LOST OBJECTS AND MISTAKEN SUBJECTS:

A PROLOGUE

Lost objects are the only ones one is afraid to lose.

Christian Metz

Acknowledgement of castration prevents murder;
it is its opposite and opposes it.

Julia Kristeva

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate, with Lacan, that there is a castration which precedes the recognition of anatomical difference—a castration to which all cultural subjects must submit, since it coincides with separation from the world of objects, and the entry into language. However, it will also venture something which psychoanalysis has not as yet undertaken, which is to articulate the relationship between that castration—symbolic castration—and the traumatic discovery anatomized by Freud. It is my assumption that the former as well as the latter can be uncovered in certain of his texts, and I will to that purpose perform symptomatic readings of “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” and “Fetishism.”

But the scope of my investigation will extend beyond psychoanalysis. I will endeavor to show that classic cinema has the potential to reactivate the trauma of symbolic castration within the viewer, and that it puts sexual difference in place as a partial defense against that trauma. I say “partial” both because no system of defense is impregnable, and because this one serves to protect only the male viewer. It has very different consequences for the female viewer, at least assuming that identification in any way follows gender, since it projects male lack onto female characters in the guise of anatomical deficiency and discursive inadequacy.

Although it might seem odd to mount such an argument without a series of detailed analyses of prototypical Hollywood films, I will be looking instead at a range of “secondary” texts which might be said to register the symbolic castration anxiety that classic cinema is capable of generating at the site of male subjectivity. The texts to which I refer constitute the dominant tradition within film theory, from Munsterberg
to the present. They will be supplemented by Michael Powell’s _Peeping Tom_, a film whose metacritical relation to Hollywood focuses precisely upon the system of projection and disavowal through which the latter denies male lack.

This chapter will specifically address the female voice only in its concluding section. It is, nonetheless, the necessary preface to the chapters which follow, since in each one of them that category will be shown to open decisively onto both sexual difference and subjectivity.

Film theory has been haunted since its inception by the specter of a loss or absence at the center of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject. When Jean-Louis Comolli suggests that “the whole edifice of cinematic representation . . . finds itself affected [by] a fundamental lack,”¹ he speaks for Munsterberg and Bazin as well as Metz, Oudart, Dayan, and Mulvey.

This fundamental lack reveals a remarkable propensity for displacement. Sometimes the absence which structures cinema would seem to be the foreclosed real. At other times it is equated with the concealed site of production. On yet other occasions, lack would appear to be inscribed into cinema through the female body. Random as they seem, these displacements follow a very specific trajectory. The identification of woman with lack functions to cover over the absent real and the foreclosed site of production—losses which are incompatible with the “phallic function” in relation to which the male subject is defined.²

What I am proposing is that film theory’s preoccupation with lack is really a preoccupation with male subjectivity, and with that in cinema which threatens constantly to undermine its stability. This obsession with the coherence of the male subject informs the debates on realism and suture as well as those on sexual difference and representation. Moreover, as early as Munsterberg and Bazin, disavowal and fetishism are marshaled to protect that coherence.

Although Hugo Munsterberg’s chief concern is to establish the affinities between human psychology and cinematic articulation, he devotes considerable time to the question of realism. However, far from privileging the relation of the cinematic image to the phenomenal world, his _Photoply_ places the two in binary opposition. For Munsterberg the fundamental condition of the cinema is that the viewer be “distinctly conscious of the unreality of the artistic production, and that means that [this production] must be kept absolutely separated from the real things and men, that it must be isolated and kept in its own

sphere.”³ Film, in other words, is defined by the distance that separates it from the phenomenal order—by the absence of the object or referent. Its pertinent relationships are discursive, not existential. Munsterberg writes enthusiastically about inserts, cross-cutting, and other devices that draw attention to movies as constructed entities.

André Bazin, of course, adopts a very different position toward both the referent and cinematic syntax. He argues that the camera not only records but traces the profilmic object—that an existential bond links the cinematic image to the phenomenal world. The transition from one shot to another threatens to disrupt this privileged relationship, to replace it with one which is arbitrary and artificial. Montage transforms “something real into something imaginary”;⁴ it substitutes absence for presence.⁵

Despite Bazin’s assertion that the photographic image “is the object itself,”⁶ and his conviction that the continuum of image and object is interrupted only by syntax and metaphor,⁷ he occasionally concedes that lack is somehow intrinsic to the cinematic operation. In “An Aesthetic of Reality,” he speaks of the “loss of the real” which is “implicit in any realist choice,” and which “frequently allows the artist, by the use of any aesthetic convention he may introduce into the area thus left vacant, to increase the effectiveness of his chosen form of reality.”⁸ Elsewhere Bazin suggests that one of the sacrifices cinema thus necessitates is the physical presence of the actor—and, by extension, that of any other profilmic event.⁹

Christian Metz makes much of this particular absence. Because the spectator and the actor are never in the same place at the same time, cinema is the story of missed encounters, of “the failure to meet of the voyeur and the exhibitionist whose approaches no longer coincide.”¹⁰ Moreover, unlike theater, which employs real actors to depict fictional characters, film communicates its illusions through other illusions; it is doubly simulated, the representation of a representation. For Metz, cinema is not only invaded by but synonymous with the loss of the profilmic event:

What distinguishes cinema is an extra reduplication, a supplementary and specific turn of the screw bolting desire to the lack. First because the spectacles and sounds the cinema “offers” to us (offers at a distance, hence as much as steals from us) are especially rich and varied: a mere difference of degree, but already one that counts: the screen presents to our apprehension, but absents from our grasp, more “things.” (p. 61)

Despite their divergent theoretical positions, Munsterberg, Bazin, and Metz all conceptualize the transition from referent to cinematic sign as a surgical incision. Munsterberg speaks of the necessity for film to
"cut off every possible connection" with the phenomenal order—to frame its spectacle in such a way that all links with the object are "severed" (p. 64). Bazin, who opposes the usurpation of the referent by the sign, and who sees montage as the agency of usurpation, characterizes the editing procedure as one which chops up the world into "little fragments," disrupting the unity "natural to people and things." Metz uses the term castration to describe cinema's structuring lack, whereby foregrounding the viewer's very personal stake in the loss of the object, and adding a new dimension to the metaphors of cutting and chopping deployed by his predecessors.

Metz not only refers to the loss of the object as a castration, but he suggests that the viewer protects him- or herself from the trauma of that castration through defensive mechanisms similar to those adopted by Freud's male child—disavowal and fetishism. Metz's spectator is divided between the one-who-knows and the one-who-doesn't-know:

Any spectator will tell you that he "doesn't believe it," but everything happens as if there were nonetheless someone to be deceived, someone who really would "believe in it." . . . This credulous person is, of course, another part of ourselves, he is seated beneath the incredulous one, or in his heart, it is he who continues to believe, who disavows what he knows. . . . (p. 72)

Like the little boy who sees the female genitals for the first time and who disavows the absence of the penis, this viewer refuses to acknowledge what he or she knows full well—that cinema is founded on the lack of the object.

Although Metz was the first to situate this epistemological division within a psychoanalytic context, he was by no means the first to note it. Munsterberg writes that "we are never deceived" about the flatness of the cinematic image, and yet we credit it with three-dimensionality (p. 23). Bazin makes a similar observation about filmic illusion in "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage":

If the film is to fulfill itself aesthetically we need to believe in the reality of what is happening while knowing it to be tricked. . . . So the screen reflects the ebb and flow of our imagination which feeds on a reality for which it plans to substitute. (Vol. 1, p. 48)

The ebb and flow of the Bazinian imagination enacts the double movement of disavowal, the "I know very well, but all the same . . . " of a subject split down the axis of belief. Metz suggests that the disavowal of destabilizing knowledge is facilitated in the cinema, as it is in the situation described by Freud, by the construction of a fetish. The viewing subject protects him- or herself from the perception of lack by putting a surrogate in place of the absent real. That surrogate becomes the precondition for pleasure. Curiously, however, Metz argues that the cinematic fetish is most often technical virtuosity or formal brilliance—a demonstration, as it were, of the "goodness" of the apparatus (p. 74). He proposes, that is, that the lost object is replaced by an overt display of artifice. What is puzzling about this argument is that it posits a fetishistic situation in which there is no suspension of disbelief. The cameramen, directors, critics, and spectators of whom he speaks, whose love of cinema is a love of technique, have already acceded to the loss of the real, and find nothing traumatic about that loss. Their investment is not in the ontological relation of image to object, but in the productive relation of machine to image.

Comolli provides a much more convincing articulation of cinematic fetishism when he proposes that what stands in for the absent real is a simulated real—what he calls "an impression of reality" (p. 133). This formulation echoes that advanced by Bazin in "An Aesthetic of Reality," where he spells out the conditions which make possible the "ebb and flow" of the viewer's imagination:

We would describe as "realist" . . . all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen. . . . At the conclusion of this inevitable and necessary "chemical" action, for the initial reality there has been substituted an illusion of reality. . . . It is a necessary illusion but it quickly induces a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation. (Vol. 2, p. 27)

Bazin here describes the paradigmatic fetishist operation, one where a construction not only substitutes for the absent object, but is confused or identified with it.

The cinematic fetish is nowhere more flamboyantly displayed than in Bazin's assertion that the photographic image "is the object itself." However, it manifests itself in other ways, as well, most frequently through the viewer's or theoretician's emphasis upon the existential and analogical bonds tying the image to the object. Comolli suggests that "the extreme eagerness of the first spectators to recognize in the images of the first films—devoid of color, nuance, fluidity—the identical image, the double of 'life itself' " came precisely from a "lack to be filled"—from the lack of the object or referent (p. 124). In other words, the desire to perceive similitude where there was as yet scarcely a discernible image speaks to the imperative of finding a surrogate with which to cover over the absent real.

Munsterberg deflects attention away from the object to the subject of the fetishistic exchange when he stresses the necessity for the cine-
The first of these divisions occurs at the mirror stage, where the child arrives at an initial perception of self. That perception is induced through a culturally mediated image which remains irreducibly external, and which consequently implants in the child a sense of otherness at the very moment that identity is glimpsed. At least within the account Lacan offers in "The Mirror Stage,"14 in which the child catches sight of its actual reflection, that otherness would seem to be compounded by the fact that the child makes its self-discovery through a process of subtraction—through the understanding that it is what is left when a familiar object (e.g., the mother) has been removed. Subjectivity is thus from the very outset dependent upon the recognition of a distance separating self from other—on an object whose loss is simultaneous with its apprehension. (These losses are, of course, experienced only retroactively, from a position within the symbolic. Insofar as the mirror stage could be said to have any emotional "content," it would be that "jubilation" of which Lacan speaks, a "jubilation" which is itself based upon an illusory unity, or—as Jane Gallop encourages us to see it—upon an anticipation of self-mastery and a unified identity.)15

The child's as yet unsteady grasp of its own boundaries becomes firmer with the severance of various objects it previously experienced as parts of itself—the breast, the feces, the mother's voice, a loved blanket. However, these objects retain their aura of presence even after they have aborted themselves, and are consequently described by Lacan as objets petits autres (objects with only a little "otherness"). Since these objects are carved out of the subject's own flesh, they attest with ritualistic force to the terms under which the subject enters the symbolic—to the divisions through which it acquire its identity, divisions which constitute the world of objects out of the subject's own self. Although its full impact will not be felt until later, with the entry into language and the Oedipal matrix, the partitioning off of the part objects from the infant subject is experienced as a castration. Lacan stresses that the objet (a) is always "bound to the orifices of the body,"16 it is "something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ," and which consequently "serves as a symbol of the lack."17

The object thus acquires from the very beginning the value of that without which the subject can never be whole or complete, and for which it consequently yearns. At the same time, the cultural identity of the subject depends upon this separation. Indeed, it could almost be said that to the degree that the object has been lost, the subject has been found. Because at this point in the child's history, the object enjoys only a little "otherness," the subject enjoys only a little identity. Further
divisions and losses will be necessary before the child can emerge as a coherent cultural subject.

The entry into language is the juncture at which the object is definitively and irretrievably lost, and the subject as definitively and almost as irretrievably found. It is also the occasion for a further sacrifice, that of the subject’s own being. These losses are determined by the fact that although signification takes the place of the real, it is in no way motivated by or reflective of what it supplants. The signifier is a non-representative representation.\(^{18}\)

When we say that language takes the place of the real, we mean that it takes the place of the real for the subject—that the child identifies with a signifier through which it is inserted into a closed field of signification. Within that field of signification, all elements—including the first-person pronoun which seems transparently to designate the subject—are defined exclusively through the play of codified differences. Not one of those elements is capable of reaching beyond itself to reestablish contact with the real. The door thus closes as finally upon the subject’s being as upon the object. Lacan conveys the extremity of the opposition between language and the phenomenal realm when he describes it as a choice between meaning and life.\(^{19}\)

It is this irrecoverability of object to subject, this irreducible distance separating representation from the real, that cinema has often seemed destined to overcome. Siegfried Kracauer describes the “inveterate moviegoer” as someone alienated from the phenomenal world, who hopes to find in the darkened theater what he or she has lost elsewhere—the “crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects.”\(^{20}\) This imaginary figure, who is a kind of distillate of not only Kracauer’s but Bazin’s realist aspirations, “traces his suffering . . . to his being out of touch with the breathing world about him, that stream of things and events which, were it flowing through him, would render his existence more exciting and significant. He misses ‘life.’ And he is attracted to cinema because it gives him the illusion of vicariously partaking of life in its fullness” (p. 169).

The life for which this spectator yearns is, of course, his or her own. Kracauer makes that clear not only through his emphasis upon the cinephile’s self-alienation, but through the natal metaphor by means of which he articulates the ideal relationship between the cinematic apparatus and the profilmic event. Films, he writes, conform most rigorously to our dreams when the camera seems as if it has “just now extricated [its objects] from the womb of physical existence and as if the umbilical cord between image and actuality [has] not yet been severed” (p. 164). Kracauer’s viewer longs not only for the restoration of this “actuality,” but for the return to a presupjective condition, as well. Significantly, the life line leading back to fusion and nondifferentiation is the indexical relation of the camera to its object.

The indexical relation of the camera to the profilmic event has always provided the most reliable guarantee that cinema is in fact capable of restoring the object to the subject. When Bazin celebrates the camera’s ability to reproduce what is placed in front of it, and when he argues for the elimination of any human intervention, he leans with all his weight upon that guarantee:

For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the intervention of man. . . . All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.

This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers upon it a quality of credibility absent from 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. (Vol. 1, p. 13)

Despite its utopian fervor, this passage from “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” reveals a complex understanding of the binary relation of subject to referent—of the fact that the presence of the one necessitates the absence of the other, since the former belongs to the symbolic order and the latter to the phenomenal realm. On this occasion Bazin opts for brute materiality over meaning; his nostalgia for the lost object is so intense that he is willing to sacrifice subjectivity in order to secure its restitution. However, lack returns via the route it invariably takes in Bazin—through the recollection that films are edited, and that shot-to-shot relationships usurp those which obtain between the camera and the profilmic event. He is obliged to conclude his essay-dream with the admission that “cinema is also a language” (p. 916).

Cinema thus revives the primordial desire for the object only to disappoint that desire, and to reactivate the original trauma of its disappearance. Since the loss of the object always entails a loss of what was once part of the subject, it is—in the strictest sense of the word—a castration. Metz’s use of that concept is consequently neither idiosyncratic nor hyperbolic. Indeed, Serge Leclaire maintains that castration is the only correct term with which to designate the break with the real induced by language, since it alone is equal to the task of marking “the radicality of the division between the order of the letter (signifier) and the alterity of the object.”\(^{21}\)
THE ACOUSTIC MIRROR

If castration is the only word which can properly be applied to the loss of the object induced by signification, and if film is (as even Bazin acknowledges) a language, then disavowal and fetishism would seem as accurately to name certain strategies deployed by classic cinema for concealing that loss. Metz’s reliance upon those signifiers has the additional virtue of drawing attention to the fact that when a film covers over the absent real with a simulated or constructed reality, it also makes good the spectating subject’s lack, restoring him or her to an imaginary wholeness.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the lack which haunts film theory proves surprisingly mobile. At the same time, its displacements follow a precise trajectory—a trajectory which proceeds from the loss of the object, to the foreclosed site of production, to the representation of woman as lacking. These orchestrated displacements have as their final goal the articulation of a coherent male subject. Before addressing the second of the questions posed above—the question, that is, as to why film theory accounts for cinema’s structuring loss with concepts drawn from Freud’s work on sexual difference—some remarks must be made about the foreclosed site of production.

We have seen that the object is definitively lost (and the subject definitively found) at the moment of linguistic access. Cinema replays that drama of phenomenal loss and cultural recovery. Its “unaccustomed perceptual wealth” instills in the viewer the imaginary sense of possession described by one of Kracauer’s interviewees, who said that at the cinema “one is, so to speak, like God who sees everything and one has the feeling that nothing eludes you and that one grasps all of it.” However, this pleasure of possession is in constant jeopardy; not only are cinema’s objects fantastic, but they belong to the order of the signifier. Here as elsewhere the operations of meaning exclude the real: the moment the viewer reaches out to claim the profilmic event, it fades to black.

The theoreticians of suture make much of this usurpation—of the transition from a mythical moment in which the spectator enjoys a “dyadic relationship” with the cinematic image, and in which space is “still a pure expanse of jouissance,” to the congealing of that image into a “frozen letter, which signifies an absence during its advent.” However, the theoreticians of suture also take the semiotic analysis one step further, pointing out that cinematic signifiers, like their linguistic counterparts, are activated only within discourse, and that discourse always requires an enunciating agency. Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan emphasize, in short, that films are necessarily spoken.

In the wake of auteurism, and in a reaction against the privileging of the individual voice, film theory has been at pains to distinguish cinema’s enunciating agency from the figure of the director or scriptwriter. The result has been a much greater emphasis upon both the productive role of the technological and ideological apparatus, and the strategies for concealing this apparatus from the general view. Filmic articulation has been traced in part to the complex of machines without which it would remain only an abstract possibility, and in part to the specific and nonspecific codes responsible for generating meaning. Since this creative dispersal runs counter to the dominant humanist view of authorship, it is often covered over (both in films and in writing about films) by a harmonizing representation. Because of its close identification with human vision, the camera most often supplies that harmonizing representation, although films as diverse as Double Indemnity, The Conversation, and Blow-Out suggest that the tape recorder can perform a similar function by virtue of its association with human hearing. Together, these two privileged machines make possible a certain anthropomorphism of the cinematic apparatus, its conceptualization in terms of a transcendental viewer and listener.

However, as Dayan and Oudart stress, not even this reassuring fiction can conceal the fact that cinema’s enunciating agency is absent from the filmic construction—that it, like the profilmic object, occupies a different scene from that inhabited by the viewing subject. The point of discursive origin is hidden or veiled; it exceeds the spectator, who lacks any access to it. Oudart refers to cinema’s unseen “speaker”—to the foreclosed site of production—as the “Absent One.”

This second exclusion manifests itself even before the cut. It is implicit in the single shot—in that element most central to Bazin’s theory of realism. Dayan and Oudart argue that as soon as the spectator notices the frame-line, he or she becomes aware of visual constraint, and hence of an unseen agency of control. The spectacle is evacuated of its fullness, becoming an empty signifier for the invisible enunciator. Thus, rather than affecting the viewer “like a phenomenon in nature,” the cinematic image attests to artifice and coercion.

The absence of the site of production from the diegetic scene is as potentially disruptive of the viewer’s pleasure as is the absence of the object. Dayan suggests that the discovery of a field beyond his or her gaze is experienced as a “dispossession”—as a diminution or loss of visual potency. As I will argue below, that discovery is also conducive to the viewer’s sense of auditory insufficiency. Classic cinema’s success can
be measured by the degree to which it manages to substitute fictional fields for the irretrievably absent one—by the extent to which it manages to construct adequate surrogates.

The shot/reverse shot is generally deemed to be particularly well suited to this purpose, since the second shot purports to show what was missing from the first shot: together the two shots seem to constitute a perfect whole. Moreover, typically one of those shots depicts someone looking, while the other seems to provide the object of the gaze. The shot/reverse shot formation thus simulates the scopic exchange behind the production of cinematic images. It not only supplies an imaginary version of the absent field, but it associates authoritative vision with a fictional character—a character who stands in for the invisible enunciator. The viewer is in this way repossessed of visual (and auditory) potency, assured that his or her gaze suffers under no constraints.

By now it should be apparent that the theoreticians of suture rely as heavily as do Bazin, Metz, and Comolli on the paradigm of castration, disavowal, and fetishism. However, they displace attention away from the absent real to the symbolic order, and the distribution of power within that order. Whereas Bazin, Metz, and Comolli are primarily concerned with the suppression of the object, Oudart and Dayan focus instead on the viewer's exclusion—on his or her alienation from the site of cinematic production. For them the trauma of castration occurs whenever the viewer recognizes his or her discursive impotence, understands that he or she is “only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, who is physically or absent.”

The disavowal of this lack is always an ideological operation, since it restores the viewer to his or her preordained subject-position and resecures existing power relations.

We can say, then, that film theory's preoccupation with castration, disavowal, and fetishism is motivated not only by cinema's exclusion of the object, but by its subordination of the spectator to a transcendent Other. It is not merely that classic cinema drops a curtain between the scene of production and the scene of consumption (there are, after all, ways of rewriting the already said and the already shown at the point of reception), but that filmic enunciation is so highly dispersed as to exceed even the authorial subject. Like the symbolic order, only much more palpably, cinematic meaning always carries the trace of the Other. The absence to which film theory almost obsessively returns finds its locus in the viewing subject, a subject who lacks both “actuality” and symbolic mastery.

The first of these losses is disavowed through the “impression of reality” which substitutes for the foreclosed object. The second loss—what Dayan calls the subject's discursive “dispossession”—is also concealed through a fetish, at least in classic cinema. The viewer's exclusion from the site of cinematic production is covered over by the inscription into the diegesis of a character from whom the film's sounds and images seem to flow, a character equipped with authoritative vision, hearing, and speech. Insofar as the spectator identifies with this most fantasmatic of representations, he or she enjoys an unquestioned wholeness and assurance. What has not yet been adequately acknowledged by the theory of suture is the degree to which the compensatory representation is coded as male.

For Freud, who provides the founding formulation, castration is something the little boy learns to fear only after he has seen the female genitals. Since until that moment he assumes that everyone has a penis, woman's anatomical difference impresses him as a lack or absence. He disavows what he has seen until some later point, when he is threatened with castration if he persists in a forbidden activity. He then recalls and acknowledges the earlier spectacle, resolving the violent emotions it arouses in him through “horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her.”

The fetishist is described by Freud as a man who remains incapable of accepting woman's lack, and who continues to disavow what he has seen. He substitutes for the missing penis an adjacent object—something which was part of the original “picture” (a shoe, a garment, another part of the female anatomy). As long as this fetish is in place, woman is adequate to his pleasure. She constitutes no challenge to the sexual potency of the male subject because her “difference” has been covered over. However, although the fetish conceals female lack, its presence testifies to the male subject's knowledge of that lack.

It comes as something of a shock to return to the anatomical literalism of the Freudian account of castration, disavowal, and fetishism after exploring the paradigms advanced by film theory. Most startling of all is the sublimation those three concepts undergo in their transfer from the former to the latter—their diversion away from an analysis of sexuality to an analysis of cinema. That sublimation is most striking in Metz, who provides a careful summary of the Freudian argument, but who chooses nonetheless to establish his own formulation on the base of what might be called the Lacanian “revision” to conceptualize castration, that is, in terms of the various splittings through which the subject is constituted. Moreover, even here Metz...
appropriates selectively, focusing primarily on those splittings which precede the Oedipal juncture, and hence sexual difference. As we have seen, for him castration designates the loss of the object induced by the cinematic signifier, a loss which catches up and gives meaning to the divisions induced in the subject by the mirror stage, the loss of the object, and the entry into language.

Jacqueline Rose has sharply criticized Metz and Comolli for what she considers to be their misappropriation of the concepts of castration, disavowal, and fetishism, suggesting that it is a strategy for avoiding the whole issue of sexual difference in cinema. She insists upon a return to the Freudian formulation as a means of rectifying this situation:

To redefine [the concept of disavowal] as the question of sexual difference is necessarily to recognize its phallic reference, how woman is structured as image around this reference and how she thereby comes to represent the potential loss and difference which underpins the whole system (and it is the failure to engage with this that is the problem with Metz’s and Comolli’s work). What classical cinema performs or “puts on stage” is this image of woman as other, dark continent, and from there what escapes or is lost to the system. ...

Rose here gestures in the direction of a critically important argument for feminism—an argument which has yet to be fully elaborated. She proposes that the lack which preoccupies Metz and Comolli (and by extension Munsterberg and Bazin) is somehow related to the lack which preoccupies Freud—that woman functions within classic cinema as a representation of the losses which precede sexual difference as well as those through which sexual difference is established. Rose intimates, in other words, that the absence which cinema locates at the site of the female body has its origins elsewhere, in the operations of the signifier and the foreclosure of the real.

However, her critique of Metz and Comolli’s treatment of cinematic castration overlooks its deconstructive potential—its potential for dislodging woman from the obligatory acting out of absence and lack. By focusing so exclusively on the losses inflicted by the signifier, and by insisting that these losses constitute a castration, Metz and Comolli provide us with the necessary critical distance from the Freudian paradigm to see what it attempts to conceal. They permit us to understand the equation of woman with lack as a secondary construction, one which covers over earlier sacrifices.

Looking at Freud’s theory of castration from the position provided by Metz and Comolli, one is struck by its single-mindedness, its refusal to accommodate any lack except that which attaches to the female genitals. This refusal seems all the more remarkable in light of the symmetry Freud establishes between the terms faces, baby, and penis in “History of an Infantile Neurosis,” and his description of each of those objects as “‘a little one’ that can be separated from one’s own body.”

This abbreviated account of the objet (a) is supplemented by a 1923 footnote to “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy,” where Freud once again insists upon restricting the meaning of castration to the absence of the penis:

It has been urged that every time his mother’s breast is withdrawn from a baby he is bound to feel it as a castration (that is to say, as the loss of what he regards as an important part of his own body); that, further, he cannot fail to be similarly affected by the regular loss of his faces; and, finally, that the act of birth itself (consisting as it does in the separation of the child from his mother, with whom he has hitherto been united) is the prototype of all castration. While recognizing all of these roots of the complex, I have nevertheless put forward the view that the term “castration complex” ought to be confined to those excitations and consequences which are bound up with the loss of the penis. (Vol. 10, p. 8)

I would like to suggest that this refusal to identify castration with any of the divisions which occur prior to the registration of sexual difference reveals Freud’s desire to place a maximum distance between the male subject and the notion of lack. To admit that the loss of the object is also a castration would be to acknowledge that the male subject is already structured by absence prior to the moment at which he registers woman’s anatomical difference—to concede that he, like the female subject, has already been deprived of being, and already been marked by the language and desires of the Other.

Freud’s emphasis upon the delayed nature of the castration crisis can be read in a similar way, as a device for protecting the male subject from a painful and culturally disruptive confrontation with his own insufficiency. By granting a retroactive status to the little boy’s “recognition” of woman’s lack, and by making that recognition the effect of prohibition and threat, Freud implies that the idea of lack is so alien to male consciousness that it must be installed through paternal admonition.

We recall that Freud grants the little girl no such reprieve. At the moment of anatomical unveiling, she “makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it.” However, since she (no more than the little boy) has undergone the loss of the penis, the responses attributed to her by Freud remain inexplicable. It can only be through a cultural intervention analogous to that to which the male subject is exposed that the female subject comes to perceive herself as lacking a privileged organ. Freud admits as much in “Female Sexuality,” when he comments on the
female subject’s epistemological recalcitrance: “When the little girl discovers her own deficiency, from seeing a male genital, it is only with hesitation and reluctance that she accepts the unwelcome knowledge” (vol. 21, p. 223).

The sense of crisis and lack which permeates the little scene described by Freud in “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” and “Fetishism” must consequently be traced to another source—to the various pre-Oedipal castrations catalogued by Lacan, castrations which are realized only retroactively, with the entry into language. These castrations produce a subject who is structured by lack long before the “discovery” of sexual difference, a subject whose very coherence and certitude are predicated on division and alienation.

Freud’s insistence that the little girl experiences a direct and immediate apprehension of what the little boy is obliged to confront only indirectly and at a later date is extremely telling. So is his stress upon the defensive mechanisms—disavowal and fetishism—whereby the male subject can further protect himself from the knowledge of loss. Perhaps most revealing of all, though, is the malice Freud himself exhibits toward the female subject in the course of his essay on anatomical difference—the “triumphant contempt” he encourages the male subject to entertain for the “mutilated creature” who is his sexual other. This set of emotions attests to nothing so much as a successfully engineered projection, to the externalizing displacement onto the female subject of what the male subject cannot tolerate in himself: castration or lack. As Freud himself observes elsewhere, once the subject establishes the cause of anxiety as external to the self, he or she then reacts against it “with the attempts at flight represented by phobic avoidance.”

Significantly, projection is a form of defense closely related to disavowal, in that it is a “refusal to recognize” something which gives displeasure. However, whereas within the Freudian scheme disavowal involves the refusal to recognize an unwanted quality in the other, projection involves the refusal to be that which evokes displeasure. The subject protects itself against this ontological dilemma by separating off “a part of its self, which it projects into the external world and feels as hostile.” In other words, it undergoes another of those splittings so necessary to its sense of consistency and wholeness.

Freud’s work on paranoia, in the context of which most of his random remarks about projection are made, suggests that vision and hearing play a key role in the relocation of an unwanted quality from the inside to the outside. Visual and auditory hallucinations have a critically important projective function in “Psychoanalytic Notes on an

Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia” and “A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Disease.” In both instances, the projecting subject protects itself against displeasure by placing the unwanted quality at a visual and/or auditory remove—by making it the object of the scopic and invocatory drives.

Freud’s account of the male castration crisis conforms with startling precision to the defensive operation just described. To begin with, that crisis is the occasion of the most dramatic of all the divisions in the history of the subject—of the differentiation of the sexes. For the first time, the little boy apprehends woman as radically and unpleasantly other, as the site of an alien and unwanted quality. He insists upon that otherness by renouncing his Oedipal desires and identifying with the father.

Second, vision provides the agency whereby the female subject is established as being both different and inferior, the mechanism through which the male subject assures himself that it is not he but another who is castrated. As in the case of paranoia, the threatening spectacle is initially unreal and easily disputed (the little boy “begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest: he sees nothing or disavows what he has seen”), but gains authenticity as its exteriority becomes more firmly established.

The exteriority of the alien and unwanted quality is initially in doubt because that quality in fact belongs to the little boy as much as to the little girl. Freud inadvertently points his reader toward this conclusion when he describes the revelation of woman’s lack as “uncanny and traumatic,” since in an earlier essay he defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” According to the terms of Freud’s own argument, if the spectacle of female castration strikes the male viewer as “uncanny,” he himself must already have experienced castration; far from functioning merely as an “innocent” (albeit horrified) onlooker, he too inhabits the frame of the unpleasurable image. In other words, the recurrence of the word uncanny in the essay on fetishism reminds us that even before the so-called castration crisis, the male subject has an intimate knowledge of loss—that he undergoes numerous divisions or splittings prior to the moment at which he is made to fear the loss of his sexual organ. Thus, what seems to confront him from without, in the guise of the “mutilated” female body, actually threatens him from within, in the form of his own history.

It is hardly surprising, then, that at the heart of woman’s otherness there remains something strangely familiar, something which impinges dangerously upon male subjectivity. From the very outset, the little boy
is haunted by this similitude—by the fear of becoming like his sexual other. That fear speaks to the “doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” out of which sexual difference emerges. It indicates that what is now associated with the female subject has been transferred to her from the male subject, and that the transfer is by no means irreversible.

The male subject responds to this threat of (re)contamination with phobic avoidance—by insisting upon the absoluteness of the boundaries separating male from female. Nevertheless, as Kristeva suggests, he will continue to be marked by “the uncertainty of his borders and of his affective valency as well; these are all the more undermining as the paternal function was weak or non-existent, opening the door to perversion or psychosis.” Sometimes the male subject is even unable to tolerate the image of loss he has projected onto woman, and is obliged to cover it over with a fetish. However, whether he insists upon sexual difference through phobic avoidance or attempts to conceal that difference with a fetish, he fortifies himself less against the female subject’s castration than against his own. The “normal” male subject is constructed through the denial of his lack; he is at all points motivated by a “not wishing to be.” In short, what he disavows is his own insufficiency, and the mechanism of that disavowal is projection.

Freud is at great pains to anchor fetishism to female lack—to establish fetishism as a male defense against the female condition of castration. Indeed, he makes the former equation the guarantor of the latter, recommending the study of fetishism to anyone “who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genital has some other ground—for instance, that it is derived from a supposed recollection of the trauma of birth.” However, the use of the adjective uncanny to describe the spectacle of woman’s castration is not the only symptom of divided authorial belief in the essay on “Fetishism,” or the only signpost pointing in a very different direction from the manifest argument.

The famous case history with which the essay begins, for instance, provides a vivid dramatization of that defensive operation whereby the female subject is obliged to bear a double burden of lack. Freud tells us that the fetish in question, a shine on the nose, is actually a disguised reference to a “glance at the nose” (p. 152), and that the substitution of the former for the latter was made possible by the overlapping sounds of the German word Glanz (shine) and the English word glance. However, he fails to remark the externalizing displacement this substitution effects, the shift of attention away from the subject to the object, the look to the spectacle, as the flash of the glance becomes the shine on the nose. A remarkable narrative is elided here, in which male lack is projected onto the image of woman, but returns, “uncanny and traumatic,” to trouble his gaze—a narrative, in other words, in which the male subject is shocked into a visual confrontation with his own lack. This return of the repressed necessitates further defensive operations on behalf of male subjectivity, defensive operations designed to construct once again the illusion of an absolute divide separating the viewing subject from the viewed object.

Here, too, Freud’s account proves curiously elliptical. The only one of these defensive operations that he is prepared to acknowledge is the fetishistic transaction, and he even moves quickly to close off analysis of it. After a brief summary of the patient’s linguistic history, he abruptly concludes that “the nose was the fetish.” The conviction with which Freud makes this diagnosis is as surprising as its naive simplicity, since within the preceding discussion the nose figures only as a term which is so complexly mediated by the glance/shine as to be indissociable from it: The patient had been brought up in an English nursery but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The “shine on the nose” [in German “Glanz auf der Nase”]—was in reality a “glance at the nose.” The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others. (p. 152)

Freud offers an even more exaggerated display of hermeneutic self-assurance in the next paragraph, where he asserts that the fetish itself must always be understood as “a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up,” and characterizes his interpretation as “natural” and “compelling” (pp. 152–53). This declaration of faith seems especially odd in the context of a disquisition upon the divisions and contradictions to which belief is prone. It is very much in keeping with that disposition that Freud finds himself impelled, in mid-critique, to respond to objections that can come only from an internal scene, although he himself attempts to displace them on to an external one (“When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost” [p. 152]).

In the face of Freud’s own defensive logic—in the face, that is, of
such a web of disavowals and projections—I feel impelled to stress once again that the fetish classically functions not so much to conceal woman’s castration as to deny man’s, and that this goal can be achieved only by identifying lack with what is exclusive to woman, i.e., with her anatomy. Even if we are to assume, with Freud, that in the present instance the fetish is in fact the nose, it does not necessarily follow that the function of this fetish is to compensate for woman’s lack. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest the contrary—to argue that the nose-as-fetish functions to secure lack on the side of the female subject. But let us return for a moment to the shine.

As I have already remarked above, the substitution of the glanz or shine for the glance shifts attention—and affect—away from the subject to the object, the viewer to the spectacle. It also transfers a certain value from the male to the female subject, so that she comes to occupy the place formerly occupied by him—to stand in for him, and in so doing to cover over his lack. It is thus woman herself who represents the “original” fetish, woman herself who is required to conceal from the male subject what he cannot know about himself. The nose is only a secondary or supplementary fetish, although it remains an important and necessary testament to woman’s supposed anatomical “lack,” and consequently an additional “buffer” between the male fetishist and his own castration.

Unfortunately for the classic male fetishist, this supplementary fetish is emblazoned with the mark of his own divided belief and, like all fetishes, announces what it attempts to conceal. It is, after all, to paraphrase Freud, not any chance nose, but a particular and quite special nose—a nose lit up with a “luminous shine” which is the mirror image of the gaze that imparts it, and which consequently never stops speaking to the absolute reversibility of male viewer and female spectacle, and hence to the shared lack of subject and object.

The loss of the patient’s native English is another symptom pointing to male castration, testifying as it does to the massive repression of his own infantile history, and to the disavowal of those manifold divisions early suffered by both the male and the female subject (one thinks once again here of Freud’s reference in the succeeding paragraph to the all-important part played in fetishism by childhood losses, losses which he shows himself so determined to circumscribe within the boundaries of the female body). The phrase with which Freud refers to that language—“mother-tongue”—effects yet another externalizing displacement of castration along lines of sexual difference, and one of profound significance to the present study. With that externalizing displacement, the male fetishist attributes to woman sole knowledge of that language within which lack can be experienced and known. I will have occasion to return to this last projection many times in the next chapter, as I examine the strategies whereby classic cinema divests the female subject of any claim to discursive authority.

Freud attempts to increase the distance between the male subject and castration by associating the fetishist’s look with “will,” i.e., with volitional creativity, and thus with mastery. However, he collapses this distance—which he produces only by disavowing his own most fundamental discovery, that of the unconscious—through a curious foreclosure. Remarkably, there is not a single reference to woman, either in the abstract or in the particular, throughout the entire paragraph devoted to this unusual fetish: the female subject is completely excluded from Freud’s cryptic account of the displacement from the “glance” to the “glanz,” in an account within which “the nose” dangles like a disembodied and anonymous organ, unclaimed even by the female possessive pronoun. This exclusion testifies eloquently both to the closed economy and ultimate self-referentiality of male fetishism, and to Freud’s own implication in that perversion.

Male lack is even more overtly implied by two of the other fetishes Freud mentions in his essay on that topic—so much so that he comes perilously close to revealing what he is at such pains to conceal. The first of these fetishes is an athletic support-belt, about which Freud has this to say:

There are many and weighty additional proofs of the divided attitude of fetishists to the question of the castration of women. In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself. This was so in the case of a man whose fetish was an athletic support-belt which could also be worn as bathing drawers. This piece of clothing covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them. Analysis shows that it signified that women were castrated and that they were not castrated; and it also allowed of the hypothesis that men were castrated, for all these possibilities could equally well be concealed under the belt—the earliest rudiment of which in his childhood had been the fig-leaf on a statue. (pp. 156—157)

This remarkable fetish does more than simultaneously avow and disavow female lack; as Freud himself admits, it also speaks to the possibility of male lack, and it does so in ways that affirm the fundamental identity-in-castration of the male and female subjects. By concealing the genital zone of its female wearer altogether, the athletic belt eliminates the only “evidence” by means of which the fetishist is able to naturalize the relation between woman and lack, and so to disavow his own lack. The abolition of this “distinction” is tantamount to an acknowledgment of male castration.
THE ACOUSTIC MIRROR

The second of these examples, with which the essay on “Fetishism” concludes, clearly gives the lie to the notion that the fetish functions to conceal female lack. Freud brings this example forward by way of illustrating a most startling premise—the premise that in some situations the fetish speaks as much to the desire to castrate woman as to deny her castration: “Another variant . . . might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated” (p. 157). There can be little remaining doubt as to what this castration signifies, or what it effects. The foot-binding example foregrounds the motivating desire behind conventional fetishism—the desire to inscribe lack onto the material surface of the female body, and in so doing to construct a fetish capable of standing in for all those divisions and losses suffered by the male subject in the course of his cultural history. That fetish, as must now be perfectly obvious, confers plenitude and coherence only on the male subject. Gratitude, even if it attaches itself erotically to all of woman’s “wounds,” seems a meager recompense.

Laplanche and Pontalis suggest that one of the psychoanalytic meanings of projection is comparable to the cinematic one, since in both cases “the subject sends out into the external world an image of something that exists in him in an unconscious way.” They add that “projection is defined here as a mode of refusal to recognize (méconnaissance) which has as its counterpart the subject’s ability to recognize in others precisely what he refuses to acknowledge in himself” (p. 354).

At first glance, the comparison seems rather puzzling, since the activities of viewing and projecting are sharply differentiated within the classic cinematic regime. The former are on the side of reception, and the latter on that of (re)production. The spectator is consequently not “responsible” for what he or she sees, at either a conscious or an unconscious level, despite the fact that his or her desires may be quite fully engaged. He or she relies upon an unseen apparatus for the flow of images—upon “a flickering vibration whose imperious thrust grazes our head from behind,” and whose “beam of light seems to bore a keyhole for our stupefied gaze to pass through.”

It is also unclear how cinema—in either its technological or ideological operations—can be said to involve the viewer in an externalizing displacement of the sort described above. In other words, it remains to be established precisely how the classic filmic text participates in the projection onto others of those qualities which constitute an unacceptable part of the viewer’s own self, particularly since the latter in no way determines which qualities shall be so projected.

The first of these difficulties vanishes as soon as we remember that the spectator is always caught up in the flow of cinematic images—as soon as we recall that films are produced not only for but through the spectator. Implicit in the reception of the cinematic spectacle is the viewer’s identification not only with the camera, but with the projector and the screen:

During the performance the spectator is a searchlight . . . duplicating the camera, and he is also the sensitive surface duplicating the screen, which itself duplicates the film-strip . . . When I say that “I see” the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents . . . Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen: in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records.

The viewer is held in the “pincers” of the cinematic apparatus, and thus inserted into its technology. Even at the most “primary” level—the level of the spectator’s perceptual relation to the text—watching a film is a constant process of projection and introjection, of sending out “a sort of stream called the look” so that “objects can come back up the stream in the opposite direction.”

Film theory has also noted that introjection plays a vital role in determining the viewer’s relation to the diegesis, since “secondary” identification is effected in large part through the incorporation of character representations. Those representations are taken into the self, and provide the basis for a momentary subjectivity—a subjectivity which is sometimes in contradiction to the spectator’s previous structuration, but which is more often sufficiently compatible so as to create the illusion of continuity. The function of projection within secondary identification has received less attention. However, I would like to suggest that it occupies as prominent a place within the representational system of dominant cinema as does introjection.

Regardless of whether cinematic projection is understood in its most technological or its most ideological sense, it always both implicates and exceeds the viewer. In short, it is activated for him or her by an external agency (the projectionist, the textual system). Cinematic projection consequently provides an invaluable metaphor for conceptualizing the involuntary nature of the sexually differentiating projections discussed above. The latter are no more “willed” than the former. They are the effect of a constantly renewed Oedipal structuration, which resituates the loss of the object at the level of the female anatomy, thereby restoring to the little boy an imaginary wholeness. This externalizing
displacement is further secured through the forced identification of woman with lack. The female subject bears the scar of the castration by which both she and the male subject enter language, granting him the illusion of an as yet intact being.

This is not the only cut the female subject is obliged to display. The coherence of the male subject is threatened as much by the distance that separates him from the phallus as by the distance that separates him from the real. In the former instance, as in the latter, his integrity is established through the projection onto woman of the lack he cannot tolerate in himself. The male subject "proves" his symbolic potency through the repeated demonstration of the female subject's symbolic impotence.

One of the aims of the present discussion is somehow to reverse these displacements—to read the loss and difference associated with the female subject as a symptom of the male condition. Another is to show that classic cinema entertains more than a metaphoric relation to the operations which construct sexual difference: to suggest that dominant film practice actually initiates and orchestrates the burdensome transfer of male lack to the female subject by projecting the projections upon which our current notions of gender depend.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that cinema constructs sexual difference all by itself. However, I do mean to propose that Hollywood plays more than a reproductive role in the construction of sexual difference. It is no coincidence that the history of cinema has coincided with the ever-increasing specularization of woman. Indeed, I would argue that cinema has contributed massively to what might be called the "revisualization" of sexual difference.

I say "revisualization" because the insistent equation of woman with spectacle and man with vision marks a shift in the general terms of cultural reference which occurred between 1750 and the present. This shift manifests itself in a variety of nineteenth-century discourses, from painting and the novel to psychoanalysis and photography. However, J. C. Flugel suggests that if we want to understand the stakes involved in that transformation, we might well look even earlier, at late-eighteenth-century fashion, which inaugurated a major change in clothing customs.

This change, described by Flugel as "the Great Masculine Renunciation," turned upon the despecularization of the male subject, and consequently (as I will argue below) upon the hyperspecularization of the female subject. After evolving for centuries in the direction of richness and elegance, male clothing underwent a kind of visual "purification," from which it and its wearers emerged chastened and subdued:

Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects

At about that time there occurred one of the most remarkable events in the whole history of dress, one under the influence of which we are still living. One, moreover, which has attracted far less attention than it deserves: men gave up their right to all the brighter, gayer, more elaborate, and more vaned forms of ornamentation, leaving these entirely to the use of women, and thereby making their own tailoring the most austere and ascetic of arts. . . . Man abandoned his claim to be considered beautiful. He henceforth aimed at being only useful. So far as clothes remained of importance to him, his utmost endeavours could lie only in the direction of being "correctly" attired. . . . Henceforward, to the present day, woman was to enjoy the privilege of being the only possessor of beauty and magnificence. . . .

Since Flugel's account of fashion would seem to have more than a little relevance to cinema, it would seem useful to remain with it for a moment or two, and to examine some of his hypotheses.

Flugel explains that "the Great Masculine Renunciation" involved more than the renunciation of male finery; it also entailed the collapse of a whole system of social and class distinctions which both differentiated and separated men from each other. Male clothing underwent a process of democratization, becoming both simpler and more uniform; it ceased to have as its primary function the designation of rank and privilege, and began instead to signify the solidarity between one male subject and all others. Male clothing also came increasingly to signify allegiance to the larger social order, and man's privileged position within that order. As a consequence, writes Flugel, "modern man's clothing abounds in features which symbolize his devotion to the principles of duty, of renunciation, and of self-control. The whole relativist 'fixed' system of his clothing is, in fact, an outward sign of the strictness of his adherence to the social code (though at the same time, due to its phallic attributes, it symbolizes the most fundamental features of his sexual nature)" (p. 113).

In its own way, this passage anticipates the lesson Lacan spent so many years delivering, the lesson that the phallus is not the penis. It does this obliquely, through the statement of a seeming contradiction—through the observation that although over the past two centuries male clothing has aspired increasingly to ideological rectitude, and has consequently detached itself more and more from the male body, it nonetheless continues to construct male sexuality. Modern male sexuality would thus seem to be defined less by the body than by the negation of the body.

Flugel's formulation points to the ways in which that sexuality has been sublimated into a relation with the phallus. The phallus, which at an earlier historical moment seemed to fit as smoothly over the penis as a condom, has undergone a similar abstraction. It no longer seems merely a theatricalization or hyberbolization of the organ it indisputably
represents, but has instead become a signifier for symbolic knowledge, power, and privilege. Access to the phallus is still predicated upon possession of the penis, but the relation between the two is increasingly arbitrary, in Saussure’s sense of the word, and must be constantly mediated by ideal male representations. All of this is another way of saying that over the past two centuries, the male subject has increasingly dissociated himself from the visible, attempting thereby to align himself with a symbolic order within which power has become more and more dispersed and dematerial.

This dissociation has been no easy matter, for the equation of woman with lack follows only from the identification of man with specularity. The female genitals, in other words, can be defined as a “nothing-to-see” only by contrast with the “strikingly visible” male organ, so that it would seem almost impossible to maintain the former definition while denying the latter. However, through an extraordinary sleight of hand, woman has been made the repository not only of lack but of specularity. She has also come to be identified with two other qualities, narcissism and exhibitionism, which would seem more compatible with male subjectivity—qualities which are almost synonymous with organ display.

According to Flugel, the identification of woman with narcissism and exhibitionism is the result of a series of defensive activities calculated to shield the male subject from himself. He suggests that the male subject protects himself from the specularity which defines him in part by converting it into its opposite, scopophilia, and in part by projecting it onto woman. An erotic contract is thus put in place which binds the male subject to the female subject; not only is she the mechanism by which he establishes his phallic wholeness and adequacy, but she provides the means by which he continues to derive pleasure from what he has ostensibly renounced:

What has happened to the psychological tendencies (Narcissistic, exhibitionistic, etc.) which formerly found expression in the decorative aspects of [male] dress? . . . In general, it would seem that, when a satisfaction is denied, the desires connected with the satisfaction are either inhibited or displaced. . . . in the case of the exhibitionistic desires connected with self-display, a particularly easy form of conversion may be found in a change from (passive) exhibitionism to (active) scopophilia . . . the desire to be seen being transformed into the desire to see and know. It is perhaps no more than that a period of unexampled scientific progress should have followed the abandonment of ornamental clothing on the part of men at the beginning of the last century.

Another subtle psychological change may consist in the projection of the exhibitionistic desire onto a person of the opposite sex. . . . In such cases there is clearly some element of identification with woman. (pp. 115–19)

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Voyeurism, exhibitionism, narcissism, identification: we are back in familiar territory. This passage from *The Psychology of Clothes* points as emphatically to the continuity between late-eleventh-century fashion and classic cinema as it does to the discontinuity between late-eleventh-century fashion and what preceded it. It also encourages us to understand the Great Masculine Renunciation in terms of the female subject it constructs—a female subject who is the mirror reflection not only of the male subject’s castration, but of his specularity, exhibitionism, and narcissism.

Cinema challenges the imaginary plenitude of the viewing subject whenever it reveals the fantasmatic basis of its objects—whenever it reenacts the foreclosure of the real from representation. I have indicated how fully this loss absorbs film theory, and the emphasis which is placed upon the substitution of an “impression of reality” for the absent real. Even more threatening to the subject’s coherence is the disclosure of the cinematic signifier, since that disclosure not only finalizes the rupture with the phenomenal realm, but draws attention to the invisible enunciator—to the fact, that is, that films and their spectators are spoken by an unseen Other. Film theory has shown itself to be equally sensitive to this absence, and to the strategies developed by classic cinema to cover it over.

However, at no point in either of these extended theoretical discussions has it been noted that the lack which must somehow be disavowed not only structures male subjectivity as much as female subjectivity, but poses a far greater danger to the stability of the former than to that of the latter. Since the female subject is constructed through an identification with possession, her exposure to further castrations jeopardizes nothing. The male subject, on the contrary, is constructed through an identification with the phallus. That identification may be threatened by the disappearance of the object, but it is capitalized by any reminder of the male subject’s discursive limitations. It is impossible for a subject who knows himself to be excluded from authoritative vision, speech, and hearing to sustain a pleasurable relation to the phallus.

Nor has either of these theoretical explorations suggested that there might be an important connection between the losses which structure cinema and the representation of woman as lacking. This omission is particularly striking in the case of Oudart and Dayan, since the system of suture works precisely through the articulation of sexual difference. As I have argued elsewhere, the most paradigmatic of all shot/reverse shot
formations is that which aligns the female body with the male gaze. This two-shot not only covers over the absent site of production, but places the male subject on the side of vision, and the female subject on the side of spectacle. Moreover, insofar as the apparatus is anthropomorphized (insofar as the camera is associated with human sight and the tape recorder with human hearing), it assumes a paternal shape. The complex involvement of classic cinema in the articulation of sexual difference can best be demonstrated through a brief examination of yet another corpus of film theory preoccupied with the notion of lack.

Since the publication of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975, feminist film theory has focused a good deal of attention on the coding of the female subject as inadequate or castrated within dominant cinema. That theory has also looked closely at the potential for trauma contained within the spectacle of woman-as-lack, and at the defensive mechanisms made available to the viewer as a shield against that lack.

Curiously, the scenario described by Mulvey conforms much more rigorously to the original psychoanalytic paradigm of castration and crisis than do those of Metz and Comolli, or Oudart and Dayan. Like Freud’s little boy, cinema’s male viewer finds the vision of woman’s lack threatening to his own coherence, and fears that he will become the victim of a similar deprivation. According to Mulvey, classic cinema offers two possible resolutions of this crisis: disavowal through fetishism, and avowal accompanied by disparagement. According to the first of these resolutions, an item of clothing or another part of the female anatomy becomes the locus of a compensatory investment, and substitutes for the organ which is assumed to be missing. The second of these resolutions has a very different end result, since instead of deflecting attention away from one part of the body to another, it shifts the focus from woman’s “outside” to her “inside.” That transfer is effected through an investigation, which “reveals” that the female subject has either committed a crime for which she has to be punished, or suffered from a crippling illness. Since in either case woman’s castration can be traced back to her own interiority, this resolution of the male viewer’s anxiety permits him to place a maximum distance between himself and the spectacle of lack—to indulge in an attitude of “triumphant contempt” for the “mutilated creature” who is his sexual other.

Its greater conformity to the Freudian formulation is not the only way in which Mulvey’s account of cinematically castrated deviations from those of the other theoreticians discussed here. An equally important and closely related deviation is that whereas Metz, Comolli, Oudart, and Dayan all emphasize the suturing effects of narrative—its capacity for covering over or making good cinema’s various organizing absences—Mulvey locates the moment of loss inside the narrative. She displaces attention away from the extradiagnostic castrations recounted by the others to one that occurs within the diegesis. Mulvey proposes, in other words, that the “impression of reality” with which dominant cinema compensates for the absent real and effaces its own status as discourse relies upon a restaging of the drama of loss. What are we to make of this compulsion to repeat, this return of the repressed? And how are we to account for the paradoxical recourse to representations of lack with which to dispel the specter of an existential lack?

The first thing that must be said is that the narrative formulation is a repetition with a number of striking differences. The most important of these differences is that Mulvey’s viewer, unlike that presumed by Metz, Comolli, Oudart, and Dayan, occupies a specifically masculine position. This viewer—whether in fact a man or a woman—identifies with the look of the male protagonist, experiencing with him the anxiety of castration and the pleasure of its neutralization. Another difference within the narrative repetition is that whereas the spectator described by the other theoreticians disavows the loss of something which was earlier perceived as part of the self, whether it be the object or discursive potency, that described by Mulvey seems to disavow another’s lack. The source of unpleasure is externalized in the form of the female body. It can be seen (and heard).

However, despite its apparent exteriority, this lack proves profoundly disturbing to the male viewer, in whom it inspires anxiety and fear. He experiences woman’s wound as an assault upon his own subjectivity, a threat of like retribution. The violence of this reaction and the extremity of the measures which must be taken to neutralize it suggest that the image of woman reflects “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.” Far from exposing the male viewer to the “new and alien,” that image would seem to confront him with “something familiar and old-established [in his mind] . . . which has become alienated from it through the process of repression.”

We would seem to be face to face with another sexually differentiating projection—with an externalizing displacement of the kind unwittingly articulated by Freud’s writings on the castration crisis. Here, as there, an unwanted part of the self is shifted to the outer register, where it can be mastered through vision. And here, as there, the projected image returns to trouble the male subject. However, the situation elaborated by Mulvey occurs well after the subject’s entry into the symbolic, and is precipitated not only by the loss of the real and the renunciation
of Oedipal desire, but by the “encumbrance” of the phallus—by the weight of that signifier in relation to which the male subject can never be adequate.

Although the phallus is naturalized through its imaginary alignment with the penis, it is never more or less than a distillate of the positive values at the center of a historically circumscribed symbolic order. Those values stubbornly resist embodiment, designating a grammatical rather than an existential position—the place occupied by the name rather than the body of the father. Each of the dominant discourses which make up the larger symbolic order helps to define and localize the phallus by “imagining” or “fantasizing” a speaking subject—a subject authorized to command that discourse’s power-knowledge. The phallus is in effect the sum of all such speaking subjects.

Like the phallus, the speaking subject is a symbolic figuration which always exceeds the individuals defined by it. That is particularly evident in the case of classic cinema, where enunciation is as much an effect of the ideological and technological apparatus as of any human intervention. Indeed, as I have already noted, the theoreticians of suture refer to classic cinema’s enunciating agency not as the director but as the “Absent One.”

The exclusion of classic cinema’s viewer from the point of discursive origin is thus simultaneously an isolation from the phallus. Every reminder of the foreclosed site of production draws attention to that isolation, revealing the gulf separating the male spectator from the paternal signifier upon which he relies for his cultural identity. Indeed, since every frame-line and cut constitute potential reminders of that hidden scene, the classic film poses a constant threat to the very subjectivity it wishes to consolidate.

I would argue that the castration crisis diagnosed by Mulvey can proceed only from this source—that in the final analysis it is the male viewer’s own exclusion from the site of filmic production rather than the spectacle of woman’s anatomical “lack” which arouses such anxiety and fear in him. As with the foreclosed real, classic cinema musters numerous defenses against this castration, both “primary” and “secondary.” (To the former category belong all those defenses mounted directly against the male subject’s lack. The second category contains all those defenses which, like those discussed by Mulvey, seem to bear upon woman’s lack, but which in fact bear indirectly upon male lack.)

Ideal representations play a key role here. The male subject is protected against the knowledge of his discursive insufficiency through the inscription into the diegesis of phallic characters with whom he is encouraged to identify—characters equipped with the phallic attributes of the “Absent One” (i.e., with the capacity to look creatively, speak authoritatively, and capture and coerce the speech of others). However, projection plays an even more important part, since the male viewer can effect these pleasurable introjections only if he is able to disburden himself of the various losses which organize his subjectivity—if he is able to displace his discursive lack onto woman.

Once again, classic cinema engineers this projection for him. Through its endless renarrivization of the castration crisis, it transfers to the female subject the losses which afflict the male subject. It also arms him against the possible return of those losses by orchestrating a range of defensive operations to be used against the image of woman, from disavowal and fetishism to voyeurism and sadism. In this way the trauma which would otherwise capsize the male viewer is both elicited and contained.

But what does all of this entail for the female viewer, presuming that she, like the male viewer, is structured by secondary identification, and that secondary identification at least to some degree proceeds along lines of sexual difference? Above all, I want to stress that although woman’s castration is always anatomically naturalized within Hollywood films, what this castration in fact entails is her exclusion from symbolic power and privilege. That exclusion is articulated as a passive relation to classic cinema’s scopic and auditory regimes—as an incapacity for looking, speaking, or listening authoritatively, on the one hand, and with what might be called a “receptivity” to the male gaze and voice, on the other. Thus, the female subject’s gaze is depicted as partial, flawed, unreliable, and self-entrapping. She sees things that aren’t there, bumps into walls, or loses control at the sight of the color red. And although her own look seldom hits its mark, woman is always on display before the male gaze. Indeed, she manifests so little resistance to that gaze that she often seems no more than an extension of it.

Woman’s words are shown to be even less her own than are her “looks.” They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external agency, or uttered by her in a trancelike state. Her voice also reveals a remarkable facility for self-disparagement and self-incrimination—for putting the blame on Mame. Even when she speaks without apparent coercion, she is always spoken from the place of the sexual other.

Classic cinema’s female subject is the site at which the viewer’s discursive impotence is exhumed, exhibited, and contained. She is what might be called a synecdochic representation—the part for the whole—since she is obliged to absorb the male subject’s lack as well as her own.
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The female subject's involuntary incorporation of the various losses which haunt cinema, from the foreclosed real to the invisible agency of enunciation, makes possible the male subject's identification with the symbolic father, and his imaginary alignment with creative vision, speech, and hearing. Indeed, not only is woman made to assume male lack as her own, but her obligatory receptivity to the male gaze is what establishes its superiority, just as her obedience to the male voice is what "proves" its power.

The diegetic drama of castration described by Mulvey is thus a simulation of the crisis which occurs whenever the male viewer is reminded of his visual and verbal subordination to cinema's absent enunciator—a simulation which covers over that other scene of castration with its representations of phallic men and wounded women. Because it restages what happens elsewhere, in both the history of the subject and the production of the cinematic text, Hollywood's diegetic organization can perhaps best be characterized by a phrase from Bazin: it is "a mirror with a delayed reflection, the tin foil of which retains the image" of earlier losses. It is scarcely necessary to add that woman is the foil.

It would seem a not altogether implausible assumption that among that category of films generally deemed "reflexive," there might be one or two in which this mirror relation is reversed—in which the obsessive self-referentiality works to uncover the pathology of male subjectivity. Hitchcock's Rear Window (1954), Antonioni's Blow-Up (1967), and Jim McBride's David Holzman's Diary (1967) are titles that might be invoked here. However, it is through the mediating details of a fourth film, Michael Powell's Peeping Tom (1960), that I would like to pursue my diagnosis.

Peeping Tom gives new emphasis to the concept of reflexivity. Not only does it foreground the workings of the apparatus, and the place given there to voyeurism and sadism, but its remarkable structure suggests that dominant cinema is indeed a mirror with a delayed reflection. It deploys the film-within-a-film trope with a new and radical effect, making it into a device for dramatizing the displacement of lack from the male to the female subject.

There are, in fact, two films-within-the-film. The first, which was completed by the now-deceased Dr. Lewis (Michael Powell) some twenty years prior to the diegetic present, offers a "scientific" record of his son's childhood, with particular emphasis on moments of fear, loss, and sexual crisis. Completely traumatized by his father's experiments, Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm) attempts as an adult to master that trauma by making a film of his own, which constitutes the second film-within-the-film.

Although both films purport to be documentaries, each is shown to be elaborately staged. Not only does Dr. Lewis orchestrate the crises he then photographs, but these crises are all key moments within the Oedipal narrative (the castration threat, the primal scene, the loss of the mother, and access to the paternal legacy, here represented by the gift of a camera). Throughout these various episodes, the emphasis falls on the father's punishing power and on the son's lack (this is true even at the moment of seeming phallic transmission, since the father's camera remains conspicuously trained on the son's). That lack is dramatically figured here by Mark's exclusion from the site of discursive production—by the evident fact that his meaning comes to him from elsewhere. By constantly turning his camera on his son, Dr. Lewis firmly locates him on the side of the spectacle, within the boundaries of the filmic fiction. Although Mark's position is thus analogous to that of any diegetic character within classic cinema, it is clearly shown to be incompatible with the "phallic function," and to necessitate extreme defensive measures. Here those measures take the form of Mark's own "documentary," which performs an analogous displacement to that engineered by Hollywood, obliging woman once again to assume a double burden of lack.

This second film is consequently equally constrained by Oedipal imperatives—by the imperatives of male adequacy. It casts an inverted reflection of the first, manifesting the same obsessive interest in trauma, but now situating Mark outside the fiction, on the side of apparent discursive control. This shift is effected by inserting a series of prostitutes and models into the specular position Mark occupies in Dr. Lewis's film, and by subjecting them to a lethal castration.

Mark's relationship with these women is insistently mediated by the camera; from the moment that he first sights one of them as a bridge to phallic identification, he never looks away from the view finder, thereby indicating the central role played by the cinematic apparatus in the desired psychic transaction. In each case, he films his victim in an attitude of erotic display which facilitates the inscription of lack onto the female body at precisely that point where Freud would have it be found. (Thus, the key moment in the erotic display of the nameless prostitute is when she separates her legs to remove her stockings. In the case of Vera it is the spreading of her trousered legs as she dances. Millie proves even
more cooperative by wearing a corset whose V-shaped lower edge sharply demarcates the looked-for site of absence.)

Mark then films his victims as he kills them. The conflation of these two actions is reiterated by the murder weapon, which is itself a part of the apparatus—a knife at the end of one of the tripod legs. Significantly, Mark forces the women to look at their own faces in a mirror as he stabs them in the throat—to see their own fear, pain, and loss, just as his father’s films have obliged him to see his own.77 The mirror also functions to disavow male lack even further by suggesting that the female subject reflects only herself, and so denying the place of the male subject within the mimetic circuit.

The scene in which castration is most successfully localized at the female body, and in which the fiction of the coherent and intact male subject is consequently best promoted, is the one where Mark encounters a woman with a grotesque harelip. This encounter takes place during a pornographic photography session, and it generates an eroticism which has until then been conspicuously missing. As soon as Mark sees Dora, the deformed model, he exchanges his commercial camera for the one with which he always shoots his “documentary” footage, and begins rhapsodically interrogating her face with it. Earlier in the same session, Millie, the other model, asks Mark to shoot her in such a way as to conceal her bruises, and he automatically complies. Now, however, the “bruise” is the site of libidinal investment, and Mark has eyes for nothing but it and the psychic pain it elicits in her wearer. Significantly, the facial contortion caused by Dora’s harelip makes her look very much like the twisted faces reflected in the mirror attached to Mark’s camera. Confronted with this spectacle, he is like the Chinese fetishists of whom Freud speaks, transfixed with gratitude to Dora for thus openly displaying the “mark” of castration.

The opening shot of Peeping Tom introduces what will be a recurrent motif in the murder sequences—a series of images seen through the cross hairs of the view finder. This motif conveys the usual message that we are looking at a “subjective shot,” but it also functions as a powerful metaphor for the barrier Mark tries to erect between himself and his victims so as to dissociate himself from them, and thereby consolidate his own claim to the paternal legacy. Here, too, Mark’s project converges with classic cinema, which also turns upon the fiction that an irreducible distance isolates the viewer from the spectacle. As Heath points out, what is at stake in both cases is a “structure of fetishism”:

Separation is the mode of . . . classic cinema; the very mode of representation. The structure of representation is a structure of fetishism: the subject is produced in a position of separation from which he is confirmed in an

imaginary coherence (the representation is the guarantee of his self-coherence) the condition of which is the ignorance of the structure of his production, of his setting in position.78

Peeping Tom makes abundantly clear that this structure works to conceal male rather than female lack, and to promote the imaginary coherence of the male rather than the female subject. It does this by indicating the permeability of the barrier Mark sets in place, and the precarious instability of his projections.

Perhaps the most striking demonstration of the reversibility of Mark’s projections occurs during the scene in which he gives Helen a lizard brooch, thereby attempting to locate her in the position he occupied as a child when his father dropped a live lizard into his bed. As Helen tries to decide where to pin the brooch, moving it around on her dress, voyeurism gives way to identification, and Mark fascinatedly mimics her gestures. However, it is while screening his “documentary” footage that he most consistently crosses the barrier he has been at such pains to construct, slipping over to the side of the victim.

Twice while watching that footage, Mark literally crosses the imaginary dividing line separating viewer from spectacle; rising from his chair, he walks over to the image of a woman experiencing the anguish of death, and places his face against the screen. This physical relocation dramatically attests to the collapse of the fetishistic structure of classic cinema. Far from maintaining the requisite distance from the image of woman-as-lack, Mark recognizes himself in that image, and tips over into it. As he does so, a remarkable transformation occurs, which is more than a little reminiscent of the glance/glänz example. Suddenly the beam of the projector lamp no longer irradiates the spectacle for the viewing subject (Mark); it illuminates him, as well. In so doing it functions much like the flashlight his father used to turn on him as a child. When Mark cries out that “the lights faded too soon,” he speaks not only to his failure to produce technically good footage of Vera’s murder, but to his failure to sustain that externalizing displacement which converts the paternal flashlight into the son’s projector lamp, and the image into the gaze. He speaks, in other words, to his inability to project the projections necessary to disburden himself of lack—to his inability to transfer “the shine” from himself to woman.

On two different screening occasions, Mark tries to protect himself against the return of his own lack by directing his klieg lights onto a female companion’s face, and by supplementing the projector with the camera. On the first of these occasions, Helen is the companion, and Marks tells her that he wants to film her watching his father’s “documentary.” His action would seem to be motivated in part by the desire to
shift Helen from the side of vision to the side of visibility, and so to assert his sole claim to the former position. It would also seem to be prompted by the desire to capture on Helen’s face that expression of fear for which he searches in his victims’ faces.

However, he employs a very different “mirror” for that purpose here than he does on the other occasion. As I suggested a moment ago, the reflecting device Mark attaches to his camera shows his female victims only the image of their own fear, and so seems to deny any external point of reference. In this scene, on the contrary, Helen is presented with that image of which the others are only delayed reflections. Although Mark attempts to photograph her watching face rather than the footage of his own childhood, and so to repeat the by now all-too-familiar pattern of deflecting attention away from male to female pain and distress, it should also be noted that in so doing he opens to her a possibility he denies all of the other women in the film—the possibility of understanding her own status as a symptom of male lack. Finally, one would have to say that this scene, like the one involving the lizard brooch, attests as profoundly to Mark’s identification with Helen as it does to his desire to differentiate himself from her. Not only does he admit her into the screening room, and place her in his customary viewing seat, but his unsuccessful attempt to film her watching face is obviously motivated at some level by his desire to film his own watching face. (This reading is reinforced by a subsequent scene, in which Helen also figures centrally—a scene in which Mark probes his own face with the lens of his camera.)

Helen’s mother, Mrs. Stephens (Maxine Audley), is the second woman to be subjected to the klieg lights in Mark’s screening room. She goes there in search of information about the films he watches every night, but since she is blind, her search is necessarily mediated by language. “Take me to your cinema,” she commands Mark, who literally complies by leading her over to the screen upon which he is projecting the images of Vera’s death. Once they arrive there, however, he becomes too engrossed in his film to attend to her increasingly agitated demands for knowledge, tearing himself away from it only when he recognizes the flaws in its cinematography (“the lights faded too soon”).

It is at this point, in the throes of anguish over what he describes as a “lost opportunity,” but which I will call a failed displacement, that Mark decides to embark upon another lethal photography session. He replaces the projector with the camera, and pins Mrs. Stephens against the screen with the studio lights, in a startling conflation of two sites—the sites of production and consumption—which are traditionally maintained in a state of complete isolation from each other. Mark’s sudden need to align himself in a single moment with the entire cinematic apparatus attests to a powerful desire for unity and simultaneity, and functions as a protest against the divisions within both cinema and subjectivity, as well as what might be called their “retroactivity.” It also speaks to the impossible dream of complete self-mastery. By implicitly equating that dream with the fantasy of total cinematic control, this scene discloses the abyss that separates the male subject from the phallus. Due to the irony of Mrs. Stephens’s blindness, Mark is unable even to deploy his mirror, and is thus thrown back upon his own lack.

In the concluding moments of Peeping Tom, Mark acknowledges the splits and losses that have structured his subjectivity and directs against himself the whole battery of weapons he has until then reserved for his female victims—camera, mirror, sharpened tripod knife. In a stunning reprise of all the many textual references to light, Mark turns numerous flashbulbs to shine on him at half-second intervals as he levels the psychic barrier separating himself from the female subject, and embraces his own castration.

I would argue that it is not so much the film’s preoccupation with voyeurism and murder as its refusal to be complicit in a general cultural disavowal of male lack which provoked such hostility from the popular press at the time of its original release. The reviews are revealingly saturated with references to excrement (“The only really satisfactory way to dispose of Peeping Tom would be to shovel it up and flush it swiftly down the nearest sewer”; “Peeping Tom stinks more than anything else in British Films since The Stranglers of Bombay”; “I was shocked to the core to find a director of his standing befouling the screen with such perverted nonsense”), suggesting intense anxiety about the possible leakage back into a “clean” and “proper” space of what has been thrown violently outside it. Ironically, as I have already indicated, Peeping Tom makes boundaries and limits an important part of its metacritical narrative, showing them to be no more than the temporary trace left behind by projections which must be endlessly repeated, and which are by no means irreversible. However, as Ian Christie points out, “What is conspicuously absent from the reviews . . . is any sense of recognition” of the film’s relation to either classic cinema or orthodox subjectivity.

The critical defense most frequently mounted against Peeping Tom at the time of its original release was to relegate it and its admirers to the category of psychic abnormality. Movie audiences were warned that it “displays a nervous fascination with the perversion it illustrates,” that it
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"wallow in the diseased urges of a homicidal pervert," and that "sick minds will be highly stimulated." Only one reviewer, Isobel Quigly, was prepared to acknowledge that the film attempts to engage its viewer on familiar ground, and her response is consequently worth quoting at some length:

Peeping Tom didn't make me want to streak out of the cinema shrieking ... it gives me the creeps in retrospect, in my heart and mind more than in my eyes. We have had glossy horrors before ... but never such insinuating, under-the-skin horrors, and never quite such a bland effort to make it look as if this isn't for nuts but for normal homely filmgoers like you and me."

What is immediately surprising about this passage is its preoccupation with spectatorship. Instead of disavowing her own relation to the film, as the other reviewers were so quick to do, Quigly focuses upon the ways in which Peeping Tom destabilized her by triggering a response tremor within her own subjectivity. She stresses not only its "under-the-skin horrors," but its capacity for generating "creeps in retrospect." Both of these phrases have a curious resonance, which reverberates once again in her admission that the film takes as its point of address "normal homely filmgoers like you and me." If the emphasis upon interiority and delayed effectivity are not enough to alert the reader to the uncanny nature of Quigly's viewing experience, the adjective homely dispels all doubt. The juxtaposition of this adjective with "creeps in retrospect" and "under-the-skin horrors" suggests that if Peeping Tom traumatizes and unsettles the viewer, that is because it forces a confrontation with "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."

I have discussed some of the ways in which classic cinema organizes its flow of images so as to protect the male subject against precisely this sort of unpleasurable self-encounter, but so far I have referred only in the most cursory fashion to the ways in which classic cinema organizes its vocal/auditory regime for the same ends. The moment has finally come to pose that question to which this book comes as a partial answer. What about the voice (and ear)? How does classic cinema engender sound?

In the immediately following chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate that Hollywood requires the female voice to assume similar responsibilities to those it confers upon the female body. The former, like the latter, functions as a fetish within dominant cinema, filling in for and covering over what is unspeakable within male subjectivity. In her vocal, as in her corporeal, capacity, woman-as-fetish may be asked to represent that phenomenal plenitude which is lost to the male subject with his entry into language. However, the female voice, like the female body, is more frequently obliged to display than to conceal lack—to protect the male subject from knowledge of his own castration by absorbing his losses as well as those that structure female subjectivity. The female voice is made the recipient of this double burden of lack through defensive measures similar to those which install woman so firmly on the side of visibility. Here, as there, the difficulty which must somehow be resolved is the male subject's discursive impotence—his exclusion from the point of textual origin. And here, as there, the solution turns upon displacement and reenactment: upon the transfer of enunciative power and authority from the site of production to a fictional male voice, and upon a hyperdramatization of woman's symbolic castration. Otherwise stated, the male subject is protected from unpleasurable self-knowledge through a fictional redrawing of the diegetic boundaries, a redrawing which situates him in a position of apparent proximity to the cinematic apparatus, while firmly reiterating the isolation of the female voice from all productivity. This opposition expresses itself through the close identification of the female voice with spectacle and the body, and a certain aspiration of the male voice to invisibility and anonymity. At its most crudely dichotomous, Hollywood pits the disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice.

Since Peeping Tom elevates spectacle to the place of reflexive primacy, it seems at first glance to have little to say about sound. Indeed, a Nagra is not even among the pieces of movie equipment Mark obsessively manipulates. It would consequently seem a curious example with which to conclude this study. In fact, however, Peeping Tom levels as sustained if not as direct an attack upon classic cinema's acoustic regime as it does upon classic cinema's visual regime, showing it to be based upon the same phallic pathology. What makes this critique the more remarkable is the fact that it never replicates its object. Because Mark's "documentary" consists exclusively of an image track, Hollywood's sound regime is present in it only as a structuring absence. This fact is emphasized rather than concealed by the extradiegetic music which accompanies the documentary each time it is screened, because that music evokes a silent-movie-house piano. At the same time, Mark's images of terrified and dying women seem calculated to produce precisely that sound which, as I will attempt to demonstrate in a subsequent chapter, Hollywood is at the greatest pains to extract from the female voice, i.e., the cry. (One thinks here of Psycho, released only a year before Peeping Tom, which enshrines a musically simulated version
of that sound, or of the more recent Blow-Out [1981], which turns upon the search for a "realistic" female scream.) Because Mark’s “documentary” fails to give us the usual sound analogue to the images it shows, it obliges us to look elsewhere for it. We are consequently directed back to Dr. Lewis’s film, and through it to the scene of male subjectivity. Once again, Powell’s film suggests that dominant cinema is a mirror with a delayed reflection—only this time the mirror is acoustic.

Although Dr. Lewis’s “documentary” is also projected without sound, it has an audio track of sorts. His “files” on the instinct of fear include a large number of tapes, the record of an elaborate surveillance system which enabled him to tune in whenever he wanted to any room in the house. We learn about the existence of these tapes only at the very end of the film, when Mark plays a recording of screams from his childhood to Helen. However, we are alerted to the fact that something is being withheld from us as early as the first screening of Dr. Lewis’s documentary, when a paternal voice abruptly intrudes with the words: “That will do, Mark. Dry your eyes and stop being a silly boy.” By drawing our attention in this way to the limits of the image track, which is insufficient by itself to account for the reprimand, that voice makes us aware of a sound we are prevented from hearing.

Mark’s censorship of these tapes is puzzling, given the alacrity with which he shows the corresponding footage. The fact that he produces them only after he abandons all defenses against his own symbolic castration suggests that they represent an even more psychically intolerable memory than the images, and that they have been the object of a powerful repression. This repression suggests that the voice is capable of manifesting an even greater vulnerability than the body.

At first the admonitory male voice seems to come from Dr. Lewis, and to represent him as pure phallus—dismembered, unlocalized, omniscient, and omnipotent. However, not only is it denaturalized through microphone reverberation, but it is clearly shown to originate from outside the “documentary,” since the latter has been projected without sound. We are therefore given no alternative but to read it as an auditory hallucination, and in so doing to entertain the possibility that this exemplary paternal inscription may never be more than a fantastic construction put in place as a defense against the involuntary male cry. That construction collapses like a deck of cards at the end of the film, when Mark not only turns his lights and camera on himself, but adds a sound track to his “documentary” by synchronizing his death with the tapes of his childhood screams.

Because Peeping Tom evacuates woman from the center of Mark’s horror film, it permits the female viewer to see what her voice and image have been made to conceal, and so to adopt a different position in front of the cinematic “mirror” from that prescribed for her by Hollywood. Helen and her mother dramatize two of the possible discursive relationships which are thus opened up for the female spectator. Mrs. Stephens’s response falls under the category of refusal; having grasped the pathological bases of Mark’s cinema, she turns away from both him, urging him to get “help.” Helen, on the other hand, is possessed by the desire to understand the ways in which male subjectivity has been organized. She continues going to the cinema, because she knows the symptoms she is looking for are there, and in the darkened theater she never removes her eyes from the images. However, she talks to herself incessantly during the screenings, interrogating, interjecting, interrupting, until the familiar grows strange, and the strange familiar. She finds herself inside and outside Mark’s cinema at the same time, recognizing that she is a part of that cinema, but speaking all the same from elsewhere, with her mother’s diagnostic tongue. Perhaps, although I am not certain of this, she believes that her own history—past, present, and future—cannot be separated from that of the male subject. Finally, for all of these reasons, she decides to write a book about the apparatus.

I am, of course, talking here about myself as much as about Helen—like her book, mine is motivated by the desire to look beyond the sounds and images that have constructed my subjectivity to what those sounds and images serve to conceal: male castration. Thus, although on one level this book is a study of the female voice in cinema, on another it is an investigation of the verbal and auditory defenses by means of which Hollywood fortifies the male subject against his own losses.

To approach woman as a symptom, as I will do in the next two chapters, is not to suggest that she is no more than the afterimage of male subjectivity. She may be, as Foucault has said of man, an invention of recent date, but that invention will be far more difficult to erase than “a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”*6 Woman is inscribed not only on celluloid and on the surfaces of the male subject’s imaginary register, but in the psychic, material, and social conditions of the female subject’s daily existence.