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Pleasure in/and Perversity: *Plaisagir* in Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte*

WITNESSING ONE'S OWN CONCEPTION—the primal scene, the impossible desired. But what if it *were* possible to return to our founding moment and privately spy on those who made us? I slip back to 1973 when Laura Mulvey's seminal article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," is written. This is the birth of feminist film theory, and what do we see at *this* primal scene? I see a man and a woman. And I see the woman being seen. This woman—passive, erotic, displayed, a fantasy, she "freeze[s] the flow of action,"¹ and "performs within the narrative" (19). She is an "object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized" (21). She also connotes castration, and may be punished for this lack. Woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (19) is all we can see, all *I* can see at this scene. It is also all *he* sees. The man is active, controlling, and pleased. He advances the narrative, fashions both language and image to match his desire, and sometimes he disciplines. "The power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (20). Like all primal scenes, this one is violent, violating, horrific.

Mulvey tells the story that begins feminist film theory. And although our theories, fantasies, and visions have moved on from this model, thirty years later we have not come very far. To be seen is still to be taken, possessed, appropriated, used, abused, and

¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 19.

wounded. Even the most revisionist feminist film theory (I am thinking, for instance, of Gaylyn Studlar's *In the Realm of Pleasure*²) turns female spectacle into an opportunity to talk about the effect it has on spectators, but is not itself a revision of the woman's position of being the object of the gaze. As Mary Ann Doane rightly notes, "When a woman looks, the verb 'looks' is generally intransitive (she *looks* beautiful)."³ The problem facing feminist film theory now is how to address multiple meanings of what is at stake *in being the spectacle*. Our culture of vision so equates looking with taking/killing/robbing/possessing that we have not been able to ascertain whether being the spectacle, being looked-at, has any radical possibilities left in it at all.

We know there are many ways of looking—we should recall Elizabeth Grosz's article, "Naked," for its descriptions of "the seductive fleeting glance ... [the] laborious observation ... a sweeping survey ... the wink and the link ... the squint."⁴ Or we might turn to the useful theorization of the double bind of the gaze that Slavoj Žižek proposes in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*. Žižek refutes the commonplace film-theoretical notion that the gaze is equal to power, that vision equals mastery: "the dialectic of gaze and power is far more refined: the gaze does connote power, yet simultaneously, and at a more fundamental level, it connotes the very opposite of power—impotence—in so far as it involves the position of an immobilized witness who cannot but observe what goes on."⁵ Problematically, however, this revision of the gaze does not also bring a revision of the one who is gazed upon: Žižek frames this analysis in the context of rape victims. He writes, "the raping of a girl (or a boy for that matter) *in the presence of her father*, forced to witness the affair—is bound to set in motion the vicious cycle of guilt: the father—the representative of authority, of the big Other—is exposed in his utter impotence, which makes him guilty in his own eyes as well as in those of his daughter" (74). Despite the new impotence found in the one who gazes, the position of the one looked upon remains the ultimate symbol of female victimization.

² New York: Columbia UP, 1993.

³ *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 177.

⁴ *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001) 219.

⁵ (London: Verso, 1994) 73.

Can we not theorize what it would mean for a woman to be looked at and find it pleasurable? What would it mean for a woman to revel in her to-be-looked-at-ness, to adore being a spectacle and, perhaps, to find radical political freedom in such a state? Can we read taking up the spectacle as anything other than a capitulation to the/a male gaze? And is all this possible while still protecting the legacy of feminist film theory? After all, psychoanalysis tells us a chilling story about those who fully repress their primal scene—the excessive symptomatic residue of such a disavowal would likely erupt in thoroughly unpleasant ways and places. Instead of refusing Mulvey's scene, let us expose it more fully, for lurking under the surface of her account of females' problematic position in cinema resides a powerful and useful narrative about pleasure.

Pleasure is not monolithic or static (or even good; see again, for example, Mulvey's article), and in this paper, in order to theorize a new type of pleasure—female pleasure in being the spectacle—I have coined the word “*plaisagir*.” A hybrid of the French verbs for pleasure, “*plaisir*,” and action, “*agir*,” *plaisagir* suggests the pleasure in acting, in both a theatrical and existential sense. *Plaisagir* allows us to redefine what it means to be looked at as spectacle, and to rewrite the history of the gazed-upon woman in film to suggest her radical, liberatory position.

Plaisagir can only be experienced by a subject. The subject places herself on display. She is a spectacle, she is the consummate spectacle, but she is not simply in the passive position of being looked-at. She actively takes up the position of showing, demonstrating, exhibiting. This is a similar operation to the one Irigaray prescribes for women and language: “To play with mimesis is ... for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself....”⁶ This resubmission is crucial for the female spectacle; it is the source of her liberation. The subject of *plaisagir* is not precisely an exhibitionist, but still there is pleasure here. She enjoys the matching of a public display of her body with the private interior knowledge of that display. She enjoys choosing whether or not to look at those who gaze upon her. Sometimes she closes her eyes and is quietly performing for herself, feeling her

⁶ Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse,” *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 124.

body move through space. At other times, she looks back, engaging those who would look in the darkness without consequence.

Although several films might be used to illustrate *plaisagir*, the concept is nowhere more useful than in cases where an instance of woman-as-spectacle has been used to damn a film and deny subjectivity to a performing female. Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte* (*The Night Porter*, 1973) is one such film. Derided as 'pornography' by some American reviewers when it first appeared—or simply panned outright, such as in this comment from Thomas Quinn Curtis: "Lucia is a mad sadist.... Cavani's 'heroine' seems to be a complacent slut"—it is nevertheless admired by many feminist film theorists. These theorists, however, admire the film either begrudgingly or by writing out of the film specific instances of pleasure-in-spectacle. Laura Frost, for example, argues as follows about the infamous cabaret sequence: "Echoes of Marlene Dietrich are undercut by the emaciation of Lucia's body and the character's real lack of agency, despite the ruse of the act."⁷ Or consider this comment from an otherwise excellent thinker, Kriss Ravetto: "Lucia lacks a sense of agency; she does not choose (hence one cannot find fault with her) but instead is Max's chosen 'little girl'."⁸ Ravetto argues further that "in her performance as Dietrich [Lucia] becomes a little boy instead of an excessive female" (51). I cannot imagine how this reading could have happened: it takes a certain wilful disavowal of Lucia's smiling face and sumptuous movements to read this scene as a ruse without pleasure and Lucia as a boy-child or woman without agency. Lucia is doubly disempowered by this theoretical move.

In fact, feminist theorists should love *The Night Porter* for *precisely* this scene. Theorists who try to redeem Lucia only by absenting her from the performances that she gives do both the character and the film a disservice. If we return Lucia to herself, we can reclaim the important subjective experience of being in her mind, performing in her body, feeling and existing in her space. Laura Pietropaolo departs from the above theorists when she admits the pleasure inherent in this scene: "it is obvious that Lucia's

⁷ *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002) 156.

⁸ *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 51.

performance, which she herself enjoys, is especially for [Max],”⁹ but I think she is incorrect to say that the performance is largely directed towards *the other's* pleasure. In fact, Lucia's personal, private subjective pleasure in the cabaret sequence operates independently of the (sometimes present) pleasure of Max or the other spectators.

Psychoanalysis has historically done a terrible job with the question of what it means for woman to be seen. At some point we have to ask the discomfiting question: what does the mother in Freud's narrative of fetishism see? What does she glimpse, caught naked by her little son—and what does she feel, is she embarrassed, a bit, surprised, perhaps? Does she spy his confused, horrified face? What goes through her mind, what guilt, what annoyance, what of *her* subjectivity, *her* vision? We will never know, because the fantasized fetishist *is not seen*, nor the child-voyeur at the intimate primal scene—something about eroticism in Freud closes off vision, refuses a returned gaze. Sexuality creates the sardine can of Seminar XI that Lacan sees, but that *does not see Lacan—this is woman*.¹⁰ If psychoanalysis cannot adequately account for female desire, it is because it cannot first account for how women might see. And if feminist film theory cannot account for how women might see, it is in large part because it refuses to ask how women who are seen might look back at the men *who see them*.

From where might a woman see herself without first being trapped in the gaze of a man? When Žižek speaks of the Lady of courtly love, following Lacan's analysis from Seminar VII, and writes “she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random” and speaks of her “uncanny, monstrous character,”¹¹ he is not only aligning the Lady with the uncanny but, in a sense, is speaking to the inherently uncanny quality that traces itself on ladies. What does the doll Olympia see in *The Sandman*, Freud's adored text and the inspiration for his essay, “The ‘Uncanny’”? Olympia's eyes fall out—but no, they are

⁹ “Sexuality as Exorcism in Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter*,” *Donna: Women in Italian Culture* (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1989) 76.

¹⁰ See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, intro. David Macey (London: Vintage, 1994).

¹¹ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment* 90.

ripped out—but no, they were never her (own) eyes; her position of vision from which she might see her eyes as they lay on the ground is a phantasmic one written in by Nathaniel's voice, elided by his vision. But if we could see from her interminable blackness, we might register the horror of his horrified face. We might see what it is like to gaze from the position of the uncanny object. The gazed-at woman uniquely gives us the opportunity to fantasize this position and to see the seer.

The Night Porter is undoubtedly obsessed with the gaze. Although it is often said to be about many things—most often, trauma and memory—it is at heart a story about different ways of looking. When Lucia (Charlotte Rampling) enters Max's (Dirk Bogarde) hotel in 1957 Vienna, seeing for the first time since the war the man who sexually, violently tortured her in a concentration camp, a quick series of flashbacks occurs, some originating from him, some from her. The result is that the present narrative is bracketed by two films: the past film—in camp, taken by Max, of a young, naked Lucia; and the present film—*The Night Porter*, made in 1973 by Liliana Cavani. The present narrative becomes a product of the mediation between these two films, the interplay of that which cannot be represented and the very attempt to do so nonetheless.

In Max's flashbacks, we see him probing space, probing Lucia's body, visually with the camera and later with his body, his fingers. We see the image filmed. In Lucia's flashbacks, the camera is nearly always absent—that is, we see her memory of being a body penetrated, but the threatening camera does not appear. The difference between the two series of memories is precisely the presence of the filmic apparatus—thus, Cavani takes as her primary subject the very act of making film, her film, as a bridge of history and time and memory. While the film itself offers the red herring of a psychoanalytic reading of content (the return of the repressed in witnesses who may have survived; the guilt complexes spoken of by the former Nazis, etc.), the locus of Lacanian thought resides in the series of returned gazes that structure the corresponding flashbacks and come to order the present-day narrative as the two are collapsed. The trace of the past leaves its stain (the two crossed bars on Max's hotel uniform look like the shadow of a swastika) nowhere more than in Cavani's film itself, which shows buildings askew in German Expressionist style, the very aesthetics of the past haunting the present visuals.

While Lucia is watching a performance of *The Magic Flute* conducted by her husband, Max approaches her and sits a few rows behind her. The four physical levels—stage, then Lucia's husband, then Lucia, then Max—suggest the complexity of spectatorial relations. The opera acts on the spectators (which include Max and Lucia) and they, in turn, take Mozart's work as the object of their gaze. The conductor manipulates the opera, he is the locus of authority for the performers, but he is also a member of the audience (he gazes on the performance) and simultaneously an object for the spectators (we never see the stage without his silhouette blocking part of it). Lucia's husband is simultaneously the bearer and subject of the gaze of the audience and the theatrical performance—a double, doubled position. Lucia, as part of the audience, gazes upon her husband and the opera, but is also the subject of Max's gaze; Max in turn is the subject of Lucia's anxious gaze backwards that retreats into the space of spectatorship. Her turn backwards is simultaneously a turn towards us, a nod to the extradiegetic spectator, who no doubt haunts the film as Max haunts her. One constantly gets the sense in Cavani's work that we are truly not meant to witness that which is within. The fluid, easy alternation between subject and object, bearer of and victim to the gaze, points to the impossibility of assuming a position from which one is not seen; the spectator to Cavani's film then finds him or herself in a position of uncertainty. We occupy a vulnerable visual sphere in which we are not protected from the returned gaze, the gaze that accuses, the gaze that delivers our own desire back to us (as later happens when Lucia receives the head of her enemy). "What we have face to face with us ... our face, our pair of eyes, allows there to emerge the dimension of our own look and the value of the image then begins to change ... the dawning of a feeling of strangeness which opens the door to anxiety."¹² The image begins to escape the subject at the very moment that the gazing subject, the perceiving being, is *seen*—the returned gaze interpolates me, but it also escapes me. It is more than me, the *objet petit a*.

During *The Magic Flute* sequence, a flashback occurs with a parallel structure of embedded gazes: camp prisoners watch as an

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety, Book X*, 1962–65, unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts, 9.1.63, 4.

SS officer fucks (many theorists say 'rapes,' but just as *we do not know all* in the case of Lucia and Max, we do not know for sure here) a male prisoner; Lucia watches too until Max grabs her, making her into another subject of the gaze. Pietropaolo argues that "the composite image dormitory-sodomy-rape, rhapsodically captured by the movement of the camera, represents the perversion of the tenderness and joy echoed in the rhapsodic strains of Mozart's duet" (75). Is there not a further perversion here, though, captured by the field of eyes of the prisoners as they watch the SS officer? The victims, too quickly associated with the object position of vision, are here the ones seeing. And yet, does this gaze suggest power or mastery? Indeed, the SS officer's crime, in addition to the 'rape,' is the compelled gaze of the other prisoners; in taking up the spectacle, in being so visible, so over-exposed, he is perpetrating a double crime: one physical, one psychological. Being the subject of their gaze is one of his more sadistic acts. The iteration of a structure of spectatorship, even in this most horrible place, suggests the complicity of the gaze that transcends time, the universality of this gaze, and the essential humanness of it.

Yet there is something else. The performance of the bodies having sex (one cannot see their faces—truly an act of bodiliness that erases individuality) is structurally similar to the moment in *The Magic Flute* that plays on stage as the former lovers see each other: Papageno laments that he is the most wretched man on earth—he calls for his Papagena in vain. Intending suicide, he prepares to hang himself when the Three Gengii appear and dissuade him. He plays his chimes to soothe himself while the Gengii secretly find Papagena for him—they bring her forth and, at the crucial moment, tell him to turn and *look*. The *sight of* his beloved restores his joy and they sing a duet that predicts a little Papageno, then a little Papagena, then another little Papageno, and so on *ad infinitum*. The duet closes as the pair happily speak the other's name. What is this moment other than the jouissance of/through recognition? The structure of recognition on stage, in the theatre, and in the camp collapse to suggest the complete submersion of self and other through the mediation of the gaze and the corresponding recognition and repetition of that recognition.

There are precise points of correspondence between the film of the past (the camp scenes) and the film of the present: the two moments of witnessing (opera and copulation); the two dance scenes

(Bert then, Bert now); the two films (Max's, Cavani's), the two love affairs (Max and Lucia then, Max and Lucia now). These moments are all changed, slightly but significantly, to reflect a difference between then and now—indeed, what appears as an uncanny structural element is not simply the repetition, but the repetition with small changes, i.e., the impossibility of pure repetition, the suggestion that the comfort of true sameness is an impossible fantasy. We must now look to a scene without a double; this sequence anchors Cavani's film and rightfully stands alone. I speak, of course, of Lucia's cabaret performance.

This cabaret sequence has a historical double—Lucia sings a Marlene Dietrich song recorded in 1930, “Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte” (“If I could wish for something”)—invoking and yet radicalizing the Dietrich/Lola Lola image of the fetishized Nazi female. Despite this historical association, however, the cabaret scene does not have a diegetic double as the scenes above do; this scene has no correlate in the present narrative *precisely* because it is antithetical to the gaze structures laid out before and after. This scene establishes Lucia's position as bearer of the spectacle, as taker-up of *plaisagir*. Although feminist film criticism often empties this scene of subjectivity, it is, in fact, the most heightened suggestion of Lucia's ability to participate in her own history. I am not persuaded by common statements like this one from Gaetana Marrone: “As an object of the combined gaze of the spectators and the male protagonist, Lucia is displayed as body/image for their fascination and fantasy”;¹³ instead, I am drawn to the words of Mary Ann Doane. Writing of the *femme fatale*, she argues that that figure “blurs the opposition between passivity and activity; [since the seductive image] is not the subject of power but its carrier.”¹⁴ It is for this reason that this scene suggests the most complicity with Max and slides most troublingly into realms of shared ethical responsibility between victim and victimizer. In Cavani's own words, “le vittime non sono sempre innocenti.”¹⁵ It should not surprise us that these thorny ethical questions arise at the precise moment that

¹³ *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 111.

¹⁴ *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 2.

¹⁵ *Il portiere di notte* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974) viii.

Lucia disrupts the classical model of women's to-be-looked-at-ness as a *passive* position, for where ethics are disrupted, visual disruption follows, and where visuals are shattered, ethics begin.

The impetus for the flashback of the cabaret scene is Max and the Contessa's conversation in which he tells her "I met her again ... I love her" and describes their story, not as romantic, but as "biblical." Cut to a man with a mask. We hear Lucia's voice first, her body follows—the separation of the voice-body, of the sound-image, is the violence of the apparatus acting on its own splitting. Naked underneath suspenders, men's pants, and a black hat, Lucia is the fetishized Nazi object *par excellence*. Her emaciated frame, her exposed ribs, countable, each one, refers, inevitably, to documentary images of Holocaust victims, the body the site of ravages within. This is the image that becomes enlivened—the dead image of the near-dead becomes an erotic spectacle. The mask on Lucia's hat functions against this exposed body: its lifeless face frustrates our desire to fully see behind the spectacle. The mask hides something and makes Lucia's performance impenetrable.

As Max and other Nazi officers watch Lucia sing Dietrich's song, one gets the sense that classic film-theoretical accounts of female bodies will fail in front of this image—there is an appropriation of the act of being a spectacle here, there is a power in the erotic, there is a move from being subject of the gaze to *insisting* on being the subject of the gaze. Lucia's half-smile and seductive self-touches indicate a private female desire to which the male spectators are not given access. She touches them first. Not all of them look comfortable being touched. Lucia moves through space, taking up and consuming the smoky air around her; she is not a localized, contained spectacle, but an eruptive stain spreading through the room. Rampling's stylized movements and the ritualized static poses she adopts play at entering and exiting the space of representation; she re-enacts symbolic death when she mimics a statue (we also see this death into representation at the end of Luchino Visconti's *The Damned*) and then plays with enlivening this shape. She is the site of life and death and life again in rebirth.

Lucia's double face is sustained by the mask on her hat, an androgynous series of facial features that looks down at Lucia and out at the spectators. The onlookers' gaze is constantly challenged by the returned gaze of her double mask—her face and the literal one on her hat—and this perhaps accounts for the palpable dis-

comfort on the Nazis' faces as Lucia performs. They are not aroused, they are terrified. She who experiences *plaisagir* knows that her figure inspires anxiety, but she revels in this excruciating excess. Lucia ends the performance in profile, the doubled mask and face making up, then, one complete face (half a set, twice)—she is always already part mask, which suggests a protective mediation between the vulnerable self-body and the strong mask(ed)-body. As exposed as Rampling's breasts are, one never forgets in this scene how absolutely blocked and imposing she really is. Fitting, then, that this is the moment in which the victim becomes victimizer, each implicated in the system of the other: Max presents Lucia with the head of a prisoner who has been tormenting her. This John the Baptist is a partial image as well: we see the suggestion of his head as we see the outlines of Lucia's under the mask-hat; here is her desire returned to her, the dead gaze of the man confronting her own status as complicit. Both confront *our* stares with the same implication.

One of the most iconic images from that most iconic scene in the cabaret is of Lucia's gloved hand reaching up to her head while her other reaches down, rubbing past her stomach, under her pants. This image closes the circuit with herself—Lucia touches nothing but her body, and the gesture towards masturbatory pleasure thrills with its total exclusion of the other. Lucia appears to look inside as she performs, the blank mask worn on her head is the public stand-in for the private expressivity hidden right under the brim, for her pleasure alone. How can we not be reminded of Irigaray's account of female desire from "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un": "a woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually ... within herself she is already two."¹⁶ This pleasure in and of self is not simply the pleasure of the body, nor simply that of performing, but is tied into a network of pleasure in one's subjectivity. This subjectivity corresponds exactly, and not coincidentally, to Lucia's moment of greatest specularity. She is not exposed, but rather exposes herself. Be-

¹⁶ "This Sex Which Is Not One," *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1980) 100.

ing seen by the others, she forces an ethical confrontation with herself as a subject. I am thinking here of Levinas' account of the foundation of ethics: a visible face-to-face relationship with the other subject.¹⁷ Lucia's touches, her self-caresses, exist beyond the rules and regimentation of the fascist regime (she "touches herself constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so") and exists independently of the sexual pleasure she finds with Max. Lucia's feral growls and erotic rolling on the floor—in both her first reuniting with Max in the hotel and later in his apartment—suggest this self-contained pleasure to which he does not have access. Perhaps the anxiety that arises from male spectators' sight of the female in film *does not*, as Mulvey and the legacy of feminist film theory suggest, arise from the suggestion of castration that she evokes, but from her pleasure in herself that the men can never know, from her exemption from castration (she 'lacks lack' and therefore has nothing to lose). She is more free than men are, and she knows it.

When Max and Lucia resume their performative affair, she ceases to speak. Her low laughs and hysterical shrieks punctuate the rest of the film; the soundtrack moves towards the unrecognizable sounds of what Julia Kristeva has termed the pre-symbolic abject. Furthermore, the song that Lucia sings in the cabaret is endlessly reiterated on the soundtrack, haunting the subjects but also reminding us of the centrality of this scene, of the importance of Lucia's insistence on her own pleasure, on her owned pleasure. Max and Lucia's connection harkens back not simply to the camp affair, but also to the unity of child with mother. The classic masochist/sadist structure is at play—one in which the masochist is, in a sense, in control (hence Max's plea in her hotel room to "tell me what to do!"). For Deleuze, the masochist is the partner who does *not* give herself up entirely to the sexual game, but retains something for herself.¹⁸ Lucia's reappropriation of her trauma, then, acted out in the apartment sequences, is simply an exploration of the power inherent in the masochist/bottom position she already oc-

¹⁷ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969). See also *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

¹⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," *Masochism: Sacher Masoch's Venus in Furs and Deleuze's Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

cupied. When Max feeds her chocolate and wipes some excess off her lips, this is simultaneously the tender gesture of a mother, the token affection of a lover, and the subservient devotion of a top to his chosen bottom. She licks his fingers, appropriating the imagery of her own flashback in which he forced his fingers into her mouth—not the reversal, but the exchange of positional terms, reconfigures the past trauma. That is, the two play at their former affair, but it is an empty gesture: for example, when Max chains Lucia to the bed only to unchain her when she demands it.

The absent signification of the power dynamic of the camp appears in the silences that start to haunt Max's apartment. *The Night Porter* is ultimately emptied of sound entirely. The visuals become slow, dark, static. Max and Lucia are watched by the Nazis outside the apartment—and when they both become subjects of the gaze, the true power of the relationship shifts and they come to occupy structurally identical positions. In this equalized state, Lucia is clearly the more dominant figure: in the one scene that shows the two having intercourse (in the present re-enactment), Lucia gets on top of Max and licks him. The undeniably erotic scene is appropriated for her pleasure, indeed her face comes to totally eclipse him—at the moment of jouissance, his orgasm, Max disappears completely underneath Lucia's body, she covers him entirely at the moment of pleasure. Her eyes are open and gaze out, away from him. If there *is* a diegetic double to the cabaret sequence it is this: in the past, the performative appropriation of erotic spectacle; in the present, the totalizing presence of Lucia during intercourse—these are the same moment and they open up a space of subversion that suggests the elimination of difference between victim and victimizer, the elimination of distinction between he who looks and she who is looked at. Both Max and Lucia are seen by the gaze, both are taken up and in by it; her pleasure in performing, then, is addressed not to Max but to the Other, to the universe at large, and simultaneously privately to herself.

Lucia and Max emerge from their domestic prison in her little girl dress and his Nazi uniform—the costumes of their former S/M drama completely devoid of their primary signification (indeed, they have come to mean their seeming opposite). They know that they are being followed by the former Nazis as they drive all night. Night is itself a figure in the film, and not because Max says he feels shame in the light; rather, along with the employed night

porter (Max's job at the hotel), we see another figure emerge: Cavani's film itself, conferring upon the relationship a sense of necessity, functions to bring the night—to bring the conclusion, the telos of the relationship to a head. The film is the porter of night, forcing the inevitable moment of blackness—the blank frame of the film once ended, and death. As the two lovers walk on a bridge in total silence, they are both shot. A slow zoom in on the fallen bodies does not focus where we might think; instead, the camera zooms in on the *space between* Max and Lucia—on the distance established through repetition, on the difference between the bodies in the flesh and the bodies' masked signification in their costumes. The final shot, then, takes as its subject the subject of the work: nothingness, the gap between, the overproximity of absolutely nondifferentiated space, non-differentiated bodies, the elimination of sexual difference into a space of pure performativity.

This performativity, however, is not more Butlerian nonsense about the dissolution of the real body, but indicates, rather, a fall into corporeality, into performance as an experience in and of the material real, into pleasure in dissolution. This pleasure in disorder is best understood by turning to Leo Bersani's account of shattering. For him, sexuality is everywhere related to a physical/psychic shattering, which I argue is not unrelated to the Kantian sublime. Bersani writes of exquisite abundance, masochistic excess, exploding jouissance, and the total loss of a coherent self—although we see these features of shattering everywhere in Cavani's film, and the importance of shattering as a concept bears spelling out, we will also see how shattering is located in Lucia's appropriation of the spectacle, in her *plaisagir*.

At the exact midpoint of Bersani's *Homos*, it is all laid out for us: "Following Jean Laplanche, who speaks of the sexual as an effect of *ébranlement*, I call jouissance 'self-shattering' in that it disrupts the ego's coherence and dissolves its boundaries."¹⁹ Following Laplanche following Freud, jouissance is "ruthlessly exclusionary" (107), and associated with "a certain degree of intensity in the organism" that "momentarily disturb[s] psychic organization" (101). Bersani reads Freud's definition of the sexual as "an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's

¹⁹ *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 101.

potential for a jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone" (100). We see these familiar phrases again and again: "dissolution of the appropriating ego" (100); "nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject" (99); "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self;"²⁰ "organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those connected with psychic organization" (257); "exploded limits," "ecstatic suffering," "beyond a certain threshold of endurance" (257). The shattering is "a threat to the stability and integrity of the self—a threat which perhaps only the masochistic nature of sexual pleasure allows us to survive."²¹

The masochistic shattering Bersani describes uses a specifically Freudian notion of masochism—it is not so much a pleasure in pain, but a total annihilation of the distinction between those two categories. This aspect of shattering is significant for our discussion of Lucia—I locate as the most radically liberatory scene in *The Night Porter* the very same scene that many theorists find to be the most offensive, sadistic, and oppressive. The central point of *The Night Porter* is not 'here, look at perverse sexuality,' but Look! *all* sexuality is constitutively perverse. We might make this move: it is *not* that all spectacularized women are oppressed and all gazers omnipotent, but that *all those* who look are taken in by the gaze while all those who are looked at receive a certain subjective pleasure from that position.

There is something about shattering and masochism that allows (perhaps even requires) endless redescription; precisely because it is about unbinding, about that which language can neither account for nor accommodate, language must endlessly circle this description without ever hitting its mark. The masochistic pleasure of shattering, the total dissolution of self, underlies Bersani's aesthetic work as well as his work on sexuality. We therefore cannot be indifferent to how similar the language of Laplanche/Bersani's shattering is to that of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* when he speaks of the sublime:

²⁰ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 1994) 257.

²¹ Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 60

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object's] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality.²²

While the beautiful in Kant is connected to understanding and quality, the sublime is associated with the superlative exhibition of reason and quantity—"something not only large, but large absolutely, in every respect (beyond all comparison)" (105). The *unboundedness* of the sublime, its quality of being large *beyond all comparison*, is the aesthetic twin to Bersani's psychic/sexual shattering—in both cases, the unbinding of the ego and the sense of oneself exploding. We see in Kant the positivity of negativity: "since the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure" (98).

What *The Night Porter* takes up strikingly, what makes it a truly feminist film, is its interest in the sublimity of being the sublime object. Lucia's quality of compelling the male gaze is associated with being the object that inspires shattering and the dissolution of the masterful ego of the man who looks upon her. The turning point in the master/slave relationship in *The Night Porter* occurs after the cabaret sequence when Max gives Lucia her tormentor's head. Lucia's scene of *plaisagir* inaugurates Max's increasing unboundedness and pleasure in masochism. And that beyond-comparison quality of the sublime is appropriately referenced here, given the lack of a diegetic double of the cabaret scene. Lucia's nearness to the Dietrich image is precisely what forecloses comparison; the not-quite match to *Lola Lola*, the excessiveness of the scene, the improper conjunctions (the emaciated pre-sexual body matched with the signifiers of sexuality)—these all make the cabaret scene unable to be consumed through comparisons. It stands alone in the text, it stands alone period. It is a negative, a hole in

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 98.

the film itself, not unrelated to the negative pleasure of the sublime and of shattering; so full, this scene literally empties itself out.

This “negative pleasure” in Kant is neither a precise analogue to the negativity as positivity that we see in Cavani, nor to the pleasure in masochism found in Bersani—and yet a certain move is being made by all three thinkers that we should attend to. Instead of positing an oppositional binary (absence versus presence; pleasure versus pain), we see the joining of lack with surplus, which is itself entirely consistent with the logic of surplus. It is the absence, the separating off, the negating of the *objet petit a* that fills out, gives form to, the remainder of reality. There is a filling out of lack with surplus, and of surplus with more surplus; jouissance with more jouissance, the sublime with more sublimity.

Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit locate the pleasure in disruption in their analysis of Samuel Beckett, Mark Rothko, and Alain Resnais in *Arts of Impoverishment*—shattering is here a specifically *aesthetic* strategy (and a particularly modernist one at that), making it of especial relevance to an analysis of Cavani. While in *The Culture of Redemption* Bersani challenges the conventional reading of art as a locus of inspiration and comfort, in this text he and Dutoit explicitly celebrate artists who have actively abdicated this false role of artist-as-redeemer. In psychoanalytic language, what Bersani and Dutoit adore about Beckett, Rothko, and Resnais is that they refuse to allow themselves to be positioned as *le sujet supposé savoir*. “It is as if each of them were saying to his reader or spectator: I have very little (perhaps nothing) to say to you, I have very little (perhaps nothing) to show you. To put this in another way: *My work is without authority.*”²³ This observation inevitably says more than it means: precisely that these artists say *nothing*; Cavani’s film speaks the language of nothingness, the affirmative presence of *nothing*. How can her film end any other way than in death? In a chapter on *The Night Porter* in her dissertation on trauma and modernism, Karen Kyyung Kim writes: “the hunger Lucia is forced to endure at the end of the film recalls her emaciated body in the cabaret scene, and by association, her sexual naïveté. As if to reiterate her perversion, Lucia emerges in the film’s final scene with

²³ *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 3.

her body inscribed with the codes of sexual innocence.”²⁴ The very language of this author divests Lucia of agency (hunger she “is forced to endure” as opposed to hunger she willingly takes up) at the very moment I locate Lucia’s greatest act of agency: as she steps out of Max’s apartment, Lucia is not a walking signifier of innocence, but a woman playing at that role and performing her greatest act, stepping up to her own death. It would be fruitful to think of Lucia’s stepping out of the apartment as an act of radical suicide: this withdrawal from the film is, in Lacan, *passage à l’acte*: “what comes at this moment to the subject, is her absolute identification to this *o* [*a*], to which she is reduced.... it is through this [look of the father] that she feel herself identified and at the same moment, rejected, ejected off the stage.”²⁵ This ‘passing to the act’ is also a ‘letting fall’ into identification with the little other, the punctum of the real. Lucia’s ‘suicide’ is a crossing of boundaries, and it challenges the very ability of the film to retain and not leak the excess of the erotic relationship. Max and Lucia’s radical absencing of themselves opens up a space for a new relationship to language, spirituality, and movement—out of their shared shattering, something new emerges, a new way of seeing and being seen, and a new type of pleasure.

Significantly, in *Arts of Impoverishment*, Bersani and Dutoit celebrate the power of art to *shatter us*. As opposed to the privileging of the diegetic experience (for example, ‘that film is about shattering; look how that character is undone; what can I learn from watching that, out there?’), there is an explicit excess of the arts in question that touches those who observe it. *Observe*, in fact, becomes a false word—there is no separation of diegetic/extradiegetic space; the shattering fractures precisely that subject/object divide. When Kant writes that “*Beautiful* is what we like when we merely judge it,” but “*Sublime* is what, by its resistance to the interest of the sense, we like directly” (127), I believe he is positing precisely the aesthetic model Bersani takes up later when discussing modernism: something acts directly, without the mediation of the sense,

²⁴ “Traumatic Figures: The Inscription of World War in ‘Mrs. Dalloway,’ ‘Sula,’ ‘The Night Porter,’ and ‘Hiroshima, Mon Amour’ (Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Liliana Cavani, Alain Resnais, Marguerite Duras),” diss., U of California, Santa Cruz, 2001, 111.

²⁵ Lacan, *Anxiety* 16.1.63, 12.

without the mediation even of the screen (phantasmic or otherwise). We might say that the beautiful is the art that is, while the sublime is the art that does. Is Cavani's film not supremely affective? Do we not feel seen and implicated? The beautiful is about shattering; the sublime shatters. Or, the beautiful is the art that we look at; *the sublime is that art that looks back at us*.

And *this* is the crucial position of the woman who is spectacle: from her unique position, and only from her unique position, can she look back on the spectator and say to the male, 'I see you seeing.' The seen woman sees, and somehow she sees more. She is therefore associated with the stain, that punctum in the picture that returns our gaze and shows us to be seen as we see. Žižek writes of the stain: "it is by means of the 'phallic' spot that the observed picture is subjectivized: this paradoxical point undermines our position as 'neutral,' 'objective' observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene—in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us."²⁶ Lucia's position as the stain, as the punctum of *plaisagir*, is precisely what subjectivizes *her*.

The concept of shattering gives us the body in crisis, but it also crucially gives us the positivity of art in crisis. I locate this positivity in the dissolution of the masterful gaze. In Bersani's account of shattering, the explicit penetrability of the male subject compels his loss of ego boundaries and coherence; the penetrator does not undergo the same process. While sexuality and shattering are linked, the uniquely masochistic position of *he who is getting fucked* has a specific relationship to sexuality that cannot be inverted. As we see Max increasingly take up the masochistic/bottom position, literally take it away from Lucia, their relationship to shattering changes and Lucia becomes the figure with a more coherent, stable identity as Max takes up the unbounded, undifferentiated position of pleasure in disruption and pain. The Freudian infant, read by Bersani, is "overwhelmed by stimuli in excess of the ego structures capable of resisting or binding them";²⁷ in other words,

²⁶ *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 91.

²⁷ *Homos* 100.

the infant is completely undone by the “enigmatic signifier” sent via the other’s unconscious. The masochistic thrill that the infant feels is both a pleasure in itself, and a strategy for surviving unbinding—sexuality is thus the subject’s desire for a re-enactment of this primary jouissance. *The Night Porter* is not about the infantilizing of Lucia through references to “my little girl” and the frilly pink dress; these are mere distractions, when in fact the story centres around Max’s pre-sexual infantile jouissance. The subject’s repetition of this infantile excitement returns in adult sexuality as “the primacy of masochism,”²⁸ the position in which Max finally ends. Our adult discomfort with a non-masterful ego is appropriately described as an uncanny harkening to the infantile pleasure in this unboundedness. Bersani’s work locates aesthetic radicality in an insecurity in one’s ego; when he and Dutoit write of Assyrian sculpture, “we proceed from A to its repetition in A1 but the latter contains a difference that makes us check the model by returning to A,”²⁹ an almost identical sentence could be written about the alternation of sexual/psychic positions Max and Lucia undertake. Bersani and Dutoit:

If Freud equates—hesitantly, ambivalently—sexual pleasure with the shattering of the self’s coherence, then we could also say that psychoanalysis encourages us to think of the sexual as helping us to effect a passage from the physical *individu* to a metaphysical *individuel*. Sexuality is perhaps as close as we come (short of death) to the beneficent destruction of the empirical individual, a destruction that is identical to its own capacity for sensations. (142)

The humiliating dimension of shattering produces the crucial split in the subject; the refusal to coincide with oneself is constitutive of the shattered subject. When the ego, unbound, no longer lines up with the ‘I’ that it simultaneously produces, we are exposed to a politics of disempowerment, a divestment of privilege and a fluid sexuality based on exchange instead of mastery. *This is*

²⁸ Bersani, *Homos* 95.

²⁹ *Arts of Impoverishment* 138.

the radical politics with which *The Night Porter* leaves us. When Bersani and Dutoit describe Rothko's paintings—"The work redirects attention from itself to the gestures that produced it.... the boundaries of aesthetic space are transgressed: the inescapable message of that space is ... to leave it in order both to represent the physical work that constituted it and to observe, self-reflexively, how our own looking responds to that message" (115)—they could have been describing how Cavani's films force us to look and then immediately to think about the politics of looking. We ultimately lose our position of mastery over the image and in the process, lose a piece of ourselves as omnipotent subjects.

This is, not coincidentally, also the same gesture one finds in abjection: "jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it"³⁰—this not knowing, not desiring, joying in it is the essence of Lucia's sublime performance. When Kristeva writes that "I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (3), we see the fundamental split of the "I" enunciated, and the "myself" of enunciation—this move of abjection points also to the split subject of shattering, of sublime appreciation, and of *plaisagir*. The radical potential of *plaisagir* lies in the paradoxical fact that at the moment one takes up fully the position of being the specular object, and takes it up *in pleasure*, one asserts a subjecthood denied to most objects.

The pleasure of *plaisagir* is the same pleasure to be found in shattering: in being forced to take up the position of object, one is divested of the fundamental fantasy of being a subject. This encounter with the Real is traumatic but also ultimately liberatory: in taking pleasure in dissolution—of mastery, of a coherent ego, of privacy from the gaze—one is given the most radical (in)sight of all: one sees oneself being seen by others, one sees the other being seen by the gaze. One sees, in other words, the very workings of vision and sexuality without being taken back up by either.

³⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 9.

