

Life Just Isn't What It Used to Be: An Exploration of the
Maternal, the Mirror Stage, and Cinematic Suture

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MOPA 409: Visual Theory and Practice

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Date: December 09, 2022

Have you ever wished to return to days past? Has the popular idiom describing a healthier and more vibrant grass on the opposite side of a dividing fence ever applied to your life? Does the idea of repeating the innocent days of youth sound appealing? It is very common for these questions to be answered with a reminiscent “yes”, and while most adults, if questioned, would likely not wish to return to their childhood bodies and forfeit the rights and freedoms granted by maturity, few will deny the desire to reclaim the innocence and whimsy held within the years of infancy. Indeed, no cognizant experience can compare to the unconscious delight experienced by an unborn child, safely nestled within the womb of their caretaker, with nothing but the muffled sounds and distant experiences of the mother to create a soundtrack to a blissful state that can only be described as being. However, this elation has a very early expiry date, terminating once the newborn has left the womb and experiences themselves in the form of Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, where their own vision forever alters the onlooker’s perspective of reality. Nevertheless, there is a unity within these opposite occurrences. Although sound plays an integral part in the tranquility of maternal existence, and sight assists in the angst and uncanny sustained by the mirror stage’s outcome of self-realization, the two senses combine, in the form of cinema, and suture the viewer back to a near-tranquil experience, which is as close as we can come to achieving the carefree life we all once lived.

To begin, it is necessary to dissect the idea of being within the womb, where one does not do, but merely and wholly is. However, commencing the journey of understanding this unexplainable state of existence first requires insight into Bracha Ettinger’s idea of the matrixial gaze. This piece of feminist film theory is thoroughly examined in Diana Romanskaitė’s journal article titled “An Inquiry into the Theory of the Matrix: Subjectivity, Gaze, and Desire in Kristina Inčiūraitė’s *Video the Meeting* (2012)”, where she explores “[t]he maternal realm

(connected with female sexual specificity, womb, and pregnancy)” and how it “is signifiable and meaning-making in the Matrix” (84), as comprehended and laid out by Jacques Lacan (84).

Romanskaitè states that, according to Lacan, the psyche is structured in three separate parts: “the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real” (85). The Imaginary and the Symbolic are connected to Lacan’s mirror stage, which will be examined at a later point, but the Real is relevant to the subject at hand “because it refers to the corporeal and the mother”. Since “[t]he Real completely resists symbolisation”, it is beyond the capabilities of human language and cannot be labelled, much like it is beyond language to define the photogénie of a common object. Though this concept stands outside the grasp of definition, it is succinctly explained by Gerald Perman, in his article “Jacques Lacan: The Best and Least Known Psychoanalyst”, as the state of being that an infant resides within “[b]efore and soon after [they are] born”, when anything and everything “is devoid of meaning” until language and self-realization are introduced into the newborn’s tranquil state. Perman continues to explain how as soon as the child “learns to say ‘mama’ and other signifiers, they have begun to take part in the symbolic register that ‘makes a cut in the real’”. The real cannot be defined through language and order, and therefore, cannot survive within it. Much like the common imaginary childhood friend, as the structure and rules of the world increase their chokehold on the adolescent, the unexplainable whimsy of juvenescence is bound to fade away. Returning to Romanskaitè’s article, which further explores this maternal state of being, the author argues “[t]he womb is not a ... container for the constitution of the child” in which there is no meaningful tie between the infant and the mother (87). Instead, “the Matrix is about intensities and flows of interconnected subjects ... based on the prenatal condition of being joined to and separated from the mother” (88). In short, the child and the mother, until the child’s time within the womb concludes, are one, which remains factual to the infant until the mirror

stage. Furthermore, it is this temporary prenatal connection that assists the infant in experiencing maternal tranquility. Without power, knowledge or control, the unborn child simply exists, spending the finite serenity creating “signification and human connection” from their exceedingly limited understanding of their carrier’s existence, all the while blissfully unaware of the lifelong desire they will one day possess to regress to this equanimity (87).

In this now dissected state of being, one might ask what the infant experiences in their serene condition, and how the severe lack of cohesive thought would result in a peaceful position for the unborn subject. Human memory does not span as far back as life within the womb, therefore attempting to comprehend an existence before everything we know was placed within our minds is as pointless as striving to concentrate on absolutely nothing. However, while it is true that the child cannot understand much of its circumstance, the world around it starts to become more and more familiar as the senses develop. Furthermore, an infant’s sense of sound and the ability to hear contributes significantly to the blissfulness of the maternal state, as well as offering other benefits to their development. According to an article by Ilona Poćwierz-Marciniak and Michał Harciarek, once the child begins to “navigate the world of sound and ... [develop] their auditory sensitivity and memory” within the womb, they focus on “listening to the mother’s voice”, which is crucial to “building a bond with her”. Listening predominantly to the sounds of the mother, such as “flowing blood, intestinal and gastric activity, ... and, most importantly, her voice”, has the result of “calmness, providing a sense of security” to the fresh mind. Poćwierz-Marciniak and Harciarek continue by discussing the idea that, since sound memory is suggested to be “present in the fetus during prenatal life”, a newborn can “recognize their mothers’ voices and they can distinguish them from other women” after exiting the womb, giving them a handle of familiarity to cling to upon entering the real world. Another benefit is

seen in the positive effects sound has on premature newborns, as Joanna Parga J., et al. conclude in their study where sounds heard in the womb are played for children who experienced an early birth and are therefore susceptible to a higher level of complications than those born on time. In their experiment, Parga et al. found that “exposing premature infants to womb-like sounds has the potential to reduce hypoxemia and bradycardic episodes” (2251). Though the researchers admit there is a lack of clarity in the “diminished hypoxemia and changes in cardiac slowing”, it cannot be denied that there is a direct link between the familiar calming sounds of the womb and the increased stability in those born before their due date. It is certain that, although the development of other senses within the womb, such as touch and smell, are vital to the child’s growth and development in and after the maternal stage, the addition of hearing and remembering sound within the mother is imperative to the tranquil state of being one inhabits before entering a world of rules, status, and order.

After the child experiences nine months of the real, composing memories from sounds and simply being, the time has come to enter the chill of the outside world, where all eventually learn to yearn for the long-lost tranquil past. Before the uncanny of worldly existence can be discovered, however, the stage of life that introduces such uncomfortable sensations must be explored and understood. The mirror stage, the prelude to self-recognition, is a concept formulated by the previously mentioned Lacan, which, according to David Sigler and Celiese Lypka’s work on Lacan’s mirror stage, describes “the moment in which an infant, who has not yet developed an integrated sense of self, ... begins to recognize their own image” after looking into a mirror or other reflection-casting tool (2). In Romanskaitè’s previously mentioned article, Lacan suggests “the Imaginary”, or the first realm of the psyche within which “the so-called mirror stage happens”, occurs “when a child aged 6-18 months ... ‘gains a sense of integrity,

identity, and continuity which could not be ensured by her corporeal existence” (85). Although this is a vital stage of the newborn’s early existence, seeing oneself for the first time and understanding who stares back also yields negative results, as it, in the words of Sigler and Lypka, “gives rise to a tension between the child’s self-image and their experience of the body”, among other effects, such as introducing the uncanny (3). Nevertheless, this event “marks a turning point in the development of the subject” because it “clears the way for their subsequent entry into symbolic systems of language and meaning”. Since, thus far, the infant knows little else besides the sound, smell and feeling of their mother, passing through the mirror stage is crucial to introducing the subject to “what Lacan calls imaginary relations (that is, relations based on identification with images)”. A question one might ask is how this stage can introduce uncanny into the child’s life. Sigler and Lypka explore this subject, commenting on how “an encounter with one’s double” possesses an aura of anticipation and dread, also known as the uncanny. As per Romanskaitė’s article, Lacan’s second realm of the psyche known as “[t]he Symbolic” is the stage where similar events transpire, and “uncertainly and incongruity” are introduced to the subject (85). A more detailed response, however, can be found in Sigmund Freud’s paper “The Uncanny”, where he explains that “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something ... once very familiar” (85). Freud continues to explain how “[s]omething has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny”, which can be a great variety of things in the early life beyond the womb, as there are not many objects or concepts that are yet familiar to an infant, which is why they require, among other things, continuous supervision. Upon entering the mirror stage, therefore, the child not only realizes they are the one looking back at them, but also they are no longer connected to their mother as they were in the maternal realm. In short, this new scenario “is frightening precisely because it is not

known”, and this comprehension arrives bundled in a sense of isolation, unfamiliarity, and angst. As the child is soon to discover over the coming years, it matters not how closely a mother holds her offspring to her body, for the hope of re-entering the tranquil state of maternity is futile. However, perhaps this dearly missed experience is not completely lost to time.

To briefly review, the tranquility within the maternal state of being, and the self-realization and uncanny that are introduced during the mirror stage, are primarily driven by auditory and visual perception respectively. Without the ability to hear the mother, the unborn child would likely feel isolated during their maternal life and, upon exiting the womb, be unable to determine, in a room of other adults, which one is their biological caretaker. Similarly, if the newborn lacked a sense of sight, there would be no mirror stage and therefore, no uncanny sensation or lack of connection until much later in life. Nevertheless, with the exception of those born without vision, the clock begins the countdown to the moment of self-recognition and the introduction of the uncanny as soon as the infant is born. Due to this event, many long for the ability to regress to a time before the mirror stage, when rules, anxiety, and terror were beyond comprehension. While it is common knowledge that returning to the womb is absurd, the cinematic art form is capable of transporting viewers to a near-tranquil state through the concept of suture. As stated by Laura Mulvey, within a film is a “hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy” (269). To prove this argument, a clear definition of suture must be given. As George Butte writes in his piece titled “Suture and the Narration of Subjectivity in Film”, suture is, as theorized by Jean-Pierre Oudart, “a narrative device in film that promote[s] an illusion that comfort[s] spectators by closing a gap in their experience of film’s space and narrativity” (281). In other words, when a viewer becomes lost in

a film's story, characters, and universe, they have been sutured, or, as the medical term suggests, stitched to the cinematic world. Furthermore, when one is lost within that world, "that profound wound in our being, the absence of the truly Absent One", is temporarily stitched over, and one's disconnection from the mother (or as written by Butte, the "Absent One") is temporarily forgotten (283). Similar to life within the womb, the viewer is simply along for the ride, lacking any control over the situation ahead of them. When the film has concluded, however, the wound reopens and the viewer once again desires to be in the blissful state they have left far behind.

A justifiable question one might ask is why cinema is able to represent the state of being we so desire, as opposed to novels, music, video gaming, or other enchanting art forms. This is due to cinema's use of audio and image, combined with the sense of blissful helplessness the viewer experiences, which cannot be replicated to the same extent in any other creative expression. In accordance with Daniel White's work, music in film directly applies to suturing the spectator into the film's reality, as it "draws audiences into the worlds, and ... helps to smooth over these liminal transitions" (101). White goes on to explain the importance of music at the beginning of a cinematic work, "both to draw viewers into the film world and to give the world a sense of coherence or completeness as a subjective space for the viewer to inhabit". The soundscape of a film is crucial to assisting viewers with the task of entering the film's universe. If one were seeing a lush forest on a screen, but did not hear animal howls, wind whistling through foliage, or a melody to set the tone of the location, it would much harder, if not impossible, to be absorbed into a tranquil experience of viewership. In the words of White, "the greater the imaginative distance, the harder some audiences find it to make the jump". However, cinema's ability to warp the viewer into a near-tranquil state cannot be done through sound alone. Although our sense of sight played a pivotal role in removing us from our long-lost state

of maternal being, it is still an imperative sense that requires domination by the cinematic medium in order for us, the viewers, to be fully sutured. Dominic Lash, in his journal article titled “Rupture, Suture, Nietzsche: Impossible Intersubjectivity in Alien”, explains that film is able to visually lead the looker into a generated world “[w]hen shot two replaces shot one”, thereby transferring the viewer “from the level of enunciation to the level of fiction”. This allows “[t]he code, which produces an imaginary, ideological effect, [to be] hidden by the message”, out of sight of the viewer’s thought process. In summary, once the eyes and ears have been sutured to the film, “the spectator is at its mercy”, and the art form is free to take the captive audience down any route it so chooses. Similar to the helplessness of the prenatal infant, there is little the viewer can do to alter any decisions made behind the screen. The difference, however, lies within the fact that all great films must come to an end, and as the stitches tying the spectator to the near-tranquil state come apart, the crushing weight of reality returns to power.

To conclude, it is certain, through the study of the contribution made by sound to the state of existence within the serene maternal phase, as well as the inheritance of the uncanny and the desire to regress due to seeing oneself in Lacan’s mirror stage, that cinema, with its ability to suture the viewer through these two phenomena, is a very powerful art form indeed. While novels might whisk the reader away via the imagination, and video gaming will be eternally popular for the ability to take control of a unique protagonist, no art form can captivate the viewer, flooding the eyes and ears with immersion and leaving the spectator in a state beyond choice, quite like the cinema can. This subject matter formulates an interesting question: if one could, be it through cinema or some other medium, relive the absolute being of the maternal phase, would they choose to return to a society of rules, language, and order, or remain within a world of connectedness, ignorance, and bliss?

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