the woman's realization of her own sex is "not accomplished in the Oedipus complex in a way symmetrical to that of the man's, not by identification with the mother, but on the contrary by identification with the paternal object" (*Psychoses* 172). This is precisely what feminizes "virile display" itself in the case of man (*Écrits: A Selection* 322). But he adds that, in the case of the female sex, it is "characterized by an absence, a void, a hole" since there is "an obstacle, a defect, in the way of bringing about the identification that is essential for the [female] subject's sexuality to be realized" due to the lack of "symbolic material" (*Psychoses* 176). Symbolic material in this sense is equivalent to the "paternal object", since it is the lack of it in the case of the female subject that problematizes her relation to it. For there is an established relation between the subject of language and the phallus regardless of the "anatomical difference of the sexes"; and, in the case of woman, "any interpretation of this relation [is] especially difficult" (*Écrits: A Selection* 312).

This absence, however, is precisely *presence beyond the physicality of the object*, the way the absence of the primordial father who is killed by his offspring establishes the powerful symbolic presence of the prohibiting “Name of the Father”. Lacan states that “before the name of the father, there was no father” (*Psychoses* 306). On prohibition, he states that “it is as a function of the death of God that the murder of the father which represents it in the most direct way is introduced by Freud as a modern myth”, and that

all the mystery is in [the murder of the father] act. It is designed to hide something, namely, that not only does the murder of the father not open the path to *jouissance* that the presence of the father was supposed to prohibit, but it, in fact, strengthens the prohibition. The whole problem is there; that's where, in fact as well as in theory, the fault lies. Although the obstacle is removed as a result of the murder, *jouissance* is still prohibited; not only that, but the prohibition is reinforced [...] the sole function of the father is to be a myth, to be always only the Name-of-the-Father, or in other words nothing more than the dead father, as Freud explains in *Totem and Taboo*. (*Ethics* 143, 176, 309)

It is crucial to understand that it is *not* prohibition that results in the murder of the father; on the contrary, it is the father's death that establishes the law of prohibition: “the father's death ... this good news, that God is dead, does not seem to me to be of a kind to liberate us, far from it ... the conclusion that forces itself upon us in the text of our experience is that the response to ‘God is dead’ is ‘Nothing is permitted anymore’ ... it is certainly not as an attempt to explain what sleeping with the mother means that the murder of the father is introduced into Freudian doctrine. On the contrary it's on the basis of the father's death that the prohibition of this *jouissance* is established in the first place” (*The Other Side* 119–20).

Similarly, it is the “absence of the penis that turns [woman] into the phallus, the object of desire” (*Écrits: A Selection* 356). To be the phallus or the “signifier of the desire of the Other” requires rejecting “an essential part of femininity” or “all her attributes in the masquerade” (321). In other words, the structure of subjectivity in the case of the female, even though she may initially take the same detour as the male subject within a discourse that is predominantly written in the Name of the Father, is nevertheless fundamentally different by virtue of the female's (dis)connection to the phallus. She is somehow outside the system of symbolization but is defined as the very point at which that system collapses. She is not

threatened by castration since she is perceived as always already castrated by her anatomical nature, yet this lack itself transforms *her* into a phallus, in other words, into man's real of desire as well as his very sign of castration.

It is in this sense that Žižek equates between woman and the phallus in the economy of desire (*Žižek Reader* 157). "What is foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real of the symptom: woman does not exist [...] she returns as a symptom of man" (*Sublime Object* 73). The symptom in psychoanalytic terms, therefore, is not to be understood as a sign to be read or interpreted; it is what leads to the interpretation of signs in the first place. To say that woman is a "symptom of man" from the position of the speaking subject means that woman evokes the sign of castration due to the lack of the phallus, which renders her non-existent in the symbolic order, yet threatening its very collapse as she precisely represents the very hole of the Real, the fracture, the deformity, or the abyss that reminds the speaking subject of its fictitiousness. If women according to common sense exist out there in the imaginary register, woman as a "symptom of man" has a relation to the Real or that which cannot be represented.

Lacan says that "becoming a woman and wondering what a woman is are two essentially different things"; in fact, it is the impossibility of the first state that gives reason to the second since "it's because one doesn't become one that one wonders". The two states of becoming and wondering are even oppositional since "to wonder is the contrary of becoming one" (*Psychoses* 178). In other words, becoming is becoming *in* the discourse while wondering *is* the discourse. How can the subject of language, in the case of woman, be defined as woman if she engages, consciously or unconsciously, in the "wondering"? Put in its simpler yet no less unanswerable form, the question could be: is there a discourse that is feminine? Lacan states that "the metaphysics of the woman's position is the detour imposed on her subjective realization. Her position is essentially problematic, and up to a certain point it's inassimilable" (*Psychoses* 178). The inassimilability of the woman's position not only puts her right in the middle of the void upon which subjectivity as such is based, but casts a serious doubt on the existence of the symbolized subject (man) as well. If woman is outside the discourse, this can only be explained by her being its very instigator. In other words, while the presence of man is a symbolic possibility that does not actually explain either man or woman, the absence of woman, in its essence, is an impossibility, because it would be an absence that cancels out the presence of both genders—and the discourse.