

The Male Gayze: Queer Cinema and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In feminist psychoanalytical world of cinema studies, the theory of the *male gaze* by Laura Mulvey has informed the way we think about the role of gender and sexuality in the way women are portrayed (and spectated upon) in narrative cinema. This project aims to approach the notion of a male gaze in underground arthouse queer cinema aimed at male gay audiences, dealing with sexually explicit gay storylines. The very notion of the gaze—coined as *gayze*—is a recurring obsession in the storylines (content) and directorial choices (camera movement, formality) of the films chosen, *Un Chant D'amour* and *Pink Narcissus*. In short, the characters in such films are in knowledge of the *gayze*, and react accordingly. The *gayze* is sometimes contested, looked back at. It is sometimes basked in, appreciated, seduced. And at times, the *gayze* itself plays an active role in perverting the embodiments of masculinity and femininity. What I find is that more engagement in discussions about this *gayze*, may in fact be the key to moving gay male subject-related research in queer theory forward.

Chapter 1. Making an Argument for The Gayze

I like to entertain the notion that every research project that was ever written has started out with a story. An anecdote, an experience, a question that came from somewhere. More often, we are not made aware of the chain reactions and thought processes that lead to the production of each research—of every thesis, article, or book. In order to lay down the ground for my project, and as I begin to crystallize what this research is about, I would like to start with my own story about how this particular set of questions that I will be posing came about, and how the obsession with this topic was birthed through both my personal and academic experience.

Visual Fixations

Certain patterns—I have noticed—recur and echo in several different, even if not directly related, gay subcultures. After having brushed with my fair share of different—and drastically diverse—subcultures in my life (between my home city of Beirut in Lebanon and the different cities in Europe over the past year of living in the Netherlands and traveling to different places,) many of my own personal thoughts, prejudices, but also desperate musings that I entertained about gay cultures had crystallized into well-articulated, burning questions. These burning questions always seem to go back to one key notion, one primal, monolithic obsession: *the gaze*.

Vision is king, or at least, such is the way in which I would articulate the importance of the gaze, vision, and visuality in many different subcultures, circles, and happening within gay culture. The elements that my research

always ends up focusing on are those that relate to the sense of sight; in the importance of visuality within different spheres of existence, power relationships, embodiments, and networks of communication. The potency of the gaze, within the framework of my project, is not to be underestimated nor taken for granted, but is to be cautiously approached as a force with a recognizable, almost 'quantifiable' impact.

"Why is it that very time I see a beautiful man I feel self-loathing instead of pleasure?" (Wood, 2008, p. 44), is an opening quote by Mitchell J. Wood in his article titled *The Gay Male Gaze*. The quote belongs to a gay male client from Wood's psychotherapy practice. Woods' article, published in the *Gay & Lesbian Social Services* journal, comprises a study that tries to articulate through feminist, queer, and poststructural sensibilities the different ways in which gay men approach their bodies (in an American context,) and tries to look at the different facets and apparitions of body image disturbances. The article ends with the conclusion that a lot of gay male body image disorders fall under and within the frameworks that a lot of gay cultures still reproduce and hold themselves in. Mainly, the article concludes that more often than not, notions of gender identity and gender relations in gay circles are bred on masculinist, patriarchal, and heterosexist foundations. As such, *masculinity* is held at the highest of esteems in gay cultures; Wood goes on to quote Michelangelo Signorile to explicate the point:

In a culture in which the physical body is held in such high esteem and given such power, body fascism then not only deems those who don't or can't conform to be sexually less desirable, but in the extreme—sometimes dubbed "looksism"—also deems an individual completely worthless as a person, based solely on his exterior. In this sense it is not

unlike racism or sexism or homophobia itself. (Signorile in Wood, 2008, p. 55).

In Woods' (2008) text, Signorile refers to a body-focused subculture within the gay community in the United States, a subculture that thrives on a symbiotic relationship with the industries of advertising, porn, fitness, and nightlife. This heavily body-centered subculture does not represent all gay cultures and all gay men, but its extreme investment in what was referred to as notions of *body fascism* and *looksism* brings forth an almost exaggerated scenario in which the optical, in some gay circles, becomes central. Segregation, prejudice, and power functions all become fixated around the aesthetic of what is seen and what is (worth being) gazed at. A subject's body and his ability to *visually* express masculinity is what decides his recognizability and acceptability (Woods, 2008).

Looking beyond the problematics of the article and Woods' style of writing which might sound universalist and 'objective' at many instances, the data it produces and conclusions which it draws feed into the idea that the *gay gaze* can be thought to reign supreme in many a gay subculture. The gaze can have a powerful and gripping role on a subject's self-worth and self-esteem.

The reason why I pull from the above article is to start off by contemplating the role of *looking* and the importance placed on what is *seen* within different gay circles. Following this, I will set the stage for a discussion on the notion of *visuality*. Although the example of the body-focused subcultures highlights those who stress on modifying, enhancing, or amplifying their bodies in one way or another, I would like to steer the conversation towards the gaze itself and its potency and value for gay

subjectivity and spectatorship. In order to do so, the conversation will need to shift away from the simple set-up of thinking about bodies in public spaces looking at and being looked at one another, and towards thinking about visuality as something embedded within, and functioning through technologies of representation. In order to do so, I will take a moment to investigate the notions of vision and visuality in ways that fall within the framework of this project.

Vision and its Pleasures

In order to secure the notion of visuality within the framework of this project, it is best to start out by understanding its parameters as a discourse and attempting to unpack it as such. The ability to locate and situate the discourse will be crucial as I move on to the case studies and speak about the gaze in their context in the next chapters.

Vision as Male

First, what about vision? Before unpacking visuality, let us speak about the bodily sense, which allows for this whole discussion to take place. Observing the sense of sight, in Western thought, we can see that it had been elevated, consistently, to a point of ennoblement and deification. Even my vocabulary in the previous sentence *shows* (here, it has happened again), how this is the case. “Observing,” “we can see”—the mental *image* of something being seen, portrayed, shown, looked at, perceived (almost) visually, validates how one can understand it and conceive of it. Seeing and believing

are very much intertwined in the way we word our argumentations.

One of the most notable things that quite a few feminist thinkers in recent memory have done is to open up of this troubling and problematic notion of vision as the be-all and end-all of knowledge. Firstly, knowledge itself has had to be pluralized into knowledges, Donna Haraway (1998) speaks quite at length about this in her text *The Persistence of Vision*. Opening up the rather totalitarian and monolithic notion of knowledge and subjecting it to the treatment of *situation*, i.e. positioning it within a rightful context, both spatial, temporal, and embodied, is crucial within the project of breaking up what she refers to as the “god-trick” (p. 192), a trick perpetuated by the privileging of sight as a disembodied, coming-from-nowhere, very masculinist (—and white), *objective* phenomenon cleansed of accountability and fallibility (Haraway, 1998). Haraway’s project—in line with many other feminist thinkers—seeks to humble the sense of sight and bring it down to its embodied state, such that it is no longer an un-located, un-locatable, godly provider of one monolithic truth, fact, or knowledge. In its stead, knowledge becomes a conditional reality whose source is located and can be contested by or juxtaposed next to more and different knowledges.

Even more accurately when it comes to thinking and un/re-thinking vision, Evelyn Fox-Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski (1983) had written a monumental piece titled *The Mind’s Eye* which houses many in’sights’ into the mainly *masculine* way in which vision was elevated to its status within Western thought. For instance, in Plato’s thinking, the eye is a noble, transcendental organ likened to the sun; vision is considered the “keenest of all the senses” (p. 210), and the sense of sight is coupled together with the creation of the soul and intelligence (Fox-Keller & Grontkowski, 1983).

The text goes on to treat the notion of the Cartesian split between mind and body—a treatment very dear to the heart of feminist politics. Descartes' notion of a split up mind and body was a framework for which he was able to perpetuate the Western ideology that privileges the sense of sight and elevates it to a transcendental, divine faculty coupled with intellect, knowledge, and thought. Fox-Keller and Grontkowski explain as follows:

Vision and [light are] frankly recognized by Descartes as analogous to the process of intellection. For example, in speaking of mental intuition, Descartes suggests that “we shall learn how to employ our mental intuition from comparing it with the way in which we employ our eyes.” And later, “understanding apprehends by means of an inborn light” and inner perception must be perfected by the “natural light” of reason. (Fox-Keller & Grontkowski, 1983, p. 214).

What Fox-Keller and Grontkowski try to show in their text (which goes on to speak about Newton and other Western thinkers who have collectively helped shape the discourse on vision in Western philosophy and thought,) is the fallibility of sight and its inability to live up to the god-like status which many thinkers have thought it to be. They make clear that once (female) feminist thinkers can begin to articulate their notions of how vision functions, the issue begins to get complicated, and this complication is what is both interesting and powerful for feminist thought. They mention that:

There is a movement among a number of feminists to sharpen what, until now, had only been a vague sentiment weaving in and out of the major theme. The gist of this sentiment is that the logic of the visual is

a male logic. According to one critic, what is absent from the logic which has dominated the West since the Greeks, and has been covered over by that logic, is woman's desire. "Woman's desire", writes Luce Irigaray, "does not speak the same language as man's desire. In this logic, the prevalence of the gaze ... is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman find pleasure more in touch than in sight ... " In the same vein, Hélène Cixous dismisses Freudian and Lacanian theory of sexual difference for its "strange emphasis on exteriority and the specular. A Voyeur's theory, of course." (Fox-Keller & Grontkowski, 1983, p. 214).

Understanding the realm of the visual, then, as a highly masculine/-ized one, the faculty of sight as one that *men* have privileged—rather naively—in Western thought, is central to my project. So the notion of the voyeur who privileges vision, is a male one—the male obsession with looking, while (as Irigaray mentions above) perhaps females desire and think differently. Although sexual difference theory is where this argument finds itself, I do not wish to particularly discuss or argue its theoretical premises in particular, but rather to explore it as a framework. Thinking about the gendering of the sense of sight as masculine or male is a notion which my research project finds a particularly interesting and revealing—if not a 'useful' point of departure.

The Male Gaze

The discussion around vision as a source of (erotic) pleasure, as a sense that can be used to fuel, rouse, and fulfill eroticized phantasmagoria has more often circulated around *men*. Laura Mulvey's (1975) landmark essay *Visual*

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, (albeit 'old-school' and 'outdated' with respect to the way in which feminist scholarship has progressed and evolved regarding the use of psychoanalysis—Mulvey (1981) herself has provided a reviewed “afterthought”¹ years later) does serve as a sort of backbone to my research project in its very *ambition* to think about the male spectator, and thus inextricably, the male gaze vis-à-vis film. Building on the feminist reasoning I relied on above that vision/sight had developed as a highly masculine/-ized discourse in Western thought, I (and Mulvey) curiously explore that very masculinity of vision, as experienced by male spectators/voyeurs. However, herein lies the twist for my project—it is the fact that the body which gazes, and the body which is being gazed at are both in fact *male*. The spectator (male) spectates at a body, which in many ways is similar to *his own*. The object of desire does not belong to the opposite sex—it is not an “other” sex, it is in fact the same one. The subject and object are eerily similar.

In Mulvey's (1975) essay, Man is the bearer of the look, while Woman is the image. One of the driving forces behind the entire dynamic between the gazer (man) and the gazed-at (woman) in Mulvey's interpretation is the—from a traditionally Freudian/Lacanian perspective—“lack,” the woman's lack of a penis vis-à-vis the man's castration anxiety. Under the phallogentric regime whereby the phallus is in many ways the only thing to be sought after, the female object *bears* the weight of the gaze and bears the weight of

¹ Mulvey's 1981 text, *Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by Duel in the Sun* was written in hopes of tying up loose ends and addressing issues that had been disregarded in 1975's *Visual Pleasure*, with regards to thinking about a(n active) female audience within the psychoanalytical discussion around the erotic/-visual functions of cinema. *Conveniently*, (dare I use such a word?) my project will be focused solely on *men*: men who look at men, who gaze at men; men who consume visuals of men made by men (for primarily, if I may assume, male audiences). Since my project will deal with these gay relationships, the complication of “where does a female spectator fit into all of this” will be shelved for the other complication of “where does a *male* fit into the *gazed-at-ness*” within gay film, which will be the topic of forthcoming chapters.

meaning—she is (passively) imbued with meaning and signification and *not* (actively) *the maker of it*. The man's main mission (through *trapping* her within his gaze, articulating her body within the cinematic frame which he can control) is to make sense of this 'lacking' body in whatever way he can, as a way of perhaps taming and claiming it (1975).

Although I will interweave Mulvey's (1975) musings on the male gaze and on visual pleasure throughout the upcoming chapters as I analyze gay films, I will lay down the grounds for the notion of the male gaze so that it is clear what is being dealt with. In order to make the distinction between Mulvey's (heterosexual) gaze and my (homosexual—male-on-male) gaze, I will refer to mine as the *gayze* from now on every time I am to refer to a (gay) male spectator gazing upon a male body.

The trajectory of Mulvey's (1975) gaze is laid out intricately in her essay. In many ways, cinema—she posits—is a site of many a contradiction when we are thinking about the gaze. Firstly, cinema does function within a polarizing regime split between scopophilia and narcissism. Narrative cinema is scopophilic in the sense that it embodies in many ways the height of what she refers to as visual pleasure (scopophilia being literally, pleasure derived from looking). Alternatively, it is narcissistic in the sense that through its formal attempt to duplicate reality, as well as its usage of mainly male protagonists (her analysis mainly falls within commercial/Hollywood narrative films which follow more or less a similar formula where the protagonist is male), it creates a reality that the male onlooker *identifies* with.

To get a more panoramic grip on these notions first we should look into one of the main pillars behind Mulvey's analysis: the Lacanian *mirror*

stage. The mirror stage, in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, is the stage during which a child sees itself for the very first time in a mirror, as such:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when children's physical ambitions outstrip their motor capacity, with the result that their recognition of themselves is joyous in that they imagine their mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future. This mirror moment predates language for the child (Mulvey, p. 61, 1975).

This mirror stage is crucial in the constitution of the ego, but also the key lies in the word “misrecognition” as well. What happens in this particular moment is not only the self-awareness of the body and its ability learn new things about itself—and to even move itself in new ways it never thought possible before as per Lacan’s *Some Reflections on the Ego* (1951)—but also the beginning of what is known as the *ego ideal*. This is where the notion of misrecognition comes in: it is but a (false?) recognition of an idealized, greater sense of self, valorized and revered, which the subject might and will—within this theoretical reasoning—spend the rest of its life trying to match up with. It is a spectral sense of idealization that haunts the ego. Through cinema, the functionings of the ego ideal are quite clear and they manifest in different ways:

Star - meta-character - character - diegetic public - real public - spectator: a structure of mirrors within mirrors, the structure of an onion skin which, in its functioning, is not without a resemblance to the situation of the individual him-or herself, particularly in the experience of nostalgia where I contemplate with delectation the person that I was, that I believed I was, that I could have been, that I am no more, that maybe I never was, and yet with whom I love to identify. All are figures relegated to the past, of the Ego Ideal that Freud defined as the "substitute for the lost narcissism of childhood." But this loss is necessary, this difference is necessary, and this renewed narcissism is necessary for identification (always partial) to take place in relation to this other myself (Vernet, 1989, p. 58).

This re-introjected ideal ego is very important, Mulvey (1975) believes, when articulating the male gaze in narrative cinema, that the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist of the film—the movie star and film character is the unattainable ego ideal in many ways—and it is *through* him that the spectator will achieve the ability to, in this case, make sense of the female character in the film.

It is thus through understanding that Mulvey's theory is grounded in the notion of identification (between male spectator and protagonist) which is traceable to the ego ideal and mirror stage, that we can then unpack the different methods in which the spectator functions. So to get back to scopophilia versus narcissism, the two are made out to be polarizing regimes in Mulvey. Scopophilia entails not only the love of looking-at but also the pleasure derived from using another person as "an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (p.

62). It entails a separation between the seer and the object being seen, meaning distance has to exist—there is a clear spectator and object-of-spectation. Moreover, scopophilia is associated with sexual instincts and instinctual drives. On the other hand, narcissism functions differently; it entails a form of close identification with the image seen. The on-looking ego identifies with the object that is being seen—“through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 62). Narcissism, also, is associated with the libido and self-preservation. Surely enough, in Mulvey's analysis, pleasure functions differently between these two—but she grounds both in one same thing: idealization.

In my personal analysis, I find that when we try to translate this theory towards the gayze, and thus think about the spectator as male and the subject of spectatorship as male, things might get a bit more complicated when categorizing the types of gayzing that can be done. Although Mulvey did create a separation between *from-afar* scopophilia and the *too-close-for-comfort* narcissism, I tinker with the speculation that both types of dynamics are much more similar than we might think. Firstly, both function within the framework of an ego ideal—they both attempt to “make a mockery of empirical objectivity” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 62) by rooting themselves in eroticized phantasmagoria. This fantasy world is motivated by the unattainable ideal, one, which exists outside of empirical reality. Secondly, my mission is to open up the scenario in which male-gayzes-at-male. No matter what approach the spectator has to the object of desire, the male body being gayzed at *does not* operate

within the realm of sexual difference. Both a sense of fetishization *and* identification, thus, can be found in the different functions of the gaze.

The Fetishizing Gaze?

To elaborate, here is an opening to reference the notion of the fetish. The fetish in many ways can act as the common ground that unifies the different practices of looking. The fetish—object being gazed at—is more often considered a substitute for a lack. In a heterosexual setup, the fetishized object (feminine) is gazed at by a (male) subject, thus fetishism is highly predicated upon the practices of *disavowing* sexual difference in a Freudian sense (Williams, 2000). However, in a *homosexual* context, the notion of the fetish can become much more layered. When Williams (2000) speaks on the films of Almodóvar, he begins by highlighting this liberation from the heterosexual definition of the fetish unto new territory whereby fetishism is strongly linked to the ego ideal, which had been mentioned earlier, but also whose disavowal thus “negotiates the often slippery turf between self and object of desire” (p. 28). The dual-function of the gaze thus (whether scopophilic or narcissistic) is complicated when we discuss the gayze—the fetishized object is at once a site of desire but a site of identification. Disavowal takes on a whole new meaning whereby gay fetishism:

...[functions] as a means of disavowing not sexual difference, but rather the gap between one's perception of self and the ego ideal, which is at once object and subject of desire. The fetish may substitute for a perceived lack of beauty in the subject whose ego ideal is also object of desire. The process negotiates between

physical beauty and the over-inscription of value onto an object which substitutes for it (Williams, 2000, p. 30).

It is precisely this slippery slope between what is desired and what is considered the ego ideal—a relentless and perhaps exhausting tug of war between object of desire and the subject's own idealization—which Williams explores when speaking about Almodóvar's films. We can complicate the idea of the fetish for it to no longer be just an object bearing inscriptions endowed on it by the male onlooker. Within the traditional, heterosexual setup, fetishism does function through the disavowal of sexual difference, but it is through the setup of the gayze that the sexual 'sameness' or 'indifference' requires a different type of disavowal, as mentioned above by Williams.

This is precisely why I find it very important to have highlighted the 'maleness' of vision (visual discourse) in the previous part of this chapter. It is because within the very male setup of the gayze, the functions of looking prove even more significant. In Mulvey's heterosexual scenario, the scopophilic gaze functions in a way to capture the (oh so mysterious and castrating) woman on screen and make sense of her (to *tame* her, so to speak, as a way of relieving anxiety), while narcissistically identifying with the male surrogates onscreen. In the project of the gayze, *looking* is not a matter of decrypting a body of the opposite sex (—transforming the woman's body into a phallus through scopophilia) and identifying with a(n idealized) male protagonist, it is rooted in the realms of *desire* and *identity* at once.

Visuality and its Inversion

This conflict between object of identification vs. object of desire will be addressed in more depth in the coming chapters, however I would like to come close to closing this one by going back to the concept of visuality as a way to come full circle in regards to laying the grounds for the case studies and analyses to come.

So what, then, *is visuality*? In his article *On Visuality*, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006) gives a lengthy and detailed insight into the history of the word, its implications, and the discourses which birthed it—and which it systematically birthed. Citing the feminist project of reducing (/abolishing) the nature/culture divide, Mirzoeff relies on Hal Foster's (1988) intervention into the vision/visuality dichotomy in order to clarify the relationship between the two. The 'physicality' of vision versus the 'sociality' of visuality does not necessarily mean that the two are independent of one another, where there might be a difference between the two terms, Foster posits that:

the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual . . .
a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able,
allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen
therein. (Foster in Mirzoeff, 2005)

The genesis, as a matter of fact, of the term *visuality* conceals the very 'flaw' (which I here articulate as such), which Foster points out above. It is more often about what we see but also *how* we see, and how/what we are made to/allowed to see. It is always circumstantial and always exists within a frame. Although the god-trick of vision had already been abolished when I

had quoted Haraway's (1998) critique of the visual earlier, the god-trick of visuality (if any) needs to also be sorted out when we explore the origin of the word.

Mirzoeff cites Thomas Carlyle as the historian responsible for coining the term visuality. The origin of the word, Mirzoeff mentions, was an imperialistic one. Carlyle's main project was about utilizing the notion of visuality in order to paint a picture of historic happenings and progressions. What becomes evident shortly after—keeping in mind Carlyle's racist, colonial, superior, and chauvinistic sensibilities—was that visuality depended largely on what was known as Heroism. The Hero is he who writes history, he who allows, at the end of the day, for whatever picture of history to reign supreme. The Hero, in his ability to preserve and perpetuate proper nationalist masculinity, is a huge part of—or even the sole keeper of—visuality (2006). This is to show that not only is the discourse around vision a (hetero-)masculinist one, but that around visuality as well—there is a (hetero-)maleness around what is conquered and what is seen (2006).

I bring this up because not only do I want to put forward the historicity of the word 'visuality' and hence the discourses around it, but because I would like to contrast it with Mirzoeff's suggestion regarding the possible *inversion* of visuality. It is once we think about these discourses as questionable and malleable constructions that we may allow ourselves to queer² them and understand that different people and different events can steer them in different directions.

² I use the verb "queer" as a way to think about subverting hegemonic(-ally constructed) notions of certain discourses. In terms of visuality, *queering* it would entail breaking down the hetero-patriarchal underlyings of the word and to begin looking at it within a homosexual (albeit still 'masculine' in some ways, and certainly still male) paradigm.

If Carlyle's visuality was heroic and imperial (and its very sense of virility threatened greatly as Mirzoeff (2006) points out by subversive possibilities such as that of abolishing slavery), then it is flaky and shakable. This is why the practice of looking at and thinking about queer visuals/visual art—and particularly, gay film—is an undertaking I consider of great importance; solely for the sheer power of images. With that said, inverse visuality, Mirzoeff describes:

... is any moment of visual experience in which the subjectivity of the viewer is called into question by the density or opacity of what he or she sees. These flickering, excessive, hyperreal, overlaid, pixelated, disjunctive and distracting moments are spectral dust in the eyes of visuality that cause it to blink and become momentarily unsighted (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 70).

The very 'nature' of gay films (i.e. their display of homosexuality, queerness, and potentially subversive visual content) thus, harbors this very potential. Although a gay audience might be familiar with the *queer* sensibility of the visuals in the film—or they might not be—it is the very notion that these visuals differ from what is within the hegemonic canon (think commercial films, Hollywood, mainstream visuals, etc.), which allows for the radical possibility of this 'inversion.'

In this spirit, and to illustrate the practice of such inversion, Mirzoeff (2006) borrows from the story of Oscar Wilde. Citing Wilde's behavior of curating his visual appearance, Mirzoeff explores how the writer used image in such a way that a persona was created; a whole sect of 'Dandyism' was birthed, marking him and his followers. For instance, Wilde consistently wore

a green carnation—which went on to become part of the evidence used against him at his trials later in life—curating his own visual story and creating his version of a visual experience. Wilde, thus, became an anti-Carlylian-Hero, an “inverted Hero,” Mirzoeff explains, who “dispersed radiance rather than being the object of clear visibility and paradoxically became hard to see” (p. 72, 2006). It is a form of trickery; not smoke and mirrors, but an overload of the reigning discourse and the conventional system, which causes a glitch or a malfunction in the big machine. *That* is the power of the visual.

Finally, Why The Gayze?

I will end this chapter by addressing the notions of gay subjectivity and spectatorship (another way of addressing the coined *gayze*, with all of the potential and pressing problematics which it—as a term and a project—encompasses) rather briefly, as well as defining the premises of the ga(y)ze within this framework.

Functioning from an intersectional standpoint is normally of great, if not indispensable, value for a feminist project. Taking into consideration the myriad of class-related, racial, sexual, gendered, cultural (the list goes on) nuances which can mark drastic differences between two or more subjects which belong to a seemingly singular category (let’s say, male homosexuality). With that said, I would like to pull from Brett Farmer’s (2000) book *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* in order to settle any questions circling the problematic potential within the notion of a

gay spectator, or a gay subject(ivity) which can be theorized when speaking about gay films.

But first—whose gayze is addressed in this project? “Mulvey observes that there are three sets of looks involved in cinema: (1) the camera's look at the pro-filmic reality, (2) the audience's look at the final film product, and (3) the characters' looks at each other” mentions Chadhuri (2005). Indeed, my project will deal with similar categorizations of the gayze: the category of the camera's frame—what is seen and perhaps what is not seen through the lens—the category of the audience (psychoanalytically and perhaps affectively) creating relationships with the image, and finally, the gayzes between the characters within the films (as well as their uses of the gayze at different moments for different purposes).

However, in going back to the notion of a gay spectator (whether the spectator is the audience member or the character within the film gayzing at another character), Farmer (2000) articulates how potentially problematic it could be to even entertain such a notion. He mentions that many a feminist thinker, such as Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, discredit the very undertaking of thinking about a gay spectator and a gay subjectivity. They not only think of it as anti-intersectional, but also reductive, as though ‘whom I sleep with’ can influence the way I experience cinema—solely based on sexuality. Of course, many will reject and dismiss such a project as “essentialist”:

Gayness or homosexuality is, however, much more than just a question of “who you sleep with.” In a culture in which, as Foucault has famously demonstrated, sexuality is deployed as the privileged locus of individual truth and knowledge, homosexuality has assumed a veritable

excess of social significances, an ever expanding range of meanings and effects that exceed those of simple sexual acts (Farmer, 2000, p. 6).

Foucault (1994) has demonstrated this at different occasions when speaking about homosexuality. Homosexual desire for most part would be not exclusive to whom one wants to sleep with, but more about whom one wants to create relationships and friendships with. It is not only that, but homosexuality, per Farmer, has assumed a veritable excess of social significances, an ever expanding range of meanings and effects that exceed those of simple sexual acts" (p.6), whereby he mentions that to identify as gay is not only to point out whom one is sexually attracted to, but to also situate oneself in a network of sociodiscursive relations (2000).

It is within these frameworks that it is possible to speak about gay (and obviously Western/-ized) spectatorships or subjectivities in this project. Interestingly enough, as well, Farmer (2000) mentions that the use of the term subjectivity as opposed to identity is not without thought: for such a choice pays tribute to the complexity and the instability of different subjects' experiences, a conscious choice which keeps in mind the "complicated field of subjective articulation that is provisional and shifting" (p. 7) because:

The term subjectivity encompasses a much broader definitional sweep than identity, taking in the full range of subjective articulations across the social, the cultural, and the psychic. As Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis argue, the term subjectivity "suggests a whole range of determinations (social, political, linguistic, ideological, psychological) that intersect to define it. Refusing the notion of self as a stable entity, . . . subject[ivity] implies a process of

construction by signifying practices that are both unconscious and culturally specific” (Farmer, 2000, p. 7).

Although I will not take on the task of particularly arguing for (or even discussing or referring extensively to) subjectivity per se, this particular argument is useful to my project for the sole purpose of constructing the framework in which I will operate whereby I—and the reader—can be aware of the problematics and potential shortcomings (and critiques), but to keep the research focused within these scaffoldings.

Final Thoughts

So if vision and visuality have been theorized extensively as (admittedly but unforgivably?) heterosexual and masculine in many ways, and if ‘queering’ them in a gay context (albeit, a male one) can help bring more questions into light regarding gay male subjectivity (and its fascination with vision), then this is the purpose of the rest of this thesis. For the coming two chapters I will be visually breaking down two monumental gay films—*Un Chant D’Amour* (1950) by Jean Genet (French) and *Pink Narcissus* (1971) by Jim Bidgood (American)—in light of the frameworks I have outlined within this chapter. I will be building up these theories more and more as I progress, depending on the visuals and storylines that these films encompass.

So, in this extremely *masculine* business of conceptualizing the gayze, which I have taken on—we will find that the eye partakes in a gluttonous feast. As it gazes on, what are the insights and questions that we will find?

Chapter 2. What Does A Gay Love Song Look Like?

Criminal Desire and the Silent Love Song

In this chapter, I will be discussing French playwright and novelist Jean Genet's 1950 silent film *Un Chant D'Amour*³. What is striking about this particular film is not only the fact that it is Genet's *only* cinematic work, but the fact that he had consciously decided to make the film silent. Prolific gay writer and novelist Edmund White, who has chronicled the life and work of Jean Genet, says "[if] Genet chose to make his one and only film silent, that is consistent with his desire to reinvent himself over and over again," (White, 2002). White credits Genet's artistic choice to his particular desire of always creating work that is drastically different from what he had done before, and in a style that is highly unexpected, because he loathed the idea of ever repeating himself.

My particular take on this issue is that—especially since this is Genet's only film, Genet the "silver-tongued novelist" and "master of words" as per White (2002)—the writer-director potentially wanted to emphasize what is seen in this film rather than what is said. Instead of painting literary or poetic images, Genet gets a chance to paint visual ones on celluloid. Images that can be screened and viewed, *feasted on* by the eye and not the ear. Not only is that the case, but the very subject matter of the film itself deals passionately with the subject of *looking*. *Chant* revolves around the story of two male prisoners—a younger French man and older Algerian one. To avoid exhausting redundancy I will give the nameless characters names which I will refer to

³ *Un Chant D'Amour* translates to 'A Love Song' or 'A Song of Love.'

them by from here on out—we will refer to the young French prisoner as Marc and the older Algerian prisoner as Sam.

In the film, a prison guard walks down the hall of prison chambers, voyeuristically taking a peek at what is happening within each cell. While he does catch sight of several very sexually charged male bodies either dancing or masturbating in their rather frustrating states of confinement, he is enthralled by the story of Marc and Sam, whose cells are adjacent to one another. Lusting for one another yet separated by a concrete wall, Marc and Sam communicate by smoking a cigarette and blowing the smoke into each others' mouths through a thin straw they lodge in a small pin-sized tunnel through the wall that separates them. They are seen as fantasizing about one another, touching their own bodies, masturbating, caressing themselves. While the guard is curious and stimulated by the sight, a surge of anger gets the best of him; he enters Sam's room and whips him with his belt. After this moment, two rather sensual and romantic sequences are montaged: a fantasy sequence where Sam and Marc run around an open field and cuddle on the grass, and another more surreal sequence where two (anonymous) naked male bodies embrace and caress one another in a rather painterly and artistic edit. After the fantasy scene, the guard makes a drastic decision—he whips out his gun and slowly points it towards Sam's mouth. In a rather sexualized sequence, very clearly depicting the gun-in-mouth visual as some form of blowjob or another, the guard supposedly kills Sam, and the unsung love song remains unsung.

Discipline, Rebellion

The body in *Chant* is first and foremost under heavy surveillance from several fronts. The prisoners are being scrutinized and looked at by the guard, the camera lens, and naturally, the viewers. When it comes to the act of *looking* and *ga(y)zing*, this film seems to be self-reflexive to the point of being overtly literal.

This is an opportunity to explore the thought of the gaze as a tool of discipline in Genet's film. The trapped (and highly gay; highly aroused, highly sexualized) bodies are perfect targets for the guard's gaze. In fact, the setup of the whole scenario makes it look very much as though they are there for his sole visual pleasure—he peeks in with a curious eye, his facial expressions those of intrigue, if not arousal.

But as a prison guard, his role would be to watch over the prisoners and make sure that they are obedient, docile, and not causing any trouble—which cannot be further from the actuality of Genet's scenario. Theoretically, vision can be used as a weapon of discipline. To explain, I will reflect a little bit on Michel Foucault's (1975) take on the role of (visual) surveillance in the internalization of discipline within bodies.

To crystallize this notion, Foucault uses the example of the theoretical Panopticon. The panopticon is a prison design that can be described as follows:

We know the principle on which [the panopticon] was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole

width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy (Foucault, 1975, p. 200).

The main idea behind this structure is to use vision—or better yet, the very *notion* of vision—in order to discipline bodies. Discipline, as per Foucault, is rather a technology of power. Discipline, then, is an instrument that functions as one of power's many minions, or surrogates, so to speak; it is a way to enforce upon and internalize power within subjects. Internalization in this case is crucial; one of the very special things about discipline is that it does not *only* come from without, but also rather functions from and within subjects. There, then, is no better metaphor (and real life structure) like that of the panopticon to explore the notion and functions of discipline. In Foucault's words, "the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1975, p. 201).⁴

In this particular film, the prisoners are rather 'cheeky' in the face of the system. There seems to be no sense of discipline, but what can be interpreted as a form of contempt for power and control. In one of the scenes where the guard is spying on the inmates, one of the prisoners—masturbating in his cell—looks (as if) towards the guard with a smirk, and continues doing what

⁴ Granted that in Genet's film the inmates are not in a panopticon, I use this metaphor symbolically. Although they do not exist in a physical panopticon—but a regular prison—the setup of the space is panoptical insofar that they are the subjects under the prison guard's surveilling gaze, within a disciplining institution that is, most likely holding them captive as a way to punish their homosexuality.

he is doing. This particular moment, I find, is quite important because it stands as exemplary of what the main function/trajectory of the ga(y)ze in this film is about. Simply put, it is very much centered around the act of (either) 'looking back' and/or being unbothered by—if not exhibitionistically content with—being the subject of a gayze; whether it belongs to the prison guard or the camera itself.



In this scene, the guard looks in on a prisoner who masturbates. The inmate looks back at the guard with confidence and arousal. Ultimately, the inmate is not fazed or shaken by the idea of being watched.

The guard's eye and the camera's eye, in my personal analysis of the film, can be and are in many ways intermingled. They both stand for very similar voyeuristic acts of looking in on. To go back to the example of the masturbating inmate—which as I mentioned is a moment that encapsulates the sensibilities of the whole film with regards to the dynamics of gayzing and being gayzed at—the first function of the gayze that can be noticed in this film is that it, actually, is not designed to be a one-way street.

Mulvey's gaze—built around narrative, heterosexual storylines—mainly sought to capture and control the female subject, to trap, fragment, and articulate her body in such a way that the male protagonist, the male camera lens and the male audience member could all decipher her. In order to

relinquish castration anxiety, this male gaze thus owns the woman's body, constructs and deconstructs it as it pleases. The body is fetishized, as mentioned before, the notion of fetishism does go hand-in-hand with the presence of an absence (sexual difference, the woman's castrated body, her *lack* of phallus) (Chadhuri, 2005). This very model, I suggest, *strips* the female body of agency. In spite of many feminist rewritings and criticisms of Mulvey's theory, and even her revision of it, all of which explore the female spectator's agency (and potentially the agency of the female performer and/or character in the film), I do believe that the very theory, at its essence, does rely on a fantasy of 'whisking away' any 'agency' (if there is such a thing, but for the sake of the particular scope and maybe even narrowness of this particular argument I will allow for such a reductive usage of the concept of 'agency') as it is 'captured' within the confines of the male phantasy that wishes to decode it. The gaze is purely voyeuristic, of course, but what about the subject, the female body? It is basically performing with a dreamt-up, scripted, coerced exhibitionism whose origin is rather complex and contested. So, my (self-answering) question is, when the body is held hostage within the gaze of the (male) camera and the (male) spectator, can we really speak of exhibitionism or simply a forced entrapment and fetishism? Is it exhibitionism or the *exhibition-of*?

My main thoughts here are that, when Mulvey speaks of the gaze, the female body is *imagined* as exhibitionistic, but I wonder to what extent it is. One of the main functions of Mulvey's gaze, as I have mentioned, is to trap, to contain. This where I find that the intervention or commentary made by Genet's *Chant*, which can be encapsulated by that scene of the prison inmate staring back and masturbating while the guard watches, in fact *steers in the*

opposite direction from how the very formula and idea of the gaze is constructed. Hence, a more nuanced understanding of the gaze. Instead of captivity, we can speak of liberation; perhaps the gaze, through entrapment, attempts to *set free*.

This, of course, can be thought of as ironic. How can we speak of liberation when the film is set in a prison? Not only is the setting—and the whole panoptical notion of discipline and surveillance—reason enough to think about ‘entrapment,’ but *masculinity* imposes control as well.

The guard’s masculinity is signified by many an element; his role as surveyor, his gun, his whipping belt, but ultimately; his obsession with looking. Not only does he *look*, but he practices his masculinity through extrapolating himself by using his gaze as a way to spy on and regulate. I will draw on Steve Neale’s (1983) thoughts on masculinity and the spectacle to pick apart this notion further. To build up to this point, I will start with the moment when speaking on identification (normally between the audience member and the male body onscreen), where he relies on Ellis to explicate that:

Cinematic identification involves two different tendencies. First there is that of dreaming and phantasy that involve the multiple and contradictory tendencies within the construction of the individual. Second there is the experience of narcissistic identification with the image of a human figure perceived as other. (Ellis, 1982, p. 43 in Neale, 1983, p. 10)

Continued;

Identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration (Ellis, 1982, p. 43 in Neale, 1983, p. 10).

The notion of the self is very crucial to the concept of narcissistic identification. The spectator invests himself or even better explained, his *self*, in the character(s) he is identifying with. To turn this around slightly and steer it away from speculating about the audience's identifications with the characters or the dynamics in *Chant*, I would like to overlay these notions of identifications on the guard himself in order to build my argument about the role of his gaze in relation to discipline and masculinity in the film. The guard, undoubtedly is, a spectator himself. His eye serves as an equivalent (most of the time) to the eye of the camera, and the eye of the camera is what allows for the audience members to *see*, full stop. Therefore, in many ways, the guard is the gatekeeper for what the audience members can and cannot see in the film. We—as spectators—are in fact living out (or made to live out) the identifications and conflicts that he goes through.

Not only does the guard use his ga(y)ze⁵ to survey and discipline, but in fact he inevitably narcissistically identifies with the characters, even if for brief moments. “Inasmuch as films *do* involve gender identification, and

⁵ Although it is highly cringe-worthy to use “him” and “himself,” especially in a gender studies thesis out of all places, I would just like to make it clear—although it probably already is by now—that my arguments and speculations are centered around male-identifying characters, audiences, and actors, thus for the sake of clarity, brevity, and practicality, I will use male pronouns as such rather liberally.

⁶ Using the variation ga(y)ze is mostly due to the fact that there are moments when I refer to the gayze but I also mean the *gaze* as a gaze before it is a gay one, meaning, the guard's actual physical faculty of gazing (looking, surveying) but/and also his male-on-male gayze which, full of meaning and significance, I try to then make sense of.

inasmuch as current ideologies of masculinity involve so centrally notions and attitudes to do with aggression, power, and control, it seems to me that narcissism and narcissistic identification may be especially significant” (p. 10) mentions Neale (1983). This is a key moment in terms of thinking about the function of the guard, “[narcissism] and narcissistic identification both involve phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery, and control” (1983, p. 11), he echoes again. This exposes a rather webby and layered relationship between many different factors, which I have already been observing in the guard. His masculinity is both signified and imposed by his role as surveyor: he is omnipotent, ever-present; he controls and looks over the prison. However, just as in Neale (and Mulvey), a male audience member can almost not but be thought of as (*because* of his masculinity’s desire of omnipotence and control) an narcissistically identifying subject. It can be thought of, then, that it is actually *part* of the observer’s narcissistic and controlling masculinity to *identify*. Identification—read: narcissistic identification—somehow comes with the package of this all-seeing masculinity that covets and chases after *mastery* and *control*. It is, in this argument, and in terms of the guard in the film and the articulation of his masculinity, an indivisible component of the whole. However, at this point I need to re-address the bodies framed by and subjected to the guard-cum-camera gaze.

Mastery and Insolence: Fantasy in relation to the gayze and body in question

The word fantasy is usually understood as 'an imagined scene', with the associated meanings of: 'fabulous; fancy (now a separate meaning); imagination, mental image; love, whim; caprice; fantasia; preoccupation with thoughts associated with unattainable desires.' The word derives through Latin from the

⁷ May sound essentializing as though there is a natural, integral, or innate 'function' or 'tendency' of masculinity towards one thing or the other, however my analysis tries to work within the psychoanalytical frameworks I am using, not without moments of questioning such as this one.

Greek term meaning to 'make visible'. However, rather than a notion of revelation, making visible what we would not otherwise be able to see - as with a microscope allowing us to see bacteria etc. invisible to the 'naked' eye - fantasy has come to mean the making visible, the making present, of what isn't there, of what can never *directly* be seen (Cowie, 1997, p. 127).

I would like to begin slowly introducing, in light of the analysis above (of which this is but a continuation), the notion of fantasy. So far I have been speaking about the masculine, disciplining gayze (of the guard and the camera) in the film and its role in narcissism and narcissistic identification, as well as the way in which bodies in *Chant* react to this gayze and exist within its premises and frames. In the dynamics between the gayzer and the gayzed-at in this film, what I have been able to observe simply and exclusively by thinking about the very character of the guard, his function, his relationship to the inmates, as *well* as a scene such as the one where he gayzes in on the inmates who are found dancing, masturbating, or even gayzing-back, it is clear what is the preliminary paradigm of the gazye that can be extracted from this setup.

The gayze, here, falls on a body that *speaks back*. It is not enough only to think about where and how the eye travels when we are speaking about the gayze—or any gaze for that matter—because since we are attempting to understand a circumstantial aesthetic discourse, we need to always take into consideration contexts and relationships. In other words, the gayze is not only about the guard and how his eye, or the camera's eye, fragments and articulates visible on-screen reality, but it is inextricably linked to *what* is seen. Meaning, I can argue for the presence of a nonlinear and thus non-chronological relationship between the act of seeing and the actuality of what is performed and shown on screen. The two fashion and produce one another.

This can be crystallized and put in perspective through the introduction of the notion of fantasy in film analysis. For this analysis I would also like to refer to one of the final scenes in the film which I had described earlier, which happens after the guard whips Sam with his belt, and right before he takes out his gun.



In one of the final scenes, before the guard takes out his gun to kill Sam, a sequence of artistically shot, choreographed men interacting in dancerly, erotic, and intimate shots is flashed. This sequence suggests the guard's inner fantasies of achieving male-on-male, gay intimacy. It is this sequence which softens him before driving him back to anger, whereby he sticks the gun in Sam's mouth.

As the guard stares at Sam, who is exhausted and in pain from the whipping, we see two montages happening in parallel. One is Sam's (I assume), in which Sam imagines being outdoors and intimate with Marc. The other montage is the guard's fantasy (again, this is my interpretation), in which two men perform a rather romantic, intimate, and erotic scene. They touch one another, kiss, touch each others' genitals, exchange a cigarette; their bodies intersect in a series of artistic, theatrical shots.

Coupling this sequence with the above-described function of the guard's gayze as supervisor or master—attempting to capture the prisoners' bodies—I cannot but think about the role of fantasy within the guard's gayze. If we revert to Neale's (1983) use of Ellis to explain the types of cinematic

identification, we are confronted with the fact that cinematic identification comes with two different tendencies; besides the narcissistic one, there is that which encapsulates the realm of dreams and phantasy^s. Neale uses and synthesizes Ellis' arguments in order to bring to light one of his main objectives while speaking on masculinity and identification in cinema, which is to complicate the relationship between spectator and cinematic subject. The very narcissistic identifications, can be concluded from the text, *involve phantastic(ally narcissistic) identifications* as well; the phantasy of living out the greater-than-life, the perfect, the unattainable ideal ego (1983).

Which means that in many ways than one, fantasy and its realms are fundamentally intertwined with the very process of identification. As a matter of fact, identification wears many different cloaks, narcissism is one, and fantasy is another. On the use of fantasy theory in film, I will use a rather lengthy but highly informative quote by Barbara Creed (1998), who writes:

The concept of a more mobile gaze was explored by Elizabeth Cowie in her article 'Fantasia' (1997), in which she drew on Laplanche and Pontalis's influential essay of 1964, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality'. Laplanche and Pontalis established three original fantasies - original in that each fantasy explains an aspect of the 'origin' of the subject. The 'primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, the origin and upsurge of sexuality; fantasies of castration, the origin of the difference between the sexes' (1964/1986:19). These fantasies - entertained by the child – explain or provide answers to three crucial questions: Who am I? 'Why do I desire?' Why am I different?' The

^s In Neale and Ellis, phantasy is spelled as such yet in other sources I will be drawing from (Bersani, Cowie), it is spelled with an f. In order to avoid going too much into the variations of the word and what it can mean in different contexts and spellings, I will use both versions interchangeably for the sake of my project, given that all the writers use the word to speak psychoanalytically about art, aesthetics, and above all, cinema.

concept of primal fantasies is also much more fluid than the notion of fantasy permitted by apparatus theory, which inevitably and mechanistically returns to the Oedipal fantasy. The primal fantasies run through the individual's waking and sleeping life, through conscious and unconscious desires. Laplanche and Pontalis also argued that fantasy is a staging of desire, a form of *mise-en-scène*. Further, the position of the subject is not static in that positions of sexual identification are not fixed. The subject engaged in the activity of fantasizing can adopt multiple positions, identifying across gender, time, and space. Cowie argued that the importance of fantasy as a setting, a scene, is crucial because it enables film to be viewed as fantasy, as representing the *mise-en-scène* of desire. Similarly, the film spectator is free to assume mobile, shifting modes of identification [...] (Creed, 1998, p. 13).

The mobility of the gaze in fantasy theory opens up the potential for different modes of identification (modes that can potentially shift between the conscious and unconscious or between primal and secondary fantasy.) In this film in particular, the gaze is highly preoccupied with fantasy—in fact, fantasy is not that which is hidden away or woven into the subliminal fabric of the story, it is portrayed rather self-reflexively, if we take into consideration, as one example, the scene described above where the guard (and Sam, both) fantasize/s about different things towards the end of the film. It can be argued also, in my particular analysis, that even the guard's gaze, which explicitly and indulgently feasts on the bodies of the prisoners during the film, is tinged with fantasy the entire time. The bodies are constantly performing erotic and fantastical acts for the guard's eye; it is as though this gaze dreams up everything it sees if not all of it—are the

characters in the film merely reflections of the eye's fantasy, or is the eye projecting its fantasies in a way to tame these bodies and ensure that it can contain, decipher, and claim ownership over them?

But herein lies the twist when it comes to the notion of fantasy. Fantasy is, according to Cowie (1997)—drawing on Lacanian and Freudian thought—almost never really about the object of desire itself. It is mostly, if not exclusively, about the act of desiring itself. Not only does Lacan mention that “desire is unsatisfiable” (p. 133), but Freud also, Cowie notes, mentions that “there is something within the nature of sexuality which is resistant to satisfaction” (p. 133). Of course, as an in-text ‘footnote’ I would like to point out the essentialism behind a statement like Freud’s, and find that I only agree with his statements at times on account of the fact that other thinkers and theorists, like Lacan, Laplanche and Pontalis, and eventually people like Cowie, have worked to evolve, crystallize and refine some of the revealing gems that he had proposed. So although there is a problematic undertone behind mentioning anything about the *nature* of sexuality, I believe that what Freud points to in this statement is a poetic, somewhat dramatized way of saying what Lacan and Cowie try to explain about fantasy, that the main focus does not go towards satisfying the fantasy, but rather to keep feeding the insatiable desire *to desire* rather than to attain. Cowie draws from George Zavitzianos (1982) to clarify this relationship as well:

In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it ... As a result, the subject,

although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a de-subjectivised form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question (Zavitzianos, 1982 in Cowie, 1997, p. 133).

This explication of fantasy is very much observable in the guard's gaze throughout the film. The main object(s) of desire—be that the bodies of the prisoners or the experience of gay love or intimacy—is/are out of his reach. When the relationship between master and captive, at first flush, might seem clear-cut as to who is locked in and who is locked *out*, what we observe in the guard's relationship to the rest of the environment and to the way that he utilizes his gaze, is that he might be the one held captive by his fantasy and desire—that perhaps the prisoners are those who experience some form of mastery over him in fact (so much so that he eventually reacts with violence and by ending Sam's life—the ultimate performance of control or mastery).

Since the guard does project and thrust himself into the object of fantasy (in his own sequence of imagination I mentioned above, which, in my analysis could be portraying *him*), we can see how fantasy has a lot to do with misrecognition. Much like the notion of a subject misrecognizing itself within the protagonist as in Mulvey's analysis of the role of the mirror stage in film spectatorship, fantasy works as well to project the subject's (de-subjectivized) self into the desired scene, faultily producing itself as an imagined, active presence within this *mise-en-scène* of desire.

I have spoken in the previous chapter about the role of the 'self' (or one's misrecognized, mistaken, misidentified account of the self) in the notion of the ideal ego in relation to film. This (rather fascinating and somewhat entertaining, might I project) misrecognition, this mistaken self or mistaken identity, only helps crystallize further the complex relationships imposed and

reproduced by the guard's (and thus, camera's) gayze in Genet's film. To position, then, the self with respect to the homosexual and/or homophobic desires and themes that permeate this film, I will move towards thinking about Genet in ways which can help reveal the inner dynamics at play within Genet's work.

One of the people who chronicled and studied both the life and the works of Jean Genet is Leo Bersani (1995), who can, with his account of Genet as the 'outlaw' in his book *Homos*, bring some more dimension into most of the points I have been arguing during this chapter. "Betrayal is an ethical necessity" (p. 151), quotes Bersani from a Genet biography written by Edmund White. The ethical trouble brought forth by such a bold statement—and hence, life philosophy—by Genet, who was notorious, vice-ridden, and felonious during his lifetime and in his work, is something which Bersani mentions that White had trouble wrapping his head around. However, Bersani is on to something; as he writes on Genet, he seems to chronicle the necessity of betrayal and treachery within the patterns of Genet's life and work in ways that bare the skeletal makeup of his many theatre plays, ballets, poems, and potentially, the film that I analyze in this project.

A quick diversion before I go back to speaking about the guard and his desire vis-à-vis the notions of fantasy and betrayal, I would like to take this moment to think about the prisoners briefly (although, to do the film justice, there should be a much more detailed analysis of the relationship between Marc and Sam. However, for the sake of my chapter and the overall thesis, I had chosen to speak mostly about the guard since his perspective in the film seems to motivate most of what we see and how we see it as viewers. Arguably, his gayze controls what the audience sees and potentially bleeds

into *how* they are 'directed' to gayze (no gayze exists outside the gayze of the guard, for most part, in my analysis,) but also it uncovers complex relationships between the characters of the film). In Genet, the notion of betrayal is one so tightly bound to the homosexual way-of-being. To illustrate this, Bersani reverts to an image found within one of Genet's letters, and which, oddly, can be seen mirrored within *Chant* in ways which I will point out. Betrayal and treachery surfaces in murderous drives within Genet's account of the act of rimming³. In one of the descriptive scenes in which Genet describes the euphoria of rimming, we witness rather unsettling imagery if I may project. Genet describes the pleasure of experiencing his partner's "foul smell" (p. 157) and fecal matter. Not only that, but Genet then describes explicitly how this rapturous moment breeds a desire to cannibalize his lover, to "tear the muscles of the orifice" up like a hungry rat—to become one with his partner but only through a violent realization of his desire:

The violence of this fantasy is ambiguous: Genet's excitement is murderous, but murder itself serves an ideal of perfect identity between the lovers. Genet's attack is, true enough, the treacherous transformation of a form of sexual servicing into a serving up of the lover's entire being. In psychoanalytic terms, the fury of anality (suggested by the image of the attacking rat) reinforces the murderous impulses of orality (Bersani, 1995, p. 158).

I cannot but relate this vision of two men connecting on such a physically proximate level to the image of the two prisoners in *Chant* who exchange cigarette smoke through a thin straw lodged through the wall that

³ Clinically explained, rimming is the act of stimulating a partner's anus with one's tongue, also known as *eating ass*, which will prove to be quite a useful way to put it in the context of Genet's rather cannibalistic description of the act.

separates them. The image of two men in a giver-receiver (albeit, in the film there is no anality involved, it is purely oral) setup is strikingly reminiscent of the way Genet describes the image of rimming.



To the right, Sam blows the cigarette smoke through the straw, and to the left, Marc receives the fumes, inhaling them.

It is a mutual, intimate, symbiotic relationship between these two men, and of course much more tinged with romance and softness that is not present in a lot of Genet's work. But always an underlying sense of violence permeates; the toxic fumes seem to be the only bridge that can bring these two lovers together. When Bersani makes the link between Genet's "jouissance¹⁰ of rimming" and thus the fueling of these murderous drives (which comes with the satisfaction of desire and this exchange of oral-anal pleasure), he posits that within this very exchange—romantic, mutual, intimate—lies, then, the seed of treachery, betrayal, and ultimately feeds Genet's "ethic of evil" (p. 160).

Although we do not see a clear act of violence demonstrated neither orally nor anally in the film (until the guard puts the gun in Sam's mouth), the act of *blowing* and *sucking* within this particular sequence ties in also with Bersani's analysis of Genet's account. Bersani uses the rather obvious

¹⁰ Psychoanalytically, the overflowing of pleasure and satisfaction towards darker, self-destructive drives. Will be outlined more thoroughly in the third chapter when speaking on Pink Narcissus.

psychoanalytical reference of not just eating but even fully entering (and burying himself in, as Genet also mentions) his lover's body in order to die, as that which takes us towards an *origin of life vs origin of death* setup:

Genet's fantasized ascent into Jean [the partner] through his anus is a savage reversal of this coming back to a life-nourishing site in the mother's body. The "return" is now staged as reproductivity sterile; from another man's body, Genet can only emerge, or reemerge, as waste. Rimming thus replays the origins of life as an original death, both for Genet as subject and for the lover-mother. This death is relived both as fierce aggression and, in a parodistic reprise of the ecstatically sated infant slumbering at its mother's breast, as a lovely death within the "cool bower" of Jean's rectum, "which I crawled to and entered with my entire body, to sleep on the moss there, in the shade, to die there" (253) (Bersani, 1995, p. 159).

If we move back towards the main premises of fantasy theory in film, it is crucial as Cowie points out, to understand that the fantasy—as I mentioned, is not about the object of desire but the act of desiring said object—is more focused on the act of the act rather than the actual function of the act. From a Lacanian perspective, Cowie mentions that:

[Fantasy is] auto-erotic because the external object has been abandoned, the drive is 'objectless' and satisfaction is derived from 'organ-pleasure' – the motions of sucking, rather than the instinctual act of sucking and obtaining nourishment (Cowie, p. 132, 1997)

The act is thus a phantom act, it is a signifier whose signified is long gone. The main goal, and the obsession, then, is simply the act of eating the ass, of blowing into the straw.

But then where does the gayze fall into all of this? There is a pattern amongst the different ways in which bodies relate within Genet's skewed frameworks: the performer of anilingus and the one receiving it; the blower of smoke and the one inhaling it; and last but most importantly, the one who looks and the one being looked at.

The gayze here goes beyond being simply what is shown and what is seen. In fact, the gazye itself has become, much like all fantastical acts which as mentioned before, satisfy the act itself and not the function, an erotic entity on its own, a covetable prize rather than a means to an end. In *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, Earl Jackson Jr. (1995) delineates the trajectory of the ga(y)ze by drawing from Lacanian thought (in order to refute the dualistic Cartesian one-way street model of that who looks and that who is being looked at) uncovering the notion of a 'detachable' gaze. The reasoning is as follows:

The supposed subject of the gaze is thus actually always subject to the gaze that exceeds the subject's control. If the gaze is always outside the body, the subject's access to visual perception (thus to mastery) also situates the subject as exterior to itself, placing that body in the field of visibility (and the potential mastery by the "annihilating" other) (Jackson, 1995, p. 127).

Again, mastery and control is a part of this exchange, and it comes wrapped in the violent drives, which I have mentioned before, the 'jouissance'

of pleasure, the desire to annihilate and destroy. However, the gaze, existing outside the body, is analogous to the trauma of castration (anxiety). Both seem to be intertwined counterparts. Lacan uses the reference of an *objet petit a*, which “[is] any part of the subject's body that appears to be detachable, and thus conducive to symbolizing the lack that founds the subject and motivates desire” (p. 127). Jackson then characterizes the gaze (in relation to the eye) as an *objet petit a* itself, explaining that “its function as an *objet a* explains why the structure of the gaze is at once foundational and traumatic for the subject, since the paradigmatic *objet a* is the penis after castration anxiety has taken hold” (p. 127).

The lacking (and longing) that is witnessed in *Chant*, this gulf between the two prisoners which cannot be filled except through fantasy, can only be compensated by that one, phallic straw that represents the only physical contact they have with one another. As a matter of fact, seeing each other is not a privilege they can afford: the gaze is only that which we as an audience cast on them, and which is respectively cast by the guard. But since Sam and Marc have no ability to compensate through vision, they can only fetishize this phallic straw. Whereas, for the guard, things are quite different. What he uses as compensation for his being trapped ‘outside’ the fantasy of homosexual love, is in fact, his gaze. To draw from my points previously made about the detachability of the ga(y)ze and thus the complex relationship between subjects, I can only argue that the guard’s use of the gaze in this case is simply part of his fantasy to impose, phallically, his self on the other characters. Jackson explains:

The viewing subject thus traumatized seeks in the act of looking the fetish object that might compensate the lack that this apprehension of the gaze effects; the ultimate fetish object would be the gaze itself. The analogies drawn between the eye and the gaze and the penis and the phallus, therefore, underwrite a transcription of the anxiety over “being seen” into a “universal castration complex” (Jackson, 1995, p. 127).

The anxiety thus that goes into the gaze starts to undo the traditional dynamic of the guard-looking and the prisoners being looked at. The gaze itself, in the guard’s world, is a fetish: he does not fetishize the prisoners or their bodies as much as he fetishizes the very gaze itself. But this does not come without a price; it is the realization that—since the gaze is detachable, since it exists outside the body—one is not merely “that who looks”, but is, in fact, subject to a gaze himself as well, as follows:

Sartre pictures himself gazing through a keyhole when a sound behind makes him realize that he is also subjected as object to the gaze of the other, a realization he experiences as “shame.” Recontextualizing Sartre’s situation through the relation of the gaze to castration anxiety, Lacan translates Sartre’s “shame” into “annihilation” (Jackson, 1995, p. 127).

The sense of “shame” thus which could be experienced by the guard—in light of my previous analysis on how the prisoners ‘gaze back’ in the film—strongly does contribute to his heightened sense of self-awareness, and self-loathing, towards the end which results in his homophobic act of violence.

Chant does in many ways work hard to show audiences how the gayze can be picked apart and unraveled, how non-simplistic and non-reductive it is: even within a setting as rigid as the prison in which it happens. What has been witnessed throughout this film is the twisting of archetypical notions of 'master' and 'slave,' a perverting of the discourse around who owns the ga(y)ze and who is subject to it. As with a lot of Genet's thought-provoking projects, this one reminds us that the violation of those laws which are meant to discipline subjects can happen at the upper levels of the systems of power. The gayze itself is challenged and unpacked; its intentions are always in question, its effects are opposed to what reigning discourses might make it out to be.

The most important takeaway from *Chant* is really about thinking beyond the notion of the heterosexual male gaze, and into the complex and nuanced male gayze. Instead of clear-cut dichotomies such as 'surrogacy' through the male protagonist and 'mastery' of the female characters, or 'fetishism' versus 'voyeurism', 'identification' versus 'detachment', the gayze—in *Chant*—encompasses a myriad of conflicting sensibilities. And that is not only something to be observed within the gayze itself and how it is cast, but through the actual setup of a film like *Chant*. It is highly likely that we cannot speak of a gayze if we do not also speak of the objects/subjects that it gazes at, and consider the relationship to be symbiotic and one of co-constitution. The eye cannot be spoken of in isolation of what it is seeing, and what it is—intentionally, in a film—being *made to see*. Such is why it is a good opportunity to close the chapter by stressing the importance of the bodies in *Chant* and their role in constituting the trajectory of the gayze in the film.

In her article *Corporeographies: The Dancing Body in 'adame Miroir and Un chant d'amour*, Elizabeth Stephens (2006) documents the significance of the dancing body in Genet's work—*Chant* included. Stephens speaks about the important role that dance plays within a lot of Genet's work, in representing homosexual relations and desire. In *Chant*, the way in which bodies move and dance stresses their sense of autonomy, and moreover, their tendency to confuse traditional notions of corporeal limits and limitations. In performing themselves, the bodies, Stephens suggests, "mingle," "interweave," and "merge into each other"—but it doesn't stop there, the bodies themselves blur their own boundaries, opening their own borders radically (2006, p. 166). Stephens also hints largely at the agency wielded and put to use by these bodies in film—an agency that bleeds into the way they *represent* themselves to the viewer:

This representation of a commingling intercorporeality is not only central to Genet's homoeroticism, but also to his rethinking of the relationship between bodies and representation, or language. The body that writes itself through the language of dance in Genet's work is not a stable, essential one, secure within its own boundaries, but rather one that is both constituted and opened through the process of self-representation (Stephens, 2006, p. 166).

Through dance and movement, these bodies seem to take control of their own corporeality. They manipulate the very language of their own representation. It is a sense of irony here; that the bodies trapped within the prison cells, being looked at and watched over, in fact—as I had mentioned in my interpretation before—seem to talk back to the disciplining eye which

attempts to trap them. This is largely why I believe that we cannot quite think about this homosexual gaze without considering the rather slipperiness of the objects/subjects it wishes to gaze at. The very 'problem' or the 'tension' between eye and what it considers its object takes center stage here:

Thus the performative body in Genet's work is not simply a blank surface or empty vessel through which meaning is transmitted, but rather something which plays a pivotal role in the construction of meaning, thereby challenging and expanding traditional notions of corporeality. As Vicki Kirby describes, the body is a 'shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written' (p. 61, 1997). For Genet, too, dance is not simply a mode of expression enacted by the body, but a process of re-inscription informed by that body. These polymorphous, metamorphic bodies, which cannot be contained within the jail cell or on the wrong side of the looking-glass, open up new, homoerotic spaces of representation in Genet's work, thereby enabling the relationship between bodies and writing to be reconfigured (Stephens, 2006, p. 166-167).

In this sense, Genet has a lot of credit to take for being one of the pioneers in portraying the performed gay body in such a way that challenged/es traditional notions of how bodies are looked at in film, and what their relations are to the traveling eye, be it the cinematic eye, or the eye of the spectator. A film like *Chant* successfully unpacks and complicates the relationship which the eye has with what it sees on a screen, within a gay male context, in which elements like desire and fantasy can interfere with the visual diegesis of the film.

Chapter 3. The Queer Gayze: A Masculine and Feminine Experience

With the artistry and not-so-subtle subtlety of Jean Genet, it can be argued that spectators are allowed to experience sexuality, body, love, and the gayze itself, all in frameworks that pervert many 'traditional' discourses on cinema, the ga(y)ze, representation, and power relationships. What Genet has demonstrated in *Chant*, and through my own analysis, is the more vulnerable dimension of the gayze. What I have concluded is that the gayze is a shaky one, the dynamics that normally delineate the structural workings of subject and object, gayzer and gayzed-at, fetishism and voyeurism, have been challenged—irrevocably. The very fact that Genet had chosen for the setting and setup of his film to be that of a traditional institution of discipline—complete with closed off cells and a prison guard—seems as though it is in fact to ridicule and pick apart notions of power in the rather two-dimensional presentation many discourses might make them out to be. The rebellion of the bodies, which we have witnessed in *Chant*, the subversion of the trajectory of the gayze, all seem to be a tongue-in-cheek nod to the potentialities that lie within the 'gaps' or 'cracks' in the power relationships between individuals and organizations of power. At many an occasion, Michel Foucault has verbalized what he thinks about the notion of resistance, in this context, mentioning that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power (Foucault, 1978, p. 95) or "[as] soon as there's a relation of power there's a possibility of resistance. We're never trapped by power; it's always possible to modify its hold, in determined conditions and following a precise strategy (Foucault, 1980, p. 13).

To use these Foucauldian notions rather loosely—and, in a bit of a simplified manner—what can be deduced from the previous chapter about the role of the gayze in Genet’s film, is that it sheds light on this potentiality of resistance which exists under the harshness of a power structure. As a matter of fact, the ‘cheekiness’ of Genet’s characters who are supposed to be in custody seems to highlight the ability of those homosexual bodies to act back, speak up, and ‘rebel’ in one way or another. It is almost parodic that Genet even chose to set the film in a prison; as though he is constructing a tyrannous institution only to make fun of it and break it down.

So if I can conclude anything from the previous chapter, it would be that the gayze in gay cinema challenges discourses on how the male eye (and the ‘male’ sensibility of the *look*) can travel in film, and more importantly, what the construction of a film in general can tell us about how the eye is made to travel or is made to question itself. We witness a lot of self-reflexivity on that front in *Chant*. The realm of the male gayze, with its subjects and objects, has already demonstrated its extreme distance from the realm of the male gaze. In many respects, the gayze is queer—and it queers what we know about the gaze.

It is in this light that I will continue my film analysis, this time on another monumental piece, which has received little credit for its unquantifiable influences on artists generations after its initial release in 1971. The film, titled *Pink Narcissus*, is chiefly about a young male prostitute exploring his fantasies in a kitschy, hyper-fantastical, visually provocative world. When the film was released, it bore no credits to its maker—the name of the director read instead *ANONYMOUS*. Rumors would circulate that Andy Warhol created the film, and the peculiarity of Bidgood and his take on

his own art led him to take a hiatus from his career for a decade after the film's release (Van Meter, 2011).

Narcissus was born out of Bidgood's inability to understand why high quality, aesthetically pleasing, artistically erotic imagery of men was so scarce in a world where beautifully produced images of erotica starring women's bodies were abundant. His intention was to create a film that was visually beautiful, erotic, and fantastical—and it took him roughly between 1963 and 1970 to create the film, in his cramped New York apartment with a cast comprised mainly of young neighborhood prostitutes (Van Meter, 2011).

It is a combination of the film's ambitious motivation of creating something new, and Bidgood's decision not to credit himself (which he referred to in an interview as a form of "protesting" (Gallagher, 2011),) which highlights *Narcissus'* role in queer cinema as a subversive film whose intention was to challenge many a reigning reality. Of course, the idea of a queer film being subversive (through its very inception and existence) is not a shocking nor groundbreaking notion—especially after the analysis of Genet's film in the previous chapter whereby rebellion was pretty much the name of the game. It is the function of my work, though, to explore *how* and through what domains each film acts out its subversive ambitions, mainly through its visual structure.

The Notion of Camp

The aesthetic of *Narcissus* is one which can be swiftly recognized today as 'camp'. Although there is no record of Bidgood using that word himself to describe his work, others have (Edgecomb, 2006), and Bidgood himself has

labeled the film's scenery as "sissy" (Kowalinski, 2010)—which, naturally is not the same as camp, yet with further explanation it will be clearer how they relate. Bidgood had mentioned to *The New York Times* that if it weren't for the film's aesthetic and subject matter, he would have potentially gotten a call from Hollywood, given the quality of the production and the amount of work he had put in (Van Meter, 2011).

Narcissus operates through a profusion of visual camp. The film's adoption of intense color schemes (with main focus on the color pink), excessive accessorizing, and an overall tendency for sensory overload has inspired the careers of many modern-day photographers and artists, such as Pierre et Gilles or David LaChapelle (Gallagher, 2011). But first, I would like to briefly touch on the question *what is camp?*

It can be argued that camp was birthed through (or utilized by) mainly gay (male) cultures, since its main function is to make a mockery of dominant, conventional methods of being and doing. It works to...

[...] prize what are considered worthless cultural objects and prove that what is deemed valueless by dominant culture is a matter of rules and conventions rather than inherent value is also a means of protesting against the continuing ostracization of homosexuality. Camp is as much a political weapon as it is cultural enjoyment (Hermes, p. 140, 1995).

In its almost negligence of the more serious matters in life through its extreme sense of sarcasm, camp actually underlines the more heavy-handed social issues (through humor). In doing so, camp shines a light on injustice, on the banality and absurdity of social categories which include and exclude, accept and disenfranchise, celebrate and dehumanize. Camp is rebellion,

camp is a 'fuck you' in the face of the system which might take a minute of subtle analysis to understand;

A part of camp is serious and based on real drama, which it recognizes but also relativizes. Camp enacts the pain of playing a role that does not suit, of trying to be who you are not. Camp is the at times bitter mockery of having to try to become someone you are not. It is laughing at one's own expense and at all those who cannot distinguish the fiction from the facts, the blatant untruth from real sorrow and real suffering (Hermes, p. 140, 1995).

What could be considered, then, in *Narcissus* as 'bad taste,' given the kitschy, 'sissy,' over-the-top sensibility and aesthetic of the film, is in fact what makes it quintessentially camp. It is almost an exaggerated reaction from Bidgood's side to the dull and uninspiring visuals of male erotica, which was almost singularly available at the time, with no alternatives, no transgressive beauty, and no element of otherworldly fantasy. The visual camp of *Narcissus* then is somewhat of an interlude into the film's many ambitions to protest. But *protest what exactly?* is the question which can guide coming interpretations of the film.

Masculine/Feminine/Masculine

[The] young boy is scripted by rules which mandate, "Don't be scared. Be brave. Be tough. Be daring. Become excited by the danger. Risk injury or death. Be proud of fearlessness. Be contemptuous of danger and cowards."

— Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, *Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation* (1988)

As far back as I remember, to want guys [garçons] was to want relations with guys. That has always been important for me. Not necessarily in the form of a couple but as a matter of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? To live together,

to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it to be "naked" among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie? It's a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people.

— Michel Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1994)

Camp comes from a place that willingly and consciously confuses masculinity and femininity. Camp is quintessentially a superimposition of the feminine on what is deemed to be—or expected to be—masculine; such is the way the absurdity of camp is created. Confusing audiences by attaching what is normally ascribed to women to men's bodies; a no-no in a patriarchal culture. In fact, dominating notions of masculinity always prove themselves through the forceful rejection of what is feminine. In *Scripting the Macho Man*, Mosher and Tomkins (1998) speak on masculinity and machismo and how parents use affect to ingrain it within male children;

As the child learns to respond to himself as an object of his affects of distress and fear, he consequently begins to experience self-disgust and self-contempt. The shame of being "unmanly" (or not a "real boy" but a "sissy," "wimp," "faggot," "cry-baby," coward," etc.) is no more than partially reduced by parents who enforce the "masculine" response. Shame itself, is viewed as an "inferior feminine" affect (Mosher and Tomkins, 1988, p. 68).

In more ways than one, camp seeks to pervert the hegemonic notion that what is feminine is shameful, or is to be avoided by males. It pokes fun at and attempts to break down the idolization of masculinity in its heteronormative apparitions, hence its embracing of 'being a faggot' or a 'sissy' as opposed to attempting to cover up traces of feminine behaviors or sensibilities in gay men. At many instances, *Narcissus* does in fact work explicitly with visual

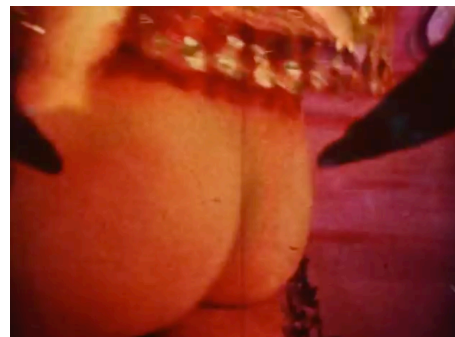
cues representing masculinity and femininity as a way to reflexively reify its camp-ness.

In a key scene early on in the film, Narcissus¹¹ imagines himself as a matador, suddenly appearing in a bullfighting ring. His opponent is in fact another attractive young man, clad in fetish-style leather attire that crosses between motorcyclist and prostitute. The camera alternates between the bull/man's point of view (zeroing in on Narcissus with his matador's cape; bull horns in the frame), and an external gayze which reveals the face and identity of the bull/man. Parallel to this scene is intercut another sequence whereby the same two young men meet in a public restroom, at the urinals. The camera 'peeks in' rather voyeuristically at first—looking in from outside the toilet—as the two men begin groping and fondling one another, before alternating to closer and more explicit shots that display the man in leather performing oral sex on (whom is assumed to be) Narcissus. As the oral sex scene culminates to Narcissus arguably cumming (visually signified by an oceanic flood which drowns the man in leather), the bullfighting scene ends with the bull charging towards the matador, Narcissus, who then turns his ass towards the camera as the bull draws closer, potentially signifying a moment of 'fatal' anal penetration. I find it particularly fascinating what we, as viewers, can infer about masculinity as it is portrayed in this sequence.

The bullfighting scene is significant in many ways, one of which is the way in which he gayze is employed. Apart from the fact that the movement of the characters in space is a very forceful, aggressive one, but the camera's view is highly significant; we gayze at Narcissus who confidently bares his buttocks for the bull's penetration. In fact, we are invited as viewers to take

¹¹ From here on out, I will use the name Narcissus to refer to the nameless main character of the film—as opposed to the usage of the italicized *Narcissus* which I will employ whenever I refer to the film *Pink Narcissus*, as an abbreviation.

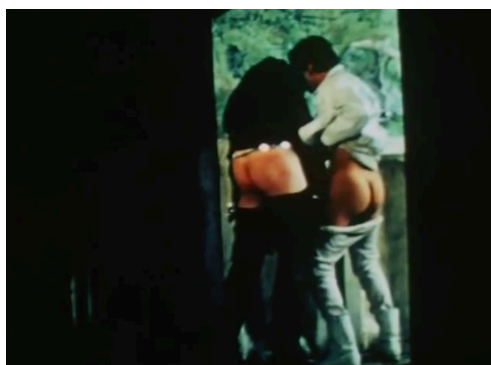
part in the action of penetration head-on. It is the confidence of the gayze in this scene, which is rather significant due to its risk-taking nature.



In this sequence, Narcissus is dressed as a matador, focused on drawing in the bull with his cape. The camera from this shot gazes through the point of view of the bull, horns in the frame, Narcissus in main focus.

The bull, in fact, is another young man, dressed in leather attire, riding his motorcycle.

As the bull charges towards the matador, Narcissus turns around, revealing his bare ass for the bull to 'penetrate.'



Intercut in parallel to the bullfighter sequence is another scene whereby (arguably the same) two young men meet up in a public toilet and engage in oral sex. The room is flooded with white seawater as the blowjob culminates in an orgasm.

Here I would like to employ the concept of camp in a way that can help in thinking about the function of the signifiers in this particular sequence. Richard Dyer (2002)² gives an insight into camp in his chapter *It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going* as follows:

² Compellingly, Dyer also accounts for the downfalls of camp in his writings, one of which is camp's tendency to objectify women. Camp does satirize and poke fun at many aspects of femininity (and women), in ways that are tellingly misogynistic of gay cultural patterns and phenomena. Although

[A study exploring the significance of *style* and *artifice* in camp] found that gays were extremely ‘adaptable’; that is, we tend to find it easy to fit in to any occupation, or set-up, or circle of people. Or rather, and this is the point, we find it easy to appear to fit in, we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, forms and appearances of different social circles. And why? Because we’ve had to be good at it, we’ve had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in – we couldn’t afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms: style. Small wonder then that when we came to develop our own culture, the habit of style should have remained so dominant in it (Dyer, 2002, p. 59).

There are, then, two main attributes of camp, which can be deduced and can prove useful to my analysis of *Narcissus* (and namely the scene described above). Firstly, camp is about appearance. Camp is highly about the visual—what is on the *surface*, and mostly, what can be *seen*. If camp is about disguise, then it is about exterior embellishment—that which can ‘trick’ or ‘fool’ the eye. The incessant usage of humor and glamour is meant to mask the struggles of belonging to an ostracized social group. Not only that, but (Dyer’s interpretation of) the gays’ use of camp also is meant to contribute to their ability to shapeshift and adapt themselves into different social situations and realities.

exploring the premises of camp’s misogyny is not a part of my particular project, it is something that can be followed in Dyer’s work, namely the book quoted here, *The Culture of Queers*.

Secondly, another key element of camp is the fact that it entails the appropriation of feminine/female signifiers by gay men (hence the genesis and also the celebration of the 'sissy', the feminized man). *Narcissus* is camp at its finest; a film that juxtaposes masculinity and femininity expertly. From start to finish, the art direction of the film is in the realm of what is visually significant of the feminine; hues of pink, delicate and elaborate costumes, jewelry, makeup, etc. But the film's axis of interest—gay male sexuality, relationships, and fantasies—is indispensable masculine. Bidgood, then—whether in an acknowledged or unacknowledged effort—attempts to reconcile the elusiveness of gay fantasy with its actualization through the employment of this hyper-fantastical camp in his film. It is almost as if navigating this hyper-feminine aesthetic of the film is a means to use a glamorous guise, embellishing the representation of the real issue at hand: gay sex and gay relationality.

In his interview titled *Friendship as a Way of Life*, Michel Foucault (1994) spoke at length about the idea that what is puzzling about homosexual relationships (not only to the heterosexual communities but to gay men themselves, even), was not (just) the sexual action, but the very notion that two men could be in any form of social relationship *outside* of what is conventionally and heteronormatively conceivable between two males. Intimacy, friendship, closeness. It is the placement of the 'masculine' within contexts that are not (in a heteronormative sense) masculine in fact, which makes up the actual complexity and difficulty of homosexual relations.

This is where the *queer* intervention of *Narcissus* (and its usage of camp) comes in. The film, in this respect, seems to work hard to pervert heteronormative visual representations of masculinity with an overload of

feminine signifiers, starting with the very formulation of the main character. Let us keep in mind the scene described above as I am not in any way done analyzing it, however I will also intervene with another sequence to help with my case of understanding the masculine/feminine. Shortly after the scene I had described above, we see Narcissus heading into an opulently art-directed, pink lit boudoir. He is dressed in a scanty silk robe, staring out of his window into the city. Unamused, longing for more, he takes sips of a drink from his glass and lays down, spinning an earth globe to his side pensively. In this scene, Narcissus lays down his body sensually for the camera to feast on visually. He caresses himself, spilling his drink over his body. In a parallel sequence, Narcissus reclines nude in a field, like a nymph, also touching his own body, sucking on his fingers, and masturbating.



In another sequence, Narcissus retires into his boudoir with a drink in hand, dressed in a silk robe. He is seen to pour the drink onto himself and touch himself sensually. Intercut with this scene is another in which Narcissus is represented as a nymph of sorts, completely nude in a field. He also begins to touch his own body and masturbate, occasionally sucking on his own fingers, simulating fellatio—the scene goes on until he reaches orgasm, culminating in a close up shot of his penis ejaculating.

What we see here is Narcissus in all his glory, inviting the viewer's to gluttonously enjoy his body—and his own enjoyment it. This sequence, of course—among others—feeds into the theme of him being Narcissus; loving himself, auto-erotically enjoying his own presence, without the need for another. The viewer is only meant to watch but cannot participate; Narcissus

owns his body and his sexuality so much that he can exhibitionistically put it all on display for the camera.

In the previous chapter I spoke about the actual reversibility of the ga(y)ze (and its actual function as a fetish external to the body) and how that complicates the traditional discourse around the act of *looking*. If we go back to Earl Jackson's employment of Lacanian psychoanalysis to gay subjectivity and objectivity in relation to cinema and spectatorship, we can pull some more insights as to how gayzing functions in *Narcissus*:

[...] Lacan's demystification of the Cartesian subject as the viewer [...] depends upon (1) identifying the reversibility of the gaze with the castration complex; (2) categorizing the male subject's [...] fear of being caught looking as evidence of the "annihilation" that being the object of the gaze constitutes; (3) discovering a specifically "feminine" satisfaction in being the object of the gaze while pretending not to know it (Jackson, 1995, p. 128-129).

Reconciling the trauma brought on by the very recognition of the ga(y)ze being external to the body, and its potential for reversibility (the possibility of being *looked at*), the viewer creates an "[analogy] between the eye and the gaze and the penis and the phallus", which then "[underwrites] a transcription of the anxiety over "being seen" into a "universal" castration complex" (Jackson, 1995, p. 127). Luckily enough, this castration complex is faced, met, and quelled in this particular film as the scene I describe as we ultimately get to see the penis, appeasing the anxiety in many ways, culminating in an orgasmic satisfaction where the 'phallic' gayze can finally meet with the penis. However, if we pore over the third point in the above

quote by Jackson, there is also one key element to this 'campness' of the gayze that I have been trying to build up to—the appropriation of the feminine using visuality. In his chapter, Jackson speaks at length about how in the psychoanalytical setup of Lacan and thus Mulvey, a certain 'femininity' is ascribed to the body that is the object of attention. Narcissus demonstrates and owns this feminine function of his body in front of Bidgood's film lens. Jackson encapsulates the above points as follows:

Synthesizing these statements, and considering them in the light of the male film viewer's castration crisis and its cinematic resolution, we find that Lacan's dismissal of the specular cogito actually authorizes "fetishistic scopophilia" for the male spectator whose apprehension of the gaze as castration anxiety requires a compensatory fetishistic spectacle to return him to the very illusion of a punctual (whole) self in the coincidence of subjective integrity and visual mastery that Lacan's analysis had been intended to dispel. This is only one illustration of the cultural entrenchment of the sexual within the visual that makes the question of gay male intervention in sexual representation such a difficult one. This synopsis of a specular economy and its fetishistic and fetishized mastery also makes it clear how important it is to theorize the differences in the gay male subject, and to actualize those differences in practice (Jackson, 1995, p. 129).

Fetishism again becomes key in this scenario—a lot needs to be made up for and compensated, but it is quite unclear how that can be done. The gayze wants to gain this mastery in a way to overcome its own anxiety, but the male body it gazes at differs from the female body which a heterosexual gaze would want to master for different reasons. Hence the castration anxiety

needs another form of release (described already in the ejaculation scene above), but is met with even more conflict; the male body is ultimately and inevitably feminized—it *basks* in the gayze, in the knowledge that it is being gayzed at.

This crossing between the masculine and the feminine within gay visual culture is in no way exclusive to *Pink Narcissus*. In his account of analyzing visual patterns and notions of spectatorship in gay erotica across centuries, Thomas Waugh (1998) explained the visual trope of the *ephebe* which can be traced back to Victorian homoerotic imagery. The ephebe is (contrary to the super-masculine he-man), a feminized, normally slender, sometimes cross-dressing male body. One of the functions of the ephebe is to command the gayze of the “older, stronger, more powerful, active [...] phallic spectator” (p. 432). In this film, Narcissus is most definitely the effeminate ephebe who owns his femininity through inviting the gayze and achieving satisfaction by being its subject.

Then how culpable is the *gayze* itself here in producing Narcissus’ femininity or masculinity for that matter? There can be no (“feminine”) exhibitionism without the camera/director/audience’s voyeurism—in the masturbation scene or even in the bathroom blowjob scene. Which also interestingly leads us into the other form of gayzing with the film employs; that which is a more forceful, more *penetrating* way of looking (unlike the sneaky voyeurism of some scenes described), such as that which I had described earlier in the bullfight scene where the camera assumes the point of view of the penetrating bull.

So if the ‘detached’ voyeuristic method of gayzing is—by definition—*feminizing*, can we assume that the more invasive, *penetrating* gayze has to do

with masculinity? I'd like to borrow from a text on how machismo and masculinity follow affective "scripts" written by Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins to portray an accurate image of what *Narcissus* tries to portray about masculinity in the bullfighting scene:

An actual case in point is the linkage of avoidance of one negative affect, fear, with another negative affect, shame, as with the bullfighter who must expose himself to the danger and fear of death to "avoid" it and who is vulnerable to the contempt of the audience and himself if he is un- willing to come close to his adversary. (Tomkins, 1962, p. 315 in Mosher and Tomkins, 1988, p. 68)

Although I do not (and do not intend to) employ affect in order to think about masculinity, Mosher and Tomkins' bullfighter metaphor is uncannily fitting for this scene. Narcissus as a matador is purely a vision of masculinity in practice. Demonstrating so in his unwavering challenge of fear and hesitation, he employs a powerful willingness to go head-to-head (Or head-to-ass?) with danger. He invites the bull towards his body—in fact, he lodges danger *into* his body; into his very anus.

In this sequence—the *masculine* sequence—the gayze assumes a different modality. It is active, forceful, aggressive; it takes the place of the bull and participates in the invasion and penetration of Narcissus. This setup is in complete opposition to the detached, voyeuristic sensibility of the camera in the previous scene where Narcissus assumes the 'feminine' positionality of being the objectified, looked-at body¹³.

¹³ I am well aware that this dichotomous separation between masculine and feminine sounds like a cliché and can be highly reductive, but such are the artistic choices made by the director and such are the generalized findings of the theoretical frameworks on which I rely in this section of the thesis. At the

I had explored before the Mulvenian gaze's tendency to *identify* with its object; how the (hetero, male) spectator attaches *himself* to the (hetero, male) protagonist, who acts as a surrogate for the viewer's desire in a way. To speak solely of *identification* in terms of proximity—closeness—and 'clinging' to the protagonist's body in this particular sequence (where the gayze literally charges towards and penetrates Narcissus) feels incomplete. It is as though there is a suggested birth of a new modality of gayzing, one that employs a *radical closeness*¹⁴ as opposed to the binary of an attachment versus detachment.

Looking back at Genet's diary entry on rimming, the artist had explored an unexplainable desire to 'cannibalize' his lover through anilingus; it is a moment where his desire pushes him towards succumbing to the drive of eating the lover. Simply rimming the partner's ass is not nearly enough—he needs to crawl up inside him, tear him up; destroy him (Bersani, 1995). I will take up another case where more *radical closeness* stirs up both intimate and violent drives between partners; this time by the author of arguably the most extensive research on the politicalness of the gay subcultures of barebacking and breeding¹⁵, Tim Dean:

The presence of HIV has allowed gay men to transform the practice of taking it up the butt from a sign of failed masculinity into an index of hypermasculinity. In bareback subculture, as in the military, masculine status is achieved by surviving a set of physical ordeals, including multiple penetrations [...] and infections. The more men you're

end of the day, much more subtlety and complexity exists in both psychoanalytical and queer theory interpretations of cinema, and I would hope that my employment of this binary only works towards thinking about how *complex* it can get pretty fast, in such a way that undermines the binary itself to begin with. The camp of *Narcissus*, I am arguing, works to remind the viewer that the masculine and the feminine both do exist in every modality of gayzing.

¹⁴ A term that I have coined for the sake of exploring my argument.

¹⁵ Barebacking is gay slang for *engaging in condomless sex*. Breeding is gay slang for *ejaculating inside the partner's anus*.

penetrated by, the more of a man you become. The prophylaxis afforded by condoms is reserved for those who can't handle the real thing (Dean, 2008, p. 85).

In his work, Dean deals with the social group of gay men who purposefully practice condomless sex to transmit/contract the HIV virus (namely bugchasing, as in *chasing the HIV bug*, and giftgiving, *giving the gift of the HIV bug*). The reason I am borrowing from Dean's research on this subculture is not to explore the politics of HIV, but rather to think about the surprisingly tight relationship between masculinity and proximity or intimacy. What Dean demonstrates through his work is that in order to achieve the holy grail of masculinity, these men lose the barrier of condoms and enter a treacherous, risky world—realizing “fantasies about making an indelible connection with someone else's insides” (p. 86)—where intimacy becomes, as he puts it in his book title, *unlimited*.

So in more ways than one, *radical closeness*, in the realm of anal penetration and the act of *entering the other*, is ritualistic of achieving a newfound masculinity; because this closeness does not come without danger or risk (whether HIV is part of the conversation or not). In fact the gayze in *Narcissus* demonstrates its function as the *detachable phallus* (Jackson, 1995) and takes the spectator *into* the trip of achieving penetrative intimacy.

This is precisely why literature on HIV/AIDS is insightful to hidden dynamics at work within male gay relations. Leo Bersani (1987) also launches his argumentation from the AIDS crisis in his landmark essay *Is the Rectum A Grave?* making similar parallels and connections between risk, closeness, and the masculine/feminine sensibilities of gay sex. Bersani speaks at length in his

(rather controversial) essay, through social and psychoanalytical frameworks about the act of penetrating and the position of being penetrated in gay sex. His main argument in the text is that there is a(n unbearable) notion of men emulating women through allowing themselves to be penetrated, “[abdicating] power” (p. 19) through offering their bodies to be invaded as such, “legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (p.18). The reason why being the subject of penetration is ‘suicidal’ or ‘self-destructive’ comes from not only the risk of HIV infection and ultimately death, but also the socially formulate notions of *being penetrated* as a sign of passivity, weakness, surrendering oneself to the (phallic) authority of the other, relinquishing power, and accepting the status of being simply an object of pleasure (Bersani, 1987).

As to not get into the subtleties of Bersani’s following arguments within the discourses of what is feminine and what is masculine in what social context and for what social groups, I will take the above notions at face value for the sake of my case in point. So, in coupling Bersani’s ‘suicidal ecstasy’ of assuming the feminine position as a way of achieving an extreme, invasive (gay) relationality, with Dean’s musings on the hunt for the masculine through experiencing closeness-through-risk, we can put into perspective the function of the gayze/camera in *Narcissus* as it performs its penetrative function, engaging the viewer in the demonstration of Narcissus’ masculinity—laced with a feminine sensibility.

So this *radical closeness* demonstrated in *Narcissus* brings a new subtlety to the masculine/feminine divide with the gayze is able to work in. There are layers of intertwined, inseparable masculinities and femininities within the act of being penetrated by a the ‘look’. Apart from the ‘female’ subject of the

gayze basking in the eye of the voyeur (discussed in the masturbation scene), the more ambiguous subject who lends his body for the viewer to be penetrated by the gayze-as-penis/phallus, assumes feminine and masculine positions.

Concluding Thoughts

The premises of this thesis are definitely very limited—it is rather difficult to find a way to ‘formulate’ a theory on the male gayze while simultaneously undergoing a visual and psychoanalytical reading (specific scenes from) two very specific (albeit iconic and influential) gay films. However what I hope to have achieved through this piece of work is an addition to the body of work exploring gay film, gay subjectivity/spectatorship, and the psychoanalytical significances of gay art.

What I have been able to notice through my interpretations is that the way the camera is made to move in gay film differs radically from the way it does in the traditional, heterosexual, Hollywood narrative films which Laura Mulvey employs in her formulation of the theory of the male gaze. I did not in any way start my analyses by thinking or comparing my project to Mulvey’s but I have kept in mind the blueprint she worked with while thinking about visual cues and patterns which can be extracted from film and analyzed for their sexual, psychoanalytical, and gender-related significances.

In gay film, the gayze is allowed to be much more disoriented, shifting between the different characters and bodies, with an unclear idea about whom is to be identified with, whom is to be desired, and whom is to be spied on voyeuristically—since the dynamics between identifying through an ideal ego versus desiring through the erotic function of looking are much more problematic in a same-sex desire situation.

Not only that, but in gay film, such as in *Chant*, the characters within the story seem to possess different relationships to the camera and to the idea of being stared at. Sometimes they might be aware of the gayze, and might even gayze back—or perform their bodies in ways that signal their awareness as

objects of affection, objectification, and desire. They crave relationality, they create it amongst each other, and even reach out towards the camera and the spectator, commanding some form of closeness or another.

In a film like *Narcissus*, the gaze functions to both reify and simultaneously queer the notions of masculinity and femininity which in the heteronormative sense. The camera/gaze is voyeuristic, sneaky, confrontational, close, but also it can *penetrate*, creating an unprecedented intimacy (or this radical closeness I speak of), which evokes danger, proximity, and connection.

I strongly believe that more and more queer academics should contribute to this line of research as what I have noticed is that a lot of the thinkers exploring issues that have to do with visibility, sexuality, cinema, and psychoanalysis seem to be peppered through the nineties and around the 2010s. Because it is my strong conviction that the more we delve into the role of vision in gay cultural circles, the more we uncover the 'keys' to looking into the way gay societies function. As I had mentioned earlier, gay male interaction is heavily based in visual communication; whether it is online dating, pornography, or body image 'fascism'.

So, can the gaze be a concept that can act as a framework steering queer theory towards more holistic understandings of modern day gay cultures?

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