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Queering the gaze: visualizing desire in Lacanian film theory

ABSTRACT: Film theorists typically conceptualize the gaze in film in terms of power and mastery. However, using Lacan's notion of the gaze as the *objet petit a*, or an unattainable object that provokes desire, this essay examines the *objet petit a* as the foundation of an intersectional queer gaze, aligning queer identification with desire and mirroring the lack of mastery that spectators who are queer, female, or people of color experience. In applying Lacan's invisible object that provokes our gaze as a lens through which to read queer existence and desire within discourses of queerness as "invisible" or an "open secret", we can locate non-heterosexual identifications and desires and radical queer potential in the unseen spaces in film. Examining the films *Safe* (1995), *Carol* (2015), and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), I identify and employ three forms of the queer gaze: reciprocal queer gazing, inclusive spectatorship, and re-visibility. These tools more successfully capture the mechanisms of queer gazing both on and offscreen, allowing us to better view queer cinema and spectatorship and disrupting the privileging of "representation" in contemporary LGBT discourse.

KEYWORDS: queer film; queer theory; film theory and criticism; gaze; psychoanalytic film theory

INTRODUCTION

I, as most people are, was first introduced to the theoretical concept of "The Gaze" through the notion of "the male gaze". I had heard the term tossed around in non-academic contexts to describe anything ranging from advertising to art to films like *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. When, in my freshman year of college, I read Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", it seemed that I had found all the answers – I now had a concrete theoretical framework that articulated my own experiences as a young woman living on the receiving end of the male gaze in my day-to-day life. However, the more I encountered Mulvey's essay, the more unanswered questions it raised: if the role of women in film was simply as

objects to be gazed upon, what could my own relationship to spectatorship be? As a lesbian was I inadvertently participating in the male gaze? Could I reconcile my queer identity with my identity as a woman and a feminist, or were they at odds when it came to film? Was Mulvey's dominating male gaze the only available gaze?

The body of film theory produced after Mulvey is generally unsatisfactory in answering these and other questions. While a number of authors have expanded Mulvey's theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory more largely in order to understand how audiences other than heterosexual white men experience spectatorship, a close look at this scholarship makes it clear that psychoanalytic theory – at least, that used by Mulvey and other theorists after her – does not effectively conceptualize these other subject positions. As film theorist Todd McGowan notes, Mulvey's essay and her use of Lacan rely fundamentally on the notion of gazing in film as an act of mastery: the cinematic spectator is able to form an idealized subjecthood through identification with the characters onscreen and is afforded the safety to do so without being perceived by others in the darkened theater. However, Mulvey's dynamic of ego identification and objectification of an other sets up an understanding of spectatorship in which many spectators – women, people of color, queer people, or members of other marginalized groups who rarely experience mastery over others or even themselves in their lives outside the cinema – fall through the cracks, revealing a significant missed opportunity in the fields of film theory and gaze theory.

Rather than continuing to apply an outdated and largely ineffective theoretical model for understanding queer spectatorship and gazing in film, this paper proposes an alternative: an understanding of the contemporary queer gaze that is aligned with Lacan's notion of the gaze as *objet petit a*, an object that provokes our desire yet is fundamentally unattainable in the field of the visible. Rather than the traditional claim within film theory that the gaze operates as mastery, the *objet petit a* instead links gazing with desire, an interpretation that fits more neatly with queer experience and relationships to spectatorship. In employing Lacan's invisible yet desirable object as a lens through which to read queer existence and desire that has, out of necessity or perhaps even choice, remained invisible and imperceptible to the public eye, we can conceptualize a queer gaze that allows us to locate non-heterosexual identifications and desires in the invisible spaces in film. This line of thinking more successfully captures the mechanisms of

queer gazing both on and offscreen, providing us with new tools for understanding queer cinema and spectatorship. The queer gaze also provides a necessary critical intervention in the field of film studies by disrupting the hegemony of traditional Lacanian gaze theory and providing a framework for a more inclusive understanding of spectatorship. Furthermore, it opens the door for a new school of thought around queer desire and experience that extends beyond film into queer theory and politics.

A QUEER GAZE

Film theory that engages with the gaze almost exclusively employs Jacques Lacan's articulation of the mirror stage in childhood development in THE 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". Laura Mulvey, for instance, argues that the process of identification in the mirror stage is replicated through the spectator's experience in the cinema: like the child in the mirror, the spectator in the cinema can both construct an idealized self-image through the images presented onscreen and overlook any potential discrepancies between this ideal representation and reality through the operation of the imaginary, which functions in film through fantasy. Mulvey elaborates on this relationship in her feminist critique by integrating desire into her analysis, but her vision of desire is centered around voyeuristic pleasure in looking, an objectifying, controlling gaze that always functions for men at the expense of women. Mulvey thus structures gazing as an "active/male and passive/female" relationship: ego identification and pleasure in looking both serve male viewers at the expense of the women onscreen, who function as an othered object to be consumed both by the male characters in the film and the male spectators in the audience (1975: 837). Like other early Lacanian film theories, Mulvey's male gaze also disregards the operation of the real in film, viewing cinematic spectatorship as a total experience of the imaginary and the symbolic that leaves nothing to be desired.

In HIS 1973 book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, however, Lacan revisits the gaze, retheorizing it from his earlier discussion of the mirror stage. Rather than as a cohesive mastery as he does in "The Mirror Stage", Lacan defines the gaze as *distinct* from what the eye can see – rather, the gaze is that which, in our visual relation to things, "slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it" (1973: 73). Thus, it is not "seeing" the object that we are looking at that

drives our gaze but the very experience of *not* seeing it, yet still knowing it is there: the gaze is “presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience...[a] lack” (1973: 72-73). This analysis also restructures gazing from a relationship between an active gazer and a passive object that is captured and controlled by this gaze to one in which the gaze becomes more reciprocal: this interpretation of the gaze recognizes that the object of the gaze is self-aware and in fact possesses the power to threaten us with a reminder of lack, leading to the distinct feeling, when looking at an object, that this object is in some way looking back at us, or at least that it possesses an awareness that it is being looked at and is deliberately engaging our gaze. For example, Lacan discusses Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, which, across the bottom of an otherwise straightforward portrait, contains an anamorphic image of a skull that only becomes identifiable when the viewer shifts their position to the painting and views it from below. Thus, for Lacan, Holbein’s painting is emblematic of the functioning of the gaze, as the painting, already aware that it will be gazed at, manipulates itself such that the viewer must not only adjust their own behavior to view the skull but is then confronted with a reminder of their own death – the real – in order to comprehend the image completely.

Unlike the mirror stage, in which the gaze allows for the formation of a symbolic identity and thus reinforces the symbolic order, the presence of the object that cannot be captured by our gaze also reminds us that the symbolic order is in fact incomplete and has a fundamental gap at its center. The gaze thus leads us toward an encounter with the real, this “nucleus” of psychic resistance that exists at the unconscious level within all of us and accounts for the missing point in the vision of the world presented to us by both the symbolic and imaginary orders of existence (LACAN 1973: 68). This understanding of the gaze as an objective gaze therefore leads Lacan to conceptualize the gaze as the *objet petit a*, or object-cause of desire – the object that provokes our desire to pursue this gap in the field of the visible. In the context of the gaze, the *objet petit a* is the trigger of a desire for something that is lost, that which is invisible or unseen. The gaze thus is by its very nature unattainable; it is instead the very impossibility of ever seeing the *objet petit a* that motivates our desire to see it.

In his book *The Real Gaze*, Todd McGowan returns to Lacan’s notion of the objective gaze, writing that understanding the gaze as the *objet petit*

a makes it “something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze” (2007: 5). Therefore, while theorists like Mulvey interpret the gaze as one that dominates and possesses the passive objects of its focus, namely women, McGowan points to Lacan’s later writings of the objective gaze to reveal that in this interaction, the object of the gaze is anything but passive – instead, it functions in the opposite way, reminding us of the traumatic real and suggesting a possible encounter with it. McGowan also argues that this equation of gazing with mastery is a misunderstanding of Lacan’s own theories and a conflation of Lacanian theory with theorists who understand gazing as power and dominance such as Foucault. As he notes, the *objet petit a* “is not the look of the subject at the object, but the gap within the subject’s seemingly omnipotent look. This gap within our look marks the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see” (McGOWAN 2007: 6). The gaze in film thus becomes the total opposite of mastery – it is turning ourselves over completely to desire for an object, allowing the film to provoke and sustain our gaze even as we know the real cannot be visually encountered.

Additionally, McGowan explains how film can sustain a viewer’s desire to see the *objet petit a* by teasing encounters with the real, but never actually providing them. In fact, McGowan suggests that desire lies not in obtaining the object but simply in pursuing it, and in fact that there is more pleasure in never seeing the object than watching its resolution through fantasy: “Desire perpetuates itself not through success (attaining or incorporating the object) but through failure (submitting itself to the object)” (2007: 9). In this way, the gaze marks the point at which we lose our subjecthood altogether, surrendering ourselves to desire for the *objet petit a*.

Many queer theorists have engaged Lacan in a similar way to McGowan, discussing the Lacanian real and its involvement in specifically queer desires and drives. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), for instance, Lee Edelman suggests that because queer people have already to some extent been turned away from inclusion into normative society, they should in turn choose to reject it altogether, thus rejecting the law of the symbolic and instead chasing the earth-shattering real via the pursuit of death and self-destruction. Though so antisocial in its rejection of utopianism and futurity that it risks falling instead into dystopia, Edelman’s theory takes the logic of following the *objet petit a* to its extreme and employs it as an

avenue exclusively available to queer subjects so as to reject an oppressive mainstream. This suggestion that following the drive toward the real – for Edelman, toward death – is an explicitly queer pursuit also sets up a queer potential in McGowan’s theory. Like Edelman’s death drive, the queer gaze functions as the pursuit of the real through a drive, in this case the scopic, or visual, drive, which dictates our pursuit of the *objet petit a*. A queer search for the real in the realm of the visible thus presents itself as another avenue of queer resistance to hegemonic modes of seeing and knowing.

On the reverse side of Lacanian theorists such as Edelman is queer utopianism, which imagines queerness as a radical future that tempts us with its possibility but remains just out of reach. As José Esteban Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), for instance, queerness is an “ideality” that, as an alternative mode of desire, allows us to “feel beyond the quagmire of the present” and visualize a better future (1). For Muñoz, queerness functions in the opposite way as it does for Edelman: queerness is not a resistance to futurity but is itself the future, one that is currently out of reach yet that allows us to imagine new, utopian possibilities for our current era. In *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (2017), Mari Ruti mediates the conversation between these disparate schools of Lacanian theory: antisocial queer theory versus social and utopian; “white gay men vs. ‘the rest of us’” (10). Ruti ultimately reinterprets Lacan into her own theory of attachment to cherished objects that drive our desire for our original lost object – the *objet petit a* – without plunging into the world-shattering real, as advocated by theorists such as Edelman. What is absent from Ruti’s argument, however, as well as those of other theorists, is the assimilation of this Lacanian queer theory into Lacanian film theory, which this project seeks to address. Queerness as *objet petit a*, and the radical queer potential of pursuing this *objet petit a*, come together in film, where films as objects can sustain our gaze and desire and queer viewers can recognize and even identify with an invisibility or lack of visual representation. The queer gaze thus presents a new understanding of spectatorship that functions outside of the “white gay men vs. the rest of us” dichotomy: understanding the queer gaze in film as the *objet petit a* permits a more inclusive means to examine queer spectatorship and desire, which applies to a variety of spectator positions and transcends the strict confines of visible representation.

Rethinking Lacan’s gaze as one of desire – specifically, desire for the *objet petit a* – rather than one of domination and control opens up an

important avenue in understanding queer film, spectatorship, and desire. Though the interplay between Lacanian theory and queer theory is not new, the redefinition of the gaze as it applies to a specifically queer gaze has gone relatively unexamined. For instance, we can forge a connection between Lacan's invisible yet desirable object and a queer existence and desire that has, out of necessity or perhaps even choice, remained invisible and imperceptible to the general public eye. Queerness, throughout Western history, has in some sense operated as a public *objet petit a*: a carefully coded, often invisible possibility that only those inside "the know" (that is, those who are queer themselves) can uncover and experience. In fact, queer theory has often articulated the notion of queer existence and possibility in similar terms to Lacan's *objet petit a*: as Muñoz writes, for instance, "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality... Queerness is a longing that propels us onward...Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (2009: 1). Queerness here, like Lacan's *objet petit a*, propels our desire to search for it; it challenges the fundamental lack within our heteronormative world; and it exists indefinitely in the future, unattainable in our current state and time. Searching for queerness, then, becomes a radical act, allowing us to imagine alternatives for the future and attempt to uncover them in the present. The Lacanian *objet petit a* thus becomes a useful jumping-off point in developing an analysis of a queer gaze, particularly as it functions in film. For instance, many of the critical traits of the gaze as *objet petit a*, such as its provocation of desire that motivates us to keep searching for it; its drive toward the real; its gesture toward a fundamental lack and therefore its ultimate unattainability; and its function as an objective, rather than subjective, gaze all can be tied innately to conceptualizations of queerness such as Muñoz's, as well as the invisible way queerness can exist, for instance in American communities of color. In the context of film theory, merging these lines of thinking in the queer gaze creates an effective tool in understanding how queer filmmakers and spectators, and queer people more generally, interact with film and experience the world.

Situated within the body of film theory influenced by Lacan, the queer gaze thus functions as an alternative understanding of queer spectatorship to theories like Mulvey's male gaze and an expansion on McGowan's notion of films as texts that stimulate desire for the *objet petit a*. McGowan's

discussion of surrendering to desire, as motivated by the *objet petit a*, is crucial in understanding the way in which the queer gaze upsets traditional discourses of representation in film. The queer gaze instead offers us as viewers the opportunity to grasp at the possibility of queerness in film even where it is not explicitly shown, functioning as an alternative reading practice that queer audiences can employ beyond the medium of film and filmmakers can imbue into films themselves, allowing the film as object to trigger and sustain our desire. Further, for queer viewers, queerness's invisibility can operate both as identification and desire, rather than either one or the other as earlier Lacanian theory and McGowan's theory seem to suggest. In the queer gaze, these forces can jointly be found in the *objet petit a*: queer viewers can not only have their desire sustained by the invisible *objet petit a* but can in fact identify with its very invisibility, particularly within a legacy of queerness existing invisibly both socially and in film.

WHEN TEXTS GAZE BACK: READING SAFE

As a case study of an objective queer gaze, and of the operation of the queer gaze in film more generally, Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe* is an emblematic example. The film follows Carol, an affluent housewife, whose life breaks down in the face of a mysterious illness. We observe Carol as she searches for a cause and cure, ultimately checking into a new-age treatment center and isolating herself from the outside world. Throughout the film, the spectator's desire to uncover and find a solution for the undiagnosable illness plaguing its protagonist is prolonged, though the gaze remains unattainable as this question is never fully satisfied nor are the illness's symptoms resolved. As the *objet petit a*, Carol's illness is introduced in the very first scene of the film – as critic Chuck Stephens notes in “Of Dolls, Dioramas, and Disease: Todd Haynes' *Safe* Passage” (1995), the first “line” of dialogue in the film is in fact a sneeze – and is prolonged throughout the film as Carol attempts to discover the cause of her worsening symptoms, decides that she is suffering from an immune collapse caused by environmental conditions, and isolates herself away from society in an attempt to heal. The underlying uncertainty for the viewer, however, is the actual cause of Carol's invisible illness, and whether it is even necessarily an illness at all or rather a result of her social condition as a suburban housewife trapped in a life of isolation, ennui, and powerlessness. Throughout the

film, Carol's illness is inextricably linked to her mundane day-to-day: she turns down passionless sex with her husband, claiming a headache; she collapses into a coughing fit on the floor of a dry cleaner's; she faints at a friend's baby shower; she gets a nosebleed in the middle of her perm at the hair salon. Even after Carol suspects that her illness is the result of chemical sensitivity and abandons her old life for a retreat where she is protected from chemical exposure, her condition appears to worsen rather than get better, suggesting that at the heart of Carol's illness is something intangible and untreatable that neither she nor we as viewers are able to access or understand.

Paralleling the mystery of Carol's disease is the mystery of Carol herself: in some sense, it is her absence of a selfhood and identity that is the cause of her physical decay, or at least that is associated with it. It is difficult to understand or sympathize with Carol as viewers because although we spend the entire duration of the film with her, we never fully know her, never have access to any of her inner life nor are given reason to believe any such inner life even exists. For example, at her treatment center when the other patients are asked about the conditions in their lives that led to them becoming sick – all articulating their illness as a projection of personal social ills such as self-hatred, guilt, or trauma rather than actual physical ailments – Carol has no answer, leaving both the concrete cause of her illness and the more metaphorical problems that plague her blank and mysterious. This distance from Carol and inaccessibility of her consciousness is also enforced technically, with the majority of the events of the film taking place through long or medium shots in which the characters and their actions become barely distinguishable. For instance, all of the scenes depicting violent attacks of Carol's illness show them from afar: unlike Mulvey's concept of gazing as scopophilia, we as viewers are placed at a distance from Carol, who is unreachable to an objectifying gaze. The final scene, in one of the film's few close-ups, takes place in an almost completely dark room, and most visible are the sores on Carol's face, which makes her illness inescapable and halts any idealization or desire. This film-making strategy also physically separates the viewer from Carol, creating an emotional distance to her character that makes her thoughts, feelings, and motivations opaque and drives us to search deep into the film or extrapolate beyond it in order to derive meaning, paralleling Carol's failure to understand and find a cure for her illness with our own as viewers.



FIGURE 1 – Carol’s close-up (1:55’23”)

However, Carol’s invisible identity is readable through a queer gaze. Carol is in some sense established as a queer figure, one who is “visible” within the context of the film, yet whose true identity remains a secret, both to the viewer and to the characters around her. Carol fails to find contentment in her seemingly idyllic domestic suburban life, decaying physically under the pressure of the heteronormative social expectations of her as a housewife and ultimately abandoning any pursuit of these expectations altogether: she leaves her marriage and domestic routine, ostensibly because of her illness, in favor of a permanent stay at the treatment center. Carol is thus further queered in her opting out of heterosexuality: even before the treatment center, she consistently refuses sex with her husband, and she ultimately leaves him behind altogether, abandoning her young stepson and their nuclear family arrangement in the process. Clearly, the Carol we see throughout the film, blandly performing her daily homemaker routine, is not the “real” Carol, who chooses at the end of the film to forgo all of these comforts of domesticity in favor of a communal living arrangement free from romantic attachments – in fact, sex is explicitly banned at the treatment center, and men and women are kept apart from each other. Carol, therefore, herself becomes a queer secret at the center of the film that is rendered readable through a queer gaze.

Further, the film contains another hidden queer subtext that exists to be uncovered by spectators through a queer gaze: a discussion of the AIDS crisis and, in turn, a queer critique of the discourse of AIDS, an invisible undercurrent to the film that is easy to miss, particularly as a heterosexual viewer. Throughout the film, while the viewer's – and Carol's – drive to uncover the cause of her ambiguous illness is perpetuated, it parallels another invisible, explicitly queer analysis that lurks beneath the surface, waiting to be interrogated: the social silencing of the discussion around AIDS. For example, though the film was released in 1995, a title card immediately establishes that our setting is not contemporary: instead, we are in 1987, a deliberate setting that positions us in the midst of the crisis and of Reagan's presidency. Thus, AIDS as an invisible current underlies Carol's own disease, which is likewise an immune deficiency and is in fact specifically associated with AIDS at several points throughout the film. However, paralleling the political silence around AIDS during the time of the crisis, the film leverages this discussion in a silent and invisible way, leaving the viewer to build on preexisting knowledge in order to identify the film's subtle cues to AIDS.

This deployment of AIDS as the *objet petit a* stimulates the queer viewer's curiosity about Carol's disease and prolongs a desire to have any potential links to AIDS affirmed. In an early scene in the film, for example, Carol visits a friend's house whose brother has recently died, and though his cause of death is never revealed, it is presumably from AIDS. The conversation between the two women is intimately familiar to a queer viewer even if the word AIDS is never uttered; though the true meaning of their conversation remains unspoken, cues such as "because he wasn't married" to allude to her brother's sexuality (*Safe*). Like the discourse of the AIDS crisis, like the coded references to homosexuality that culturally predominated the era of the film's release, even like the subtle exchanges between queer people themselves in hostile times and places, the queer viewer must read between the lines of their conversation and comprehend queerness there even when it is deliberately avoided. Within the film's specific historical context and for its built-in queer audience – Haynes is himself a gay man and was a central figure in the New Queer Cinema movement – this otherwise fleeting and unimportant scene takes on a significant meaning to a queer viewer that is central to the function of queerness as *objet petit a* in the film.

The AIDS crisis is again (un)invoked in a later scene in the film, in which Carol listens to commentators on the radio debate Reagan's religious fundamentalism. As their conversation continues, Carol is overcome by a coughing fit, and we can hear only fragments of the discussion on the radio over the sound of her coughing. Here, again, the film's reference to AIDS is vague: we are given no context to the conversation on the radio, though through its mirroring of Carol's clear disease and the film's setting in time we can once again connect it back to the ongoing AIDS crisis. In a film so centered on disease, invoking Reagan, who essentially embodied the government's failure to respond to the AIDS crisis when he was in office, and particularly his religious fundamentalism, which was used to discursively frame the narrative of the disease as a plague and a punishment for gay men, necessarily returns the conversation to AIDS. In this way, Carol is again queered by the film – outward symptoms of her own illness are aligned explicitly with the discussion of AIDS on the radio, and the crisis of AIDS and the government's response to it parallel her own personal body in crisis as she, stuck in traffic, is forced to pull over and succumb to a prolonged coughing fit. Here, Carol's queerness again offers an avenue for identification for queer viewers, enforcing their investment in her as a means of prolonging a desire to uncover and resolve her disease.

Carol's queer illness and AIDS converge in the founder of her treatment center, Peter Dunning, who is a self-proclaimed gay man living with both AIDS and chemical sensitivity. In fact, this is also the first point in the film at which AIDS is specifically named, yet even Peter's references are often coded or vague in contrast to the other open conversations around illness that take place at the treatment center. For instance, in one scene at dinner Peter appears to be discussing his experience with AIDS, describing a dream in which "black sores turn into black pansies which bloom and turn into beautiful bouquets" (*Safe*). Here, Peter employs imagery surrounding AIDS – black sores, "pansies" – and repurposes it into something positive, even empowering, articulating his new-age philosophy that is central to his own attitude toward disease and approach to running the treatment center. Carol, however, exists outside of even Peter's unwavering positivity, instead queering his approach to disease by refusing to consider other causes of her illness and turning further inward rather than seeking community, eventually isolating herself completely in a tiny, cold quarantine in

the house of a recently deceased resident. Here, Carol's negative response to Peter's mainstream, gay positivity in the face of crisis and disease functions as a type of queer resistance to the minimalization of such illnesses, a social opting out and even, eventually, a turn toward the death drive as we see in the film's final scene wherein Carol, covered in rashes and looking even more gaunt and unhealthy than before, repeats affirmations of self-love in the mirror. Here, our curiosity for the *objet petit a* is perpetuated rather than resolved, and we are left only with a lingering sense of unease and anxiety that continues even after the film has concluded.

This anxiety, too, is queered throughout the film, manifested in the uncertainty and negativity surrounding Carol's illness and its connection to AIDS. In addition, there is another embodiment of queer anxiety – and an occurrence of the Lacanian real – that appears in another resident at the treatment center, a bizarre figure named Lester. Lester appears only in two brief moments in the film, both times from afar and clothed from head to toe, even covering his hands with gloves and his face with a ski mask. In fact, his entire appearance falls into the uncanny – his limbs appear unnaturally long; he moves in an awkward and almost unhuman gait; and the center of his ski mask where we would expect his face to be is likewise covered, leaving him simply white and featureless, with no recognizable human traits.



FIGURE 2 – Lester appears at a distance (1:43'04").

As Peter explains to Carol, Lester is “very, very afraid – afraid to eat, afraid to breathe” (*Safe*). As with the scenes of Carol’s attacks of illness, Lester is only shown at a distance through long shots, and the fact that we cannot unravel the confusion of his appearance with a close-up only contributes to his mystery and the uncanny feeling that his appearance evokes. In some sense, then, Lester, in our inability to pinpoint who or even what he is, likewise becomes a queer figure, one who, like Carol, is essentially a mystery to us and exists only as an incomprehensible presence. That Lester’s existence is portrayed as a consequence of extreme anxiety is not insignificant either. Though Lester appears to live in fear of contamination, the covering of his body and facial features and isolation from everyone else at the treatment center also convey a fear of being seen, of being recognized for who he truly is. In this way, Lester’s anxiety itself, like Carol’s, is queered, with his secret identity and outsider status from society taken to an absolute extreme.

Further, this disturbing encounter with Lester also evokes Lacan’s discussion of the *objet petit a* – Lester, like the skull hidden at the bottom of *The Ambassadors*, is difficult at first glance to visually make sense of, and he does not reveal himself to us throughout most of the film but instead is traumatically exposed to us when we are least expecting it, at Carol’s supposedly safe haven tucked away in the isolated desert. In this way, queerness operates throughout the film as an invisible identity, hidden in its main character yet confrontationally revealed, as an embodiment of the real, in the otherwise unexplainable appearance of Lester in the film. The film thus operates on multiple levels of invisibility: Lester, Carol’s identity, her illness, and even the film’s discussion of AIDS all function as an invisible undercurrent that becomes recognizable to queer audiences and stimulates their desire to unravel these multiple representations of the *objet petit a* that operate beneath the text of the film itself. *Safe*, then, on many levels reveals the queer possibilities of the gaze as *objet petit a*, not only through a concealed discussion of invisible queer identity and the AIDS crisis but further by pointing to the “queerness” of the Lacanian real itself – encapsulated in the film by a bizarre and incomprehensible figure like Lester – an aspect of existence that cannot be captured or understood and instead leaves us with a sense of vague discomfort and fear. The film therefore embodies a self-conscious employment of a queer gaze contained within the text itself, even one not specifically queer on its surface, that

can be read and identified with by queer spectators. *Safe* thus sets the stage for an analysis of the queer gaze as it relates to spectatorship, particularly for queer viewers who are seldom directly represented in film and, like in *Safe*'s queer narrative, function as hidden figures obscured within mainstream cinematic representations.

INCLUSIVE SPECTATORSHIP

As several critics have noted, the traditional Lacanian school of film theory leaves behind many subject positions – women, people of color, queer or transgender people, and members of other marginalized groups. The queer gaze as *objet petit a* thus offers a new mode of analyzing queer spectatorship that can take an intersectional approach, more closely aligning with an understanding of the gaze as motivated by desire, not mastery. This interpretation also upsets traditional perceptions of representation: if the queer gaze allows us to search for what is not actively presented to us, it therefore reshapes the demand for the images that are shown onscreen. In other words, when viewed through a queer gaze, representation need not align neatly, or even at all, with our own identities as spectators in order for our desire to be provoked. In this way, a queer gaze that probes the invisible spaces in film rather than takes at face value what is seen onscreen presents new possibilities for understanding queer spectatorship and identification.

In order to understand this construction, we must first examine the critique of visibility offered by queer theorists of color. In “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm” (2005), for instance, Marlon B. Ross challenges the construction of the “closet” in queer discourse – a space of secrecy and invisibility that it is necessary for the modern queer subject to visibly or verbally “come out” of – as one that is centered around white constructions of queerness and that ignores alternative experiences of sexuality that exist in queer communities of color. Ross suggests that because racial and sexual marginalization are constructed in relation to one another and cannot be examined separately in the subjects who experience both, the relevance of the closet narrative becomes complicated in communities of color in which alternative expressions of sexuality to “coming out” are available. Discussing an ethnography of black gay men in Harlem, for instance, Ross points out that

the emphasis is not on a binary of secrecy versus revelation but instead on a continuum of knowing that persists at various levels according to the kin and friendship relations within the community. Although sometimes imprecisely referred to as an “open secret,” such attitudes express instead a strong sense that it is impossible *not* to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough....When the question of telling loved ones what they already know does become an issue, it can be judged a superfluous or perhaps even a distracting act, one subsidiary to the more important identifications of family, community, and race within which one’s sexual attractions are already interwoven and understood. (2005: 145)

For Ross, these alternative modes of experiencing and knowing sexuality, particularly in communities of color in which sexuality is not usually the main identification shared among its members, complicate the dominant narrative of visibility that the closet discourse supports. Extrapolating from Ross, then, how might we come to understand these relations of visibility when it comes to representation in film? I suggest that it is precisely by reconciling this “open secret” experience with the invisible desire of the queer gaze that we can begin to approach an intersectional understanding of spectatorship aligning more closely with experiences of sexuality beyond the closet narrative. In other words, when queer spectators “gaze” at characters that outwardly appear nothing like them, the queer gaze can nevertheless sustain both identification and desire even far outside the realm of the visible. In this way, and in an absence of diversity of representation within queer narratives on film, the queer gaze can be employed to provoke a range of desires and identifications that extend beyond what is represented in the film itself.

This approach to spectatorship is enacted in Todd Haynes’ 2015 film *Carol*, which is, on its surface, a straightforward film about two white lesbians in 1950s New York City whose relationship is charted across the multiple hurdles both women must overcome in order to protect their reputations and families from the threat of their relationship being exposed. In his portrayal, however, Haynes actively engages the queer gaze to hint beyond what is immediately visible in the film, allowing for a sustained provocation of desire and ultimately contributing to a portrayal of queerness in line with a wide array of spectator identifications, not solely white American lesbians. In *Carol*, the closet dichotomy is dissolved in place of an invisible, yet knowable, lesbian existence and desire. As the film follows the

development of a relationship between two women, its location in history – the post-World-War-II era – causes the sexuality of both women and the relationship between them to remain explicitly unspoken, even as viewers, particularly queer viewers, are cued in to it visually and through loaded allusions such as “people like *that*” (*Carol*). In some sense, then, both main characters are situated both inside and outside the closet, paralleling Ross’ queer “open secret”: Carol, an older, married woman who eventually seduces the younger Therese, has clearly been acting on her lesbian desires for quite some time, but while her sexuality is recognized by those around her, it is never specifically identified nor revealed publicly. Her husband, Harge, for instance, is clearly aware of Carol’s previous relationship with her best friend Abby, to which they both refer several times throughout the film – when Carol refuses his advances and decides to stay home for Christmas, for example, he resignedly says, “There’s always Abby” and Carol matter-of-factly responds that “Abby and I were over long before you and I were over” (*Carol*), suggesting that both are aware of and have discussed this relationship before. In fact, Abby, like Carol’s own queerness, is mentioned in the film before she is actually shown, further embodying an invisible queerness that is alluded to but not visually revealed until much later.

As in Carol’s relationship with Abby, Harge is immediately aware of the romance between Carol and Therese upon discovering Therese in their house, angrily questioning them about how they met and stating to Carol, “That’s bold” (*Carol*). Abby, too, is aware, asking Carol, “You want to tell me about her?” and following up with a pointed “*And?*,” when Carol attempts to gloss over their clearly sexually loaded encounter by stating simply that “She returned my gloves” (*Carol*). In fact, though the threat that her “secret” will be revealed looms over Carol throughout the film – particularly wielded by Harge, who hires a private detective to follow her on a road trip with Therese and record evidence of their sexual encounters in order to gain sole custody of their daughter – Carol ultimately demonstrates that this threat carries no power against her, choosing instead to sacrifice custody of her daughter in order to live authentically. Here, again, however, there is no “coming out”, no formal revelation of her relationship with Therese; Carol declares to her husband and a conference room full of lawyers that she refuses to continue “living against [her] own grain” (*Carol*), again using language coded specifically for Harge – and the film’s queer audiences – that will remain unperceived by the non-queer others around her.

Therese, on the other hand, is far more “closeted” than Carol, as she lacks the same discernible “pattern” of lesbian relationships, allowing her feelings to remain hidden – even within her close relationships – for far longer (*Carol*). Her boyfriend, Richard, for example, innocently encourages her to spend time with Carol and does not become suspicious even after Therese pointedly asks him, “Have you ever been in love with a boy?” (*Carol*), while her friend Dannie misreads her sexual and emotional confusion as attraction to him, even attempting to kiss her. Though both men eventually to some extent catch on to her attraction to Carol, they still seem oblivious to the true extent of their relationship – Richard minimizes it as “some silly crush” (*Carol*), while Dannie assumes that her trip with Carol is a reaction to his advances rather than a product of genuine attraction. Unlike Carol, Therese’s youth and presumed innocence is understood by those around her to suggest that she is unaware of what she is doing, or perhaps that she is being preyed on by Carol. In this way, Therese’s queerness is not disguised, but it becomes invisible through the dismissive attitude of those around her, remaining essentially unrecognizable. It is not until the very end of the film, in fact, that Therese’s queerness is recognized in an extremely brief encounter with a woman at a party who seems to approach her flirtatiously. In this setting, however, it is possible that, at a gathering largely of acquaintances of Richard’s, this recognition is due to news of Therese’s relationship with Carol preceding her rather than because of any visible identification of her queerness. Therese thus eventually approaches the same level of recognizability as Carol, yet she is still positioned firmly within the closet even as her queerness is “known” by those around her.

Assisting the “open secret” of their relationship is the fact that both women also betray no visible markers of the expectation for lesbianism of the time. In a period in which lesbians were understood as butch “gender inverts” who assumed masculine roles and presented in a masculine way, both Therese and Carol visibly upset this portrayal, instead embodying what Robert Corber (2011) calls the “Cold War femme”: feminine-presenting lesbians who “posed an ‘invisible’ threat to the nation; because [they] could pass as ‘normal’” (3). According to Corber, this entrance into heteronormative society thus allowed femme lesbians access to institutions normally off-limits to homosexuals, which they could then destabilize from the inside by continuing to participate in a secret lesbian subculture, making lesbian femininity “a powerfully ambiguous signifier of sexual identity”

(2011: 5). This structure is outlined in the POPULAR 1965 book *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian*, which observes that lesbian subculture existed as “a vast, sprawling grapevine, with a secret code of [its] own” and that lesbians had “an almost radar-like communication with each other, and seemed able to spot, not only other lesbians on sight, but potential lesbians as well” (CORBER 2011: 2). In the film, this secret system of recognition is made clear when Therese encounters a more stereotypically femme/butch pairing in a record shop, who stare at her, presumably in recognition, as the camera lingers on them in a prolonged shot. Here, the film self-consciously reproduces its own audience response – queer viewers of the film, like the women in the record shop, recognize Therese and Carol’s individual queerness and attraction to each other, even as heterosexual audiences or supporting characters in the film remain oblivious.



FIGURE 3 – Lesbians in the record shop (49’45”)

The film thus deliberately engages the queer gaze in a moment that otherwise passes by unnoticed in the film, providing a clue to Therese’s sexuality through its nod to queer history and allowing viewers to read into Therese and Carol’s relationship before it is revealed to us explicitly.

In addition to its abandonment of the closet metaphor, the film further opens up possible identifications through its awareness of its audience and

use of the queer gaze. For instance, throughout the film desire is sustained not only through the impossibility of visibility for the relationship between the two women due to its setting in time, but also by the drawing out of the development of this relationship, leaving any blatant queerness obscured to audiences untrained in looking for it. For instance, as Patricia White observes in “Sketchy Lesbians: *Carol* as History and Fantasy” (2015), though the attraction between the two main characters is apparent even from their very first interaction – their eyes meet across a crowded department store in a “frankly lecherous” gaze – the viewer is forced to wait, until the film is more than two-thirds over, for “this mutual and obviously sexual desire to be fulfilled” (13).



FIGURE 4 – Therese spots Carol across the department store (9’52”)

However, even after the consummation of their relationship, the spectator’s desire is again interrupted, this time by the invasion of reality – the next morning, Carol receives a threatening telegram revealing the private detective’s collection of evidence that will be used against her in court. As Carol cuts off all contact with Therese in order to resolve her own family drama, the viewer’s desire for the *objet petit a* is again provoked. We know, due to the film’s circular structure, that they will eventually reunite, as we see in its opening scene; however, this prolonged waiting is the driving

force behind the audience's desire, as viewers are forced until the end of the film to see any reunion between the two main characters and resolution of their relationship.

In its conclusion, however, the film evades a simple reconciliation and the satisfaction of a happy ending, choosing instead to suggest the women's reunion rather than show it. In the circular scene that appears both at the very beginning and end of the film, we see Therese – persuaded to meet with Carol despite the abrupt end to their relationship after the detective's tapes surface – reject Carol's proposal to move in together as well as her invitation to dinner. Later, however, Therese seems to reconsider, appearing at the restaurant where Carol is waiting as the camera, following her line of vision, navigates through the room looking for her. In this final moment, however, rather than reveal their reunion, the film keeps it invisible and inconclusive, choosing instead to end the film just as their eyes meet, thus perpetuating the spectator's desire for what is suggested but never attained. As White points out, this break is emphasized by cinematic technique: "This is no homo-normative world of 'happily ever after' in which Therese joins the sparkling dinner guests and they discuss the logistics of their move. Instead a hard cut to black leaves the audience hanging on the verge of this second coup de foudre, as the music resolves abruptly to emphasize the break" (2015: 17). In this way, though the film's conclusion is frequently lauded as a "happy" ending distinct from the lesbian films preceding it and for the time of its setting, the resolution that the "happy" description suggests is complicated. Instead, the film deliberately elides Therese and Carol's reunion, choosing instead to keep the viewer in a state of desire for what is not shown. Rather than providing audiences with the positive representation that a happy ending might allow, this ending instead perpetuates the queer gaze, which by nature cannot be satisfied or resolved and instead leaves the viewer suspended in pure desire.

In line with this analysis, White reads the film through her theory of "lesbian representability", which she defines as a spectator's own "inference" of desire between women that exists in opposition to representation (1999: 1). For White, this inference places the spectator, rather than the figures onscreen, as the desiring subject, and the characters in the film as the objects of that desire. White also situates lesbian representability in the murky space between visibility and invisibility, noting that *Carol* was heralded as "authentic" by critics although "these heroines don't even kiss

until ninety minutes into the movie” (2015: 10). For White, the film’s refusal to articulate itself as a lesbian film – the unspoken part of the “open secret” that exists between its protagonists – universalizes it as a love story, which, despite its specific historical setting, is “suspended in time” although it remains “a specifically lesbian fantasy” (2015: 11). It is this positioning of the spectator as a subject of explicitly queer desire that shapes the film’s interaction with spectatorship: Therese is to some extent rendered a blank slate, a pure desiring subject, onto whom any queer viewer can project themselves.

It is precisely this instability of the central character with whom we are meant to identify that contributes to the film’s queer universality. For instance, over the course of the film, Therese’s gender and class identifications both fluctuate: though her gender presentation is to some degree normatively feminine, she is separated as other from Carol through her youthfulness, which by the end of the film has disappeared in favor of a more mature and polished presentation, revealed in Carol’s remark that “You look very fine... as if you’ve suddenly blossomed” (*Carol*). Mirroring this evolution is a shift in Therese’s class position, as she trades her job as a department store salesclerk for one at the *New York Times*, and we see her poised and professional at work before her reunion with Carol, a stark contrast to the insecurity and confusion we see at the beginning of the film. Therese’s unfixed identity, like Carol’s in *Safe*, thus paints her as an empty space into which queer viewers can insert themselves: instead of being anchored by her gender or class, these identifications are instead destabilized, leaving Therese’s own characterization unestablished and open to the projection of other identities.

The power of the film for the spectator therefore lies in Therese’s “markedly blank subjectivity” (WHITE 2015: 12). Rather than painting Therese as a complete character with whom specific viewers can identify, the film instead self-consciously employs the queer gaze to allow for the complete identification with desire, specifically lesbian desire, which supersedes any other possible identifications within the film. With the character of Therese left blank, any of her other possible identities – as a white, cisgender lesbian, for instance, with relative class privilege, who is localized in a particular space and time – are erased, and she becomes instead a purely desiring subject, centering Carol as the object of her desire. However, this interaction is still specifically queer: as White notes, “What the audience

is given is Therese's desire with which to identify. Carol is the name of her obsession" (2015: 8). In this sense, *Carol* becomes a more universalized queer love story, one driven by queer desire rather than the specific identities of the characters or the film's setting in time and place. Any spectator, even one sharing no other similarities with either woman, can identify not with Therese herself but with her desire, desire which by necessity in the film must largely be kept hidden and secret. In such an intersectional approach to the film, while it is possible for any queer spectator to identify with the film's gaze, its abandonment of identity in favor of desire and employment of the invisible queer open secret creates other possibilities for spectatorship and becomes more accessible to queer spectators of color. In *Carol*, there are few opportunities to gaze back against negative representations because they largely do not exist, nor do any representations: what the spectator is given instead is the opportunity to identify solely with desire, desire that parallels experiences of queerness not only historically but, for many queer viewers, in the present as well. In this way, the lens of the queer gaze presents a new opportunity to understand spectatorship, a gaze oriented around an invisible, yearning desire.

RE-VISIBILITY

In recent years, the focus of discourse around queer films and film in general has been that of representation and visibility. The underlying logic of these concepts – that queer viewers can be empowered to be themselves when presented with positive representations of characters that look like them – is pervasive and has led viewers to champion queer representation in even such decidedly un-queer (in the political sense of the word) film franchises as Disney films or *Star Wars*. However, what this argument about representation ignores is the nature of the queer gaze itself, constructed around the long history of queer viewers reading back into the invisible spaces in film and inscribing or uncovering the real of queerness. This reading practice, in fact, can be extended beyond film and applied to history as well. As queer feminist scholar Emma Pérez articulates, for example, this same process of reshaping our vision of history in order to uncover or even invent queerness functions as “a decolonial queer gaze that allows for different possibilities and interpretations of what exists in the gaps and silences but is often not seen or heard” (2003: 129). Pérez's queer gaze is one centered on searching for, and at times even inventing,

what is absent from conventional recorded history. Thus, as we see in *Carol* and in *Safe*, another use of the queer gaze in film is the interrogation of history – combing the past for its own *objet petit a*, the queer figures and relationships that are invisible and inaccessible.

This interrogation of history is enacted in Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film *The Watermelon Woman*, a mockumentary (or, more precisely, one of the filmmaker’s signature “Dunyementaries”) in which Dunye, portraying herself, attempts to uncover the history of an unnamed black Hollywood actress from THE 1930s whom she knows solely as “the Watermelon Woman”. Throughout the film, the viewer is included in Cheryl’s journey as she combs archives, conducts interviews, and searches libraries attempting to uncover the hidden – or perhaps nonexistent – historical record of the Watermelon Woman’s life and identity. However, Cheryl’s desire for answers is continually eluded by the invisibility of black women, particularly queer black women, in these institutional renderings of history. For example, Cheryl is informed by a black film historian that he knows nothing about the Watermelon Woman or her white director Martha Page because “Women are not my specialty” (*Watermelon Woman*). The library, too, proves to be an insufficient resource – discussion of the Watermelon Woman is absent from both the library’s compartmentalized “black section” and its white-centric books



FIGURE 5 – Dunye as the Watermelon Woman (1:17’03”)

on film history and women in film. Meanwhile, interviews with the cultural critic Camille Paglia, who is unaware of Martha Page's lesbianism and grandiosely challenges black scholarship's resistance to stereotypes, and students on the street who plead ignorance of the Watermelon Woman because "we haven't covered women and blaxploitation yet" reveal the shortcomings of academia in acknowledging those who exist at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality (*Watermelon Woman*). In this sense, the Watermelon Woman becomes the symbolic *objet petit a*, the lost black lesbian woman from institutional histories whom both Cheryl and the viewer are driven to uncover and claim

Likewise, the oral histories of the Watermelon Woman – who is eventually revealed to be named Fae Richards – collected by Cheryl similarly present a contradictory and incomplete picture, further mystifying Fae's true identity and blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. For instance, while one interviewee, a self-described "stone butch" who frequented the nightclubs that Fae performed in, asserts that Fae was a lesbian and was in fact involved with Martha Page, Page's sister later rejects this relationship, declaring that "My sister was not that kind of woman!" (*Watermelon Woman*). This exchange, in fact, leads Cheryl to suggest that "it was almost like Fae never existed" (*Watermelon Woman*), once again alluding to the absence of these types of histories from the traditional record and the need for the invention of alternative histories as Pérez describes. Here, once again, we see a resounding "lack" in history – even in informal histories – to account for the full picture, only further motivating Cheryl's desire to fill this absence with the figure of Fae Richards. Throughout the film, the truth about Fae – at least, what is presented as truth within the narrative of the film – remains elusive, driving the viewer's desire both to uncover her from history and, like Cheryl, find her hidden queerness.

In fact, this mechanism of queer gazing as *objet petit a* is fully realized when Fae is revealed at the end of the film to be an invention of Dunye's rather than an actual person. As Laura Sullivan notes in "Chasing Fae: *The Watermelon Woman* and Black Lesbian Possibility" (2000), Dunye's elision of Fae's true fictionality drives the viewer's desire not only to uncover who Fae Richards is but also to find out whether or not she even really exists. Sullivan writes, "...while the issue of secrecy and confession are typically associated with gay identity, this film does not conceal homosexuality, but instead contains a 'secret' about the fictional nature of the subject of the

central character’s documentary.... much of [the film’s] power comes from the ambiguity of the figure of Fae Richards” (2000: 455). Thus, we can understand the driving desires of the film’s viewer to uncover what is lost and hidden – the *objet petit a* – as threefold: the excavation of Fae Richards and other invisible women like her from history; the pinning down of her ambiguous sexuality as presented by the conflicting accounts throughout the film; and the unclear historical validity of Richards herself. While the final question is almost too straightforwardly resolved by a title card at the end of the film reading “Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction” (*Watermelon Woman*), the other two remain ambiguous, especially when complicated by the revelation that all of the information presented as factual throughout the film is in fact an invention. Here, too, we see the ultimate unattainability of the *objet petit a* – both Cheryl and the viewer are “unable to retrieve this history [they] wanted to find” despite the desire to do so that drives the entire narrative of the film (SULLIVAN 2000: 456). In turn, the “hope”, “inspiration”, “possibility”, and “history” that Fae Richards represents for Cheryl and the viewer are likewise “illusions”: Sullivan concludes, “Dunye had to make up the history of a black lesbian actress; in other words, she had to create her own hope, inspiration, and possibility through the creation of a history that was not, but could have been, in some ways should have been, there” (2000:



FIGURE 6 – “Fae Richards” (33’52”)

459). Thus, *The Watermelon Woman* quite literally carries out the act of the queer gaze, constructing a history – and propelling the viewer through it by triggering their desire – that the filmmaker herself knows from the outset to be unattainable.

However, while *The Watermelon Woman* reveals this absence of representation from history and in some respect attempts to remedy it by telling the story of Dunye, a black lesbian filmmaker, it also demonstrates the limitations of visibility itself. As Kara Keeling observes in “Joining the Lesbians’: Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility” (2005), the film in some sense subscribes to and upholds the very constructions of visibility that it seeks to challenge. Keeling argues that the film, in its response to the historical invisibility of black queer women, represents its “black lesbian” subject precisely by discriminately handpicking some aspects of this identity to render “visible” while reproducing the erasure of others. For example, Keeling points to Cheryl’s privileging of the interracial relationship between Fae and Martha Page in her documentary over Fae’s relationship with her life partner, June Walker, arguing that this focus “legitimizes the ‘black lesbian filmmaker’ as ‘the one’ who will become visible as ‘black lesbian’ by invoking a sheet of the past that supports Cheryl’s needs and interests... a past wherein interracial lesbian desire is part and parcel of ‘black women’s’ participation in Hollywood and so continues to inform their entry into it” (2005: 223). Keeling also notes that in obscuring the parts of the past inconvenient to her narrative, for instance by dismissing Fae’s long-term relationship with June by calling her a “special friend”, Cheryl in fact “reproduces the homophobic discourse through which same-sex erotic attachments are obscured and rendered illegitimate within dominant conceptions of the world” (2005: 224). Here, we again see the role of visibility, even “positive” portrayals onscreen, in reproducing the same hegemonic constructions of the world that they seek to challenge. In a contemporary era of film in which there are more and more varied queer portrayals onscreen, it becomes necessary to challenge even the most nuanced representation for what is missing, for the facets of identity that are deliberately excluded and operate as their own invisible *objet petit a* when any single queer identity functions as representation for a whole.

The omission of these inconvenient identities in the project of visibility thus calls for a critique of visibility itself, despite its emphasis in modern discourses of queer film. As Keeling writes,

If the regime of visibility that authorizes black lesbian and gay images to cohere and be recognizable as such is itself a product of those movements that have become victorious by conceding to aspects of the existing hegemonic constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, then that which remains hidden in or obscured by those images still might retain the capacity to further challenge the dominant hegemonies set in motion by a politics of representation now predicated on black lesbian and gay visibility. (2005: 218)

In this sense, Keeling's critical approach to *The Watermelon Woman* and toward "black lesbian and gay" film in general suggests the availability of yet another possibility for the queer gaze: a tool through which to examine not only what is rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives but what is erased even from more contemporary attempts to re-write or challenge those narratives as well. Keeling's call to examine "that which remains hidden in or obscured" even when we are presented with "visibility" offers a radical ground for queer re-reading and the search for the *objet petit a*. Further, Keeling's argument demonstrates the limitation of representation in an era in which it dominates most popular and even critical discussion surrounding queer film. As this argument reveals, no representation is truly complete, and even the most comprehensive attempts at visibility will always have a fundamental lack. Any construction of visibility, then, itself needs to be probed for its own *objet petit a* even when it appears to wholly represent a previously un- or underexamined identity. It is the task of the queer viewer, employing a queer gaze, to "rigorously interrogate" these images and attempt to uncover the hidden subjects that any representation necessarily obscures.

In this way, the queer gaze offers a radical potential in this critique of visibility; reading back against black gay and lesbian representations, even seemingly "positive" ones like Dunye's, and all queer images more generally, becomes the site of counterhegemonic resistance. This interrogation, argues Keeling, is the only mode of preventing the "comfortable complicity with the very forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation that the birth of 'black lesbian and gay film' itself critiques" (2005: 217). However, the gaze here remains aligned with the *objet petit a* and grounded in desire, a desire that cannot by its very existence be satisfied. For Keeling, the queer gaze reminds us of the alternatives – "the 'stone butches,' the 'special friends,' 'the studs,' 'the femmes,' 'the woman-lovers,' and 'the queers'" – those "ambivalent, destabilizing, and unstable forces of desire

and community [that] cohere as a collective expression of a multifarious ‘we’ that complicates any innocent notion of ‘the one’ who says, ‘I am a black lesbian filmmaker’” (2005: 224). Just as with Keeling’s “black lesbian filmmaker”, in any comprehensive construction of queer visibility the very aspects of identity that are inconvenient to such a construction – those that destabilize any single “queer” identity as the one being represented – are rendered invisible. The queer gaze thus is enacted through the radical desire of queer viewers to uncover themselves in this obscured collective of queer misfits: gazing at a film becomes not passive absorption of hegemony but a challenge to it and a search for alternatives.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY

In an absence of theory that accurately articulates the particular mechanisms of queer gazing in film, for spectators, and in a larger social context, this theory takes the next step in contemporary film theory by demonstrating how gazing, even on a small scale, constitutes a radical act. The implications of the queer gaze as demonstrated here expand far beyond film, allowing us to rethink queer spectatorship, queer representation onscreen, and a larger political project of queer visibility. For example, in reimagining queer spectatorship from the approach of earlier film theorists, who largely assimilated queer spectators into other theoretical constructions of the gaze such as Mulvey’s male gaze, the queer gaze allows us to understand queer spectatorship in a new way, one that is more widely applicable to intersectional spectator identities. Further, the queer gaze presents a critical tool to challenge queer representations where they do exist and uncover the erased aspects that make those representations complete. The queer gaze, therefore, teaches us that queer spectatorship and visibility can come in many forms; that no representation is comprehensive, and visibility is a flawed goal; that queerness as a possibility can exist anywhere, waiting to be uncovered.

Further, when viewed with a queer gaze, film becomes a political project, teaching us to identify the flaws in what is presented to us and imagine seemingly impossible alternatives to our current world order. Todd McGowan, for example, highlights the way in which even the suggestion of an encounter with the real holds the potential to disrupt dominant ideologies, writing that “Our ability to contest an ideological structure depends on our ability to recognize the real point at which it breaks down, the point at which the

void that ideology conceals manifests itself. Every authentic political act has its origins in an encounter with the real” (2007: 17). Thus, in order to separate ourselves from the symbolic power of ideology, we must as political subjects instead opt to pursue the seemingly “impossible” real, even though it cannot be visualized or grasped. For McGowan, “The only way to break from the controlling logic of the ideology is to reject the possibilities that it presents and opt for the impossible. The impossible is impossible within a specific ideological framework, and the act of accomplishing the impossible has the effect of radically transforming the framework. The impossible thus marks the terrain of politics as such” (2007: 177). McGowan argues that film, in facilitating an interaction with the gaze, can subsequently grant us the ability to glimpse this “impossible” real and allow us to assume the perspective of the gaze, the *objet petit a*, itself, radically destabilizing our visions of the world and ourselves and therefore marking us as political subjects capable of seeing beyond the rigid constructions of ideology.

When we understand McGowan’s observations through the lens of queer theory, we can begin to see that in many ways, the queer subject is always already viewing the world from the position of the invisible other, already able to imagine the impossible – after all, queerness itself has long operated as an “impossible” way of life to realize – thus functioning as an inherently political subject. The queer gaze therefore offers us a new approach to queer politics that differs from a mainstream LGBT movement focused on assimilation into a heteronormative mold – the ideological norm – and instead allows us to imagine a queer, impossible alternative. Queer theorists have long presented their work as an approach to this very concept, positioning themselves in contradiction to the assimilatory goals of marriage, productivity, reproduction, and normativity and conceptualizing various responses available to the queer subject in the face of social pressure to conform to such expectations. In this way, the pursuit of the invisible *objet petit a* and of the real can function as another queer political response, less extreme than Edelman’s self-destructive pursuit of the death drive yet still granting us a tool to look beyond and critique the ideological structures that surround us, even within the queer community itself.

Most significantly, the queer gaze, as an invisible, ideological rupture, calls for a reinvention of the visibility-oriented goals that are frequently emphasized in modern queer communities through events such as the Transgender Day of Visibility or through an emphasis on increased

representation in film, television, and advertising. As Mia Fischer writes in *Terrorizing Gender: Transgender Visibility and the Surveillance Practices of the U.S. Security State* (2019), for example, mainstream LGBT organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or GLADD solely prioritize increasing the number of “good” representations of transgender people in the media, but fail to examine “what these representations actually *do* and how they impact the lives of queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming communities” (5). As Fischer and other critics note, for many queer people, visibility often comes at the cost of erasure, repression, and even violence, particularly for the multiply marginalized such as trans people who are poor or people of color. For transgender populations, for example, the question of visibility becomes even more fraught in a contemporary cultural era in which there is simultaneously more transgender representation in media, art, and the public eye than ever before and, at the same time, a rising wave of brutal violence against transgender people, especially transgender women of color.

Further, in her essay “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” (1994), Rosemary Hennessy argues that the call for visibility perpetuates the suppression of class analysis in queer discourse, a process in which there is always a marginalizing of an other in order to render some visible – what she describes as the “unspeakable underside of queer critique” (68). In our contemporary, post-marriage equality era, Hennessy’s critique becomes even more salient – as more and more queer subjects are granted mainstream visibility, the class component to which she calls attention has remained relatively untouched. An intersectional approach to the queer gaze, therefore, recognizes not only the tangible danger of existing as visibly queer or transgender but, further, examines the impact that mainstream commodification of such visibility has had in increasing the surveillance and control of queer bodies and normalizing and exploiting queerness, essentially folding it into the very ideological system that it originally sought to critique. In this way, the queer gaze as a practice of reading invisibility in media becomes socially and politically relevant as well, highlighting the cracks in the regime of visibility and allowing us to imagine alternatives.

I draw on these examples of the underside of visibility not in order to dismiss it outright but rather to present as an alternative a mode of queer seeing and knowing that rests not on visibility but on its very absence, as presented in the invisible *objet petit a*. What these arguments about visibility highlight is the breaking point of a dominant LGBT ideology that privileges

assimilation, conformity, and visibility adhering to certain accepted markers of representation and disregards those who cannot, or choose not to, render themselves visible. They also point to the use of the queer gaze in interrogating all ideological constructions, even those foregrounding a regime of visibility that is seemingly empowering for queer subjects. The “invisible others” who are obscured under white, middle-class, gay or lesbian visibility call for the same application of the queer gaze as Pérez’s historical backward-gazing or Keeling’s interrogation of the underside of black gay and lesbian representation. Film, in this sense, is a part of a larger visibility project in which every representation is by necessity incomplete, as it always possesses an invisible, uncapturable center – the real – which is waiting to be probed by the queer gaze. It is only when we recognize the ideological structures that surround us as incomplete that we can search for the *objet petit a*, these “impossible” alternatives – a world unregulated by sexuality, for example, or one in which the radicalism imagined in queer theory becomes politically attainable. The queer gaze is the foundation for both this interrogation and re-imagining, demonstrating how anything, even our own formation of the world, can be rewritten when viewed through a queer lens.

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