A Nothing: The potential for a feminist psychoanalysis of Chantal Akerman’s La Captive

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A Nothing focuses on Chantal Akerman’s film La Captive in relation to Lacan’s concept of the gaze and desire. Although Akerman’s work seems on the surface to be distinctly feminist, she has often distanced herself from this claim, as well as explicit feminist analysis. Akerman’s distancing is understandable considering the sometimes reductionist, and tunnel-visioned analysis of early feminist film theorists. This paper starts with a brief overview of how early feminist film theory de-contextualized and oversimplified Lacanian theory. This review is followed with an analysis of La Captive using Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze. It then moves into an argument for the continued politicization of psychoanalytic theory (Stavrakakis), through a “rebirth” of accountable psychoanalysis. An in-depth review of how the gaze (l’object petit a) and desire can be found in Akerman’s film follows. The main female protagonist, Ariane, is a major part of this study, as it is argued that she represents major aspects of l’object petit a (A rien). Zizek’s discussion of fantasy as ‘implicit’ will be used to argue that Akerman’s film stands outside of mainstream investment in passive, comfortable consumption. The opening and closing scenes in La Captive are scrutinized, as well as scenes that make evident the gap between Simone and Ariane. We conclude with an analysis of the powerfully feminist aspects of the film, including the visibility (and subtle criticism of) of ideology, and the “choice” that is made at the end of the film with uncertainty and the Real. With a surface analysis, it may seem that Ariane is Simone’s possession, a mere play thing. A Lacanian lens will demonstrate how she has more agency than Simone, who tortures himself over something he can never acquire.

“At times, yes. But that’s what I like. You want to know all, as if that changed something. Me I ask you nothing. Neither what you think nor dream. And if you told me all, I feel I’d love you less. I love you because there’s a part of you I don’t know. I imagine you’ve this world I cannot enter. It intrigues me. That it’s closed to me only pleases me.”
Ariane, La Captive

“Every authentic political act has its origins in an encounter with the real”
McGowan, 17

Filmmaker Chantal Akerman is most renowned for her distinct hyperrealist style. Her work has also received attention for its politicized feminist content. Despite this, Akerman
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has been known to distance herself from a self-proclaimed feminist agenda or analysis. Akerman’s distancing is perhaps understandable considering the sometimes reductionist and tunnel-visioned analysis of early feminist film theorists. Likewise, psychoanalytic theory has largely removed itself from politicized or mainstream usage, with similar complaints of misinterpretation and simplification (McGowan 8). The following will argue for a non-reductionist reclamation of feminist interpretations of Lacanian film theory, working with Chantal Akerman’s Proust adaptation, La Captive (2000) in relation to Lacan’s concepts of the gaze, l’objet a and desire.

Beginning with a review of early feminist Lacanian film theory, La Captive will be investigated using Laura Mulvey’s early feminist film theory of the male gaze. From there, Yannis Stavrakakis’ argument for the continued politicization of psychoanalytic theory, through a “rebirth” of an accountable psychoanalysis will be discussed. It will then be possible to apply Lacan’s concepts of the gaze and desire to Akerman’s film. The female protagonist, Ariane, will be central in this inquiry, as it will be argued that she represents major aspects of l’objet petit a. Slavoj Zizek’s discussion of fantasy as “implicit” can then be used to argue that Akerman’s film is politicized, because it stands outside of mainstream investment in passive, comfortable consumption. Finally, potentially feminist aspects of the film will be considered, including the visibility (and subtle criticism) of ideology, and an encounter with the Lacanian Real. With a surface analysis, it may seem that Ariane is merely Simon’s possession. Accountable use of a Lacanian lens will demonstrate how she has more agency than Simon, who tortures himself over something he can never acquire.

Coming out of the second wave of feminism, Laura Mulvey was involved in early activism, and became one of the first and most influential feminist film theorists in the 1970’s. Mulvey found beauty in psychoanalytic theory, empowered by the theoretical structures that she felt well articulated the continuation of women’s oppression. She was delighted by “psychoanalytic theory[’s]...ability to see through the surface of cultural phenomena as though with intellectual X-ray eyes” (Chaudhuri 33). Her most significant contribution was arguably her interpretation of the “gaze” of the (male) spectator. Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze became touchstone for feminist film theory, and for overarching understandings of invisibilized male/patriarchal voyeurism and fetishism (Chaudhuri 33).

Mulvey made use of both Freudian and Lacanian theory in her film analysis. The Mirror Phase, for example, is the fundamental split that brings the ego into being, and (according to Mulvey) could be re-invocated during the cinematic experience. Her politicized Lacanian feminist analysis came into fruition with her discussion of the splitting of visual pleasure between active/passive and male/female. Mulvey theorized that the “gaze” of the cinema is always a male gaze, and that male spectators are encouraged to identify with the active hero. This male gaze and identification, in turn, renders the heroine
“a passive object of erotic spectacle” (Chaudhuri 35). Women identify with this image narcissistically, subjected to the hero’s gaze both in film and manifest in everyday life. Mulvey further theorizes that conventions in film attempt to make the audience forget that they are looking, which in turn renders the patriarchal gaze invisible (Chaudhuri 32-39). Her theory of the male gaze in film attempts to exhibit the ways that the oppression of women, often concealed, permeates every facet of our society.

Akerman’s *La Captive* follows the intimate bourgeois relationship between Simon and Ariane. Simon’s obsessive love for Ariane saturates much of the film. His rendition of love showcases his relentless struggle to comprehend, and eventually have bourgeois ownership over, every aspect of her life. Opening with Simon’s fixated voyeurism, he stands by a projector repeatedly watching, rewinding, and re-watching a home movie of Ariane and her friends. As her mouth stirs soundlessly, he words “je vous aime bien” (I really love you), seemingly attempting to make the utterance match up with her movements. A Hitchcock-esque scene follows this eerie commencement, where Simon stalks Ariane, unbeknownst to her, in his car. The beginning of the film leaves the audience wondering what their relationship is, and if they even know each other at all. It is soon revealed that they exist in an awkward upper-class relationship, largely devoid of sex or reciprocal intimacy. Simon’s neurosis leaves a cold and distant stain on their interactions; he is often accusatory, and she is mostly vacant. Simon’s obsession culminates with Ariane’s death/disappearance into the ocean.

Drawing from Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, Akerman’s film could be considered a powerful refusal to participate in mainstream film’s perpetuation of invisibilized gender oppression. *La Captive* illuminates the male gaze with Akerman’s hyperrealist style, making it unavoidable. The opening projector and car scenes, for example, use point-of-view camera technique to position the audience with Simon. Viewers are left to feel uncomfortable with their voyeurism, because of the inappropriate and forced stalking that is involved. The way that Akerman renders the “male gaze” visible is inescapable, and therefore does not permit the typical passive patriarchal consumption of medias.

In the same fashion, Simon’s ownership of Ariane highlights assumptions about female passivity and male ownership. Ariane often appears vacant, complacent, and completely at Simone’s disposal. When Ariane is out with her friends for lunch, Simon, frustrated alone at home, drives to the restaurant to acquire her. With silent authority, he grabs her by the arm so quickly that she doesn’t even have time to put down her glass of wine, and drags her out to the car. “I hope you’re not mad at my taking you away” he states once they are securely in the vehicle, “it’s sunny I so wanted we stroll together.” Ariane does not argue. She sits meekly and responds to his questions as they come, interested only in pleasing him. She does not show passion in her pleasing, however. Simone only
receives mechanical responses that seem to come out of Ariane’s unengaged habit, more than what she is actually thinking or feeling. Using Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, it could be argued that Akerman provides an example of women’s positionality as a passive, objectified spectacle, with her hyperrealist materialization of invisibilized power structures in film. With this early feminist reading, Ariane’s lack of agency in the film positions the audience with the camera as the active patriarchal gaze.

As previously stated, film theorist’s early manipulation of Lacanian concepts have been challenged. Mulvey’s work has been criticized on many fronts, including feminist arguments that her theories ignore the potential of active female spectatorship (Chaudhuri 39-43). As opposed to criticizing the social implications of Mulvey’s theories however, it will be more effective here to look at the very foundational problems of her analysis. Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze” de-contextualizes and simplifies the psychoanalytic theory on which it is based. Her misreading of Lacan’s concepts of “the gaze” and “desire” has serious implications. Most prominently, it perpetuates unjustified stigmas attached to psychoanalytic theory, and further maintains the assumption that reductionist interpretation is the only way that psychoanalysis could become politicized. Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists like Todd McGowan and Yannis Stavrakakis do not disagree with the ways that early politicization of Lacanian theory has been discredited. They argue that these preliminary blunders present an opportunity to re-visit and re-evaluate the concepts themselves, and to apply them in a way that is true to the theories themselves. As McGowan puts it, “we should greet the news of the death of Lacanian film theory as the opportunity for its genuine birth” (5).

Stavrakakis’ discussion of the possibility for politicization of Lacan’s theories provides a solid theoretical foundation with which to move into a non-reductionist feminist analysis of Akerman’s film. He maintains that reductionist readings of Lacan’s work are common, and have resulted in psychoanalytic theory being unjustifiably invalidated. The politicized application of Lacanian theory has so far been insufficient. Despite this inadequacy, Stavrakakis argues for accountable and practical politicization of psychoanalysis. Although psychoanalysis is an individual act, for example, there is also a social bond between analyst and analysed. Freud himself claimed that the study of language and institutions was integral to the analytic experience itself, and Lacan also borrowed from many social sources. Stavrakakis argues for the potential political application of Lacanian theory, but strongly advises against conflating the two. Psychoanalysis is in itself an independent and unique science. This is not to say, however, that it cannot be connected to politics. Lacan’s work invites interpretation, not direct imitation. Both Stavrakakis and Lacan explicitly express that caution must be taken when stripping concepts from their original sphere. Lacanian theory does not attempt to help show what society is, as many would expect. Conversely,
psychoanalysis can illustrate that which prevents society from being (Stavrakakis 1-12). Stavrakakis therefore asserts that the political application of Lacanian theory must be systematic, not simplified or reductionist.

Semantically, it is logical that Lacan’s theory of the gaze would be conceptualized as a literal “look”. Early film theory located the gaze “with the misguided look of the spectator, even though such a conception has no significant roots in Lacan’s thought” (McGowan 4). A “gaze” is typically understood as an active process. On the contrary, however, Lacan’s concept of the gaze is objective, rather than subjective. It is something that the spectator encounters in the object. The gaze is the scopic aspect of l’objet a, it is the gap in the look or what we cannot see straight on. The gaze also signals the subject’s non-mastery of the visual field. Because we are not masters of what we see, there is a tension between what we want to see and what is really there (McGowan 1-8). It is “the point at which the subject loses its subjective privilege and becomes wholly embodied in the object” (McGowan 7). The gaze is not the privileged, active, mechanism of patriarchal control as theorized by Mulvey.

The gaze therefore elicits the subject’s desire visually. Much like Lacan’s concept of the gaze though, “desire” should not be understood as it is typically defined. Early film theory conflated desire with power. Lacan’s concept of desire is not a desire for mastery. It is instead a masochistic desire, mediated by the Other and invested in its own perpetuation (McGowan 9). Darian Leader explains that Lacanian desire “takes up what has been eclipsed at the level of need” (81) which is set up in opposition to demand. In other words, true desire is hidden by what we think we want. Desire is masochistic because its goal is not fulfillment, rather the maintenance of itself. The object elicits desire in the subject, but it is not attaining the object that facilitates pleasure, it is the failure to obtain, the inability to obtain that is enjoyable (McGowan 9). L’objet a can only cause and perpetuate desire when it is not present, which in turn makes satisfaction of desire impossible (Stavrakakis 49). Therefore, as Zizek asserts, l’objet a is “the tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer alien” (67). McGowan’s theorizing also highlights how the unconscious can be understood in a spectator’s relationship to the cinema. Early film theory expected viewers to become more aware (or conscious) of the material they were consuming, so as to not fall prey to corrupt ideologies (such as patriarchy). Lacanian film theory would conversely be interested in depriving the consciousness, and focus on the “ruptures where the gaze emerges” (McGowan 16).

Ariane is Simon’s obsession. Set from the beginning with his voyeuristic repetition of Ariane’s family home video, the audience is primed for his compulsive attempts to really know her. However, no matter what Simon asks, no matter how much he follows her, or tries to become a part of her life, he is never satisfied. With a Lacanian analysis, desire is
manifested by Ariane, making her the scopic l’oject a, the passive gaze. The gaze and the resulting unattainable, perpetuated desire appears throughout the film in several different ways. From the beginning of the film, Simon is chasing Ariane without being able to catch her. He follows behind her, but can never look at her “straight on.” Similarly in the art gallery, after the car stalking scene, Simon walks behind Ariane shadowing her movements and copying her footsteps. Although he shadows her, however, he does it out of aimless curiosity, not understanding. When they are bathing together, Akerman chooses to put a glass wall between them, with Simon in view and Ariane blurred behind the frosted pane. Simone asks her questions about her body, and tells her how he feels about her vagina. Their disjointed conversation, Simon’s fixated voice, and Ariane’s casual responses all set a tone of distance. This distance, and also Simon’s non-mastery of the situation is even more tangible with the wall between them. The blockade stopping Simon from ever acquiring the object of desire is also illustrated in their sexual encounters. During the act, both stay clothed while Simon merely rubs up against her. These encounters are awkward for the audience, confrontationally demonstrating his inability to obtain desire.

The bourgeois lifestyle that the characters lead can also be placed under a Lacanian lens. Simon has access to a lot of money, he does not work, and has many servants. Everything is taken care of, so he does not have much to do with his time. Often he seems to be looking for something to do, sauntering aimlessly around the upper class loft in his pyjamas, getting chauffeured in his car, or reading newspapers listening to classical music. A politicized analysis would perhaps scrutinize the emptiness of this class, that there is an insatiable need that can never be met with material possessions. A feminist analysis could read Simon’s obsession with Ariane, then, as a desperate attempt to possess something else, rendering her a commodity of patriarchy. Simon’s bourgeois lifestyle, however, can also be politicized with a Lacanian analysis. The apparent “need” that Simon has for Ariane (and all his other possessions) could be understood as a symptom of neurosis. Enjoyment is conditional only upon the presence of unobtainable desire (Zizek 81). Simon cannot accept this condition, obsessed with seeing what cannot be seen - Ariane. Perhaps his fixation on Ariane is based on the way this rupture, this contradiction, is made manifest. La Captive uncovers the neurotic need of upper class materialism, driven by the imaginary and symbolic, feverishly avoiding confrontation with l’objet a. While the subject is unable to satisfy desire, need can be satisfied. As Tim Dean explains with Lacanian queer theory, the goal of capitalism “is to convert the unsatisfiable into something that ostensibly can be satisfied (that is, need) and so promote capitalist consumption while simultaneously perpetuating desire” (198).

Simon’s obsession with knowing Ariane turns to assumptions, and eventual accusations about a hidden lesbian lifestyle. He follows her relationships with girlfriends,
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and at one point actually interviews two lesbians, as a means to obtain insight into a sexual situation that he has potentially constructed. Akerman’s choice to imply lesbianism could be read, again, as an indication of Ariane’s marginalized status. Her sexuality is being crushed by a heterosexist, misogynistic culture. However, Lacan’s theory of the gaze challenges this reductionist feminist reading. Using psychoanalytic theory, the sex which Ariane is interested in does not actually matter. Dean explains that binary relationships are imaginary, based in the foundational opposition of the Mirror Phase (192). Lacan theorized that sexuality and desire are not produced through structures of binary. L’objet a is a cause, not an aim of desire, which is therefore situated outside of gender and is not heterosexist (Dean 194). This is interesting, considering psychoanalysis has often been accused of heteronormativity. Simon’s attempts to “know” Ariane through interviews with lesbians are therefore acting to reinforce the intensity of his desire, which will never be satisfied. A feminist reading can still be applied, however, turning to the use of language, as an indication of Ariane’s subtle agency.

The language used throughout the film provides another encounter with the gaze. Simon is always asking Ariane what she is thinking, and often the answer is “nothing”. He is never satisfied by this response, constantly attempting to draw out more information, largely to his own disappointment. Interactions are usually punctuated with Ariane’s complete indifference to Simon’s actions and attempts to get inside her head. She is constantly telling him to “do what he likes”, which only seems to frustrate him more. Feminist film theory, like Mulvey’s, could consider Ariane’s passive, empty, and indifferent responses as an indication of her oppressed positionality. Akerman could be attempting to create a hyperrealist model of the ultimate oppressed bourgeoisie woman, making this invisibilized exploitation impossible to ignore. A feminist analysis could also, however, use Lacanian theory to illustrate that Ariane actually has more agency than Simon.

Simon is frustrated with Ariane’s compliant behaviour because he is attempting to know something that he can never see. Akerman positions her as l’objet a in the film through use of dialogue, having her say “nothing,” “I have nothing to say,” and “do what you like” frequently. Strikingly, Ariane’s name translates to “A Nothing” when anglicized. Ariane, as l’objet a can never be consciously seen or understood, she is actually a nothing. It could be argued here that this “nothingness” renders the female protagonist more silenced and oppressed. To say that the female character is “nothing” does not, on the surface, align with most gender justice politics. A politicized feminist Lacanian reading, however, could also construct Ariane as having more agency than Simon. Although Ariane is passive throughout the film, she still somehow manages to keep her composure and generally acts saner than Simon. His relentless prodding at Ariane overtakes his entire life, until he is nothing but her prying shadow. He often seems quite pathetic. How does Ariane have
more power than Simon, even though she often acts vacant? The following interaction is probably the clearest example of Ariane’s strength, autonomy, and power. Nearing the end of the film, Simon is overcome with frustration. His inability to understand Ariane has “forced” him to end their relationship. He is driving her to her aunt’s house, and starts accusing her of lesbianism:

S: Ah, you girls in love, you learnt to lie very young, it’s become second nature. So many years hiding it from the world, what you are, how you love, and...
A: There are such girls, but others couldn’t care less. Who have nothing to hide. Should’ve taken a right.
S: And you?
A: I am here now with you. You know that.
S: Yes, but sometimes I wonder. You’re not happy with me. Indeed, lucky for you it’s over. You were happier before, you miss it.
S: No, alas I don’t know. We’re like strangers at times.
A: At times, yes. But that’s what I like. You want to know all, as if that changed something. Me, I ask you nothing. Neither what you think nor dream. And if you told me all I feel I’d love you less. I love you because there’s a part of you I don’t know. I imagine you’ve this world I cannot enter. It intrigues me. That it’s closed to me only pleases me.
S: See? We cannot get along. I’m the totally opposite. For me, love is the very opposite.

Here, Akerman is making clear that Ariane is closer to love than Simon. His obsession with knowing her, of seeing l’objet a, has driven him to the brink of abandoning their relationship. Ariane, however, is content with not ever really knowing him. She articulates her knowledge of and comfort with unobtainable desire. Her calm assertion that she loves him because of his unknowns, that it pleases her, underscores her power and agency. Ariane is not panicked over the existence of the l’objet a, the real. Rather, she is contented by the pursuit of enjoyment, jouissance, and the inaccessibility of desire. According to Lacanian theory, Ariane is actually more mentally stable than Simon, and more powerful because of it. Thus, her power in this oppressed bourgeoisie relationship is an effectively feminist statement.

Encounters with the real of the gaze are traumatic. Most mainstream cultural media, therefore, attempt to conceal l’objet a/the real by making focal the imaginary and the symbolic. One could argue this is a strategy to stop individuals from being traumatized, but McGowan and Zizek tease out something more. McGowan argues that “every authentic political act has its origins in an encounter with the real” (16). How do we facilitate this encounter, and how does it stir political action? In his discussion of the real, Zizek
demonstrates how fantasy has to be “implicit”. Audiences most often assume that medias which subvert the norm also intrinsically challenge our taken for granted realities. Zizek explains that it is the opposite. As an example, he uses the film MASH, which on the surface seems subversive because of its mockery of authority. However, it is the distance from the actual experience of the military that is created through MASH’s humour that hides ideology. It is what Zizek calls a “trans-ideological kernel” (like solidarity or justice) that allows an ideology to continue functioning. Similarly, McGowan argues for the radical elements of the cinema, arguing that cinema is one place where the gaze can unapologetically show itself. It is a place where spectators can be subjected to that which they regularly avoid at all costs.

When Ariane leaves the hotel for a swim at the end of La Captive, audiences are forced into an encounter with the Lacanian Real, the unobtainable l’objet a, and the enjoyment in the perpetuation of desire. When Simon realizes that she has been gone for too long, he runs out into the ocean, trying to save her from drowning. The film culminates with a torturous scene where, for two minutes, a questionable boat drifts back to shore. Because it is mostly out of sight, the audience is left wondering what happened. The audience eventually sees that it is Simon who drifts slowly forward, draped in a blanket, but paddled by a stranger. What happened to Ariane? Akerman does not give any answers. Viewers are left with “no visual pleasure to be had anywhere in the image, and [a suspicion] that the resolution we desire, like Simon’s ambition to know Ariane, will fail to materialize” (Penney 57).

Ariane disappears into the ocean, leaving the audience with “a nothing”. This confrontation with the real escapes meaning, and “threatens the stability of the social order that ideology protects” (McGowan 16). It is unquestioned ideology that strips individuals of their freedom, so the visibility of these ideologies through confrontation with the real is a political act. Following this analysis, any resolution to Ariane’s disappearance would be employed only to hide ideology, such as patriarchy. Ariane’s power lies in her ability to refuse definition or symbolization, which is being demanded by both Simon and the audience. Akerman’s film provides an opportunity for non-reductionist feminist use of Lacanian film theory. By forcing voyeurs out of comfortable and passive consumption, La Captive provides a powerfully feminist attack against ideologies, like patriarchy, which still function as pervasive systems of oppression.

References


