

Inspiration for a Libidinal Cinema: Klossowski, Lyotard, and the *Tableau Vivant*

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Abstract: Considered a “classic” text in film theory, Jean-François Lyotard’s “Acinema” (1973) has been subject to recent critical reappraisal. Part of that consideration, I argue, would benefit from an excavation of Lyotard’s own specific set of resources, an area left under-examined in the contemporary discussion of his work. In this essay, I look at one of Lyotard’s philosophical forebearers, a figure who Lyotard engages in order to overcome the hegemonic theories of Freud and Lacan. With the aid of the erotic novelist and philosopher Pierre Klossowski, Lyotard crafts an alternative film theoretical discourse in distinction to the classical arguments of psychoanalytic film theory, as well as both realist and formalist notions of film economy.

Keywords: Lyotard, Klossowski, continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, film theory

In his 1973 essay “L’acinéma,” the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard theorizes cinema as the product of negation. The essay, published originally in the arts journal *Revue d’esthétique*, was written in the wake of Lyotard’s own *Discours, figure* (1971), his prolonged defense of avant garde aesthetics. Highlighting the prominence of the image in psychoanalysis as the feature motivating Freud’s conception of primary process thinking, Lyotard’s analysis was premised on a deconstruction of psychoanalysis’s mutual implication of image-based, pre-symbolic mental processes and the realm of discourse that conforms them. “Acinema” comprises an elaboration of this project, gauging the medium’s potential for a *positive*, pre-symbolic form of “thinking.”

Film itself, for Lyotard, in its most rudimentary aspect, comprises precisely this phantasmal force, a material that yields intermediately to language, more specifically to the conventional language(s) of cinema. What remains unassimilable in this process, he explains, falls to the cutting room floor. Yet these abandoned shards of celluloid are no different than that stuff from which film in its final product is composed—discontinuous fragments of reality ushered into place (“made productive”) by the hand of the film’s editor. “No movement,” he writes, “is given to the eye/ear of the spectator for what it is. Instead, every movement brought forward sends back to something else, is written as a plus or minus on the ledger book which is film, is valuable because it returns to something else, because it is thus potential return and profit.”¹ The sensuous immediacy of film, its immanence as an “intensity of recorded reality,” is, in other words, negated by the actions of the director, the editor, the post-production crew, whose job it is to effectively neuter the image of its excess—to give the image over not to what it is in itself but to what it can contribute to the next article in the continuous chain of images.

Lyotard’s description of the cinema, posed from the perspective of the film practitioner, has its counterpart in a competing theory which takes as its center the passive subjectivity of the spectator. The theoretical concept of “suture,” which originates in Lacan’s seminars,² was incorporated into film theory through the work of Jean-Pierre Oudart, Daniel Dayan and Stephen Heath as a concept of cinematic space serving to provide a solution to the problem of “primary identification” central to Jean-Louis Baudry’s and Christian Metz’s psychoanalytic film theories. Their argument concerning the spectator’s imaginary identification with the place of the camera would, according to the suturists, be necessarily undermined by the spectator’s awareness of the frame as such. As

Kaja Silverman notes, in Lacan's mirror stage, the joy associated with the infant's moment of self-recognition is mediated instantly by the "lack" embedded in his image, a feeling of displeasure that becomes inextricably tied with *jouissance* thereafter.³ In its relationship to suture, this displeasure is analogous to the kind of tension produced by the first (potentially unresolved) shot in a film sequence, a tension held at bay by cinema's consistent "phasing-in of subject vision" in continuity editing. With the successful relay of narrative, the spectator is, of course, meant to understand the desire of the characters and their motivations for achieving these goals. The ingenuity of the suturists, however, was to ask, beyond basic character pathology, what is it that motivates the cinema itself. Recognition of the figure that sutures film's discourse, the "Absent One" in Oudart's term, is tantamount, they say, to the trauma of the mirror, a repression that haunts the entire history of cinema's narrative development. This figure is made apparent only ever in the uncanny cinematic hiccup—the fortuitous moment in a film when narrative becomes "unsutured" and hence gives way to this cinematic Other.

With a premise similar to the suturists ("film acts as the orthopedic mirror analyzed by Lacan [...] [as] the constitutive function of the imaginary subject"), Lyotard's project branches off as soon as it leaves the domain of critique in an attempt to make room for a positive conception of cinema as an alternative to the classical paradigm, a cinema of the impulses.⁴ In suture theory, the delineation of the "absent one" never takes a positive form, but appears only ever as an excess cast in relief against the enunciation of a narrative. What is essential for this theory, therefore, is narrative production, a place where the "objects" of film can reliably unite. For the suturists, in other words, imaginary identification has always-already occurred: the body of the child is delivered to the symbolic order as soon as its spatial relations are configured, as soon as the child's image is given unity in the gaze of an other. Even when this big Other rears its head, it can do so only negatively. Its negative existence is the ultimate reminder of the assimilating power of the symbolic order—whatever lapses these drives arise, they do so only to be (re)subordinated to the proper functioning of conscious thought.

Suture's edifice, therefore, leaves little room for a conception of cinema outside the bounds of narrative representational development. There can be no conception, within this theory, for the functioning of primary process thinking or unconscious, image-based mental processes as they relate to imaginary identification. Claiming this difference, Lyotard writes: "The real problem is to know *why* the drives spread about the polymorphous body *must have* an object where they can unite. That the imperative of unification is given as a hypothesis in a philosophy of 'consciousness' is betrayed by the very term 'consciousness,' but for a 'thought' of the unconscious [...], the question of the production of unity, even an imaginary unity, can no longer fail to rise in all its opacity."⁵ On this line of thinking, it has been, according to Lyotard, a mistake to accredit Freud with the discovery of the movement of the drives. Freud's project was rather to describe impulsive life only in reference to what can be said of it, and hence from these descriptions he derives the terminology of his discipline—a translation of the unconscious drives into conscious speech. There is, for Lyotard, however, no discipline without a 'disciplining.' Psychoanalysis must necessarily by reference to 'structure' denigrate sensual experience. Cinema no doubt takes the same function: movements that derive from impulsive life are disciplined, limited to the (cinematic) norms of tolerance.

Lyotard follows instead a vocabulary set forth by the philosopher Pierre Klossowski, who, in his literature and especially in his writings on Sade and Nietzsche, produces a philosophy of the simulacrum, a 'kinetic problematic' conceived primarily not as representation, but rather as enigma: 'the paradoxical product of the disorder of the drives, as a composite of decompositions.' Within this vocabulary an alternative consideration for cinema might take form—an 'acinema' that exists at the antipodes of the medium, at the extremes of movement and non-movement. A digression through Klossowski's conceptual edifice is therefore necessary before we continue with Lyotard's analysis—in particular, his formulation of the *tableau vivant*, which, for Lyotard, exists at the "antipodes" of cinema: cinematic stasis, or the mobile rendering of a frozen two-dimensional

image. Klossowski's theorization of the tableau forms the basis of Lyotard's reception of stasis, ergo it must be considered as paramount for his theorizing the potential of a cinematic avant garde. It provides, likewise, a guiding light through the quagmire of recognition as elaborated by the premises of suture theory and psychoanalytic film discourse. The difficulty of this effort, however, lies in translating the effect of Klossowski's theorization, obscured in the setting of a pornographic-philosophical fiction, into the discourse of academic philosophy—something that Lyotard deftly accomplishes in *Économie libidinale*.

Introduced in Klossowski's fiction in the context of his 'Laws of Hospitality' trilogy, a series of erotic-philosophical novels written between 1953 and 1960, the *tableau vivant* plays an important role in the description of a (fictional) set of paintings related by Klossowski's protagonist Octave, an aging, perverse theologian and art collector, thought to be a double for the author himself. The first novel in the trilogy, *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes* (1959),⁶ comprises a set of diary entries written by Octave and his wife Roberte, oscillating between two narratives: the first, Octave's commentary on the works of an imaginary pompier artist named Tonnerre, the erotically-charged paintings that form Octave's personal collection and (2) the description and enactment of the bizarre custom that he and his wife share, referred to as the 'laws of hospitality.' These laws, codified by Octave and pinned to the wall of their abode, detail the rules of their home, that Octave, in his duties as host, must offer his wife to the pleasure of his many fortuitous house-guests. For Octave, the rationale for these laws is perversely theological, legitimized by an argument from medieval Scholastic philosophy, a line of reasoning that rests on the following premise: in order to possess the essence of Roberte, Octave must first deny her purely accidental distinctions ("society woman," "wife," "hostess") to uncover her "essence" in the moment of its becoming. Over the course of the narrative, the setting of the novel becomes increasingly surreal. Its most frequently cited episode is the infamous scene in which Roberte, tied to parallel bars, has the palms of her hands licked by a hunchbacked dwarf and a giant. Such scenes have an ambiguous relationship to the laws described. Are they, in fact, offerings of Octave's wife according to these laws? Are they imaginary? In descriptions resembling dreams, are they instead projections of the husband's desire? The question of these visions' origin, whether Octave's descriptions might be trusted, or, if they are too marred by pathology to be extricated from the logic of his peculiar desires, is the question present in the other aspect of the novel, in the erotic and eroticizing descriptions of the paintings. "Is there not risk enough," Octave wonders, "that my own descriptions, though based on the painting's material reality, should hint at a morbid reverie?"⁷

Octave's formal descriptions of his art collection, which account for the greater portion of the novel, are remarkably similar to those descriptions he gives of his wife Roberte while she undergoes various forms of sexual acts. Often neglecting explicit sexual description, Octave places primary emphasis on the hands and what they express: resistance or beckoning. There remains room enough in these passages for the descriptions to be fabricated, to be an analysis of events, or analyses of paintings that are skewed by Octave's predilections, a reading encouraged by the fact that the paintings so closely resemble the situations that Roberte herself becomes involved. This problem of origination regarding Octave's textual analyses becomes summarized in the problematic of the *tableau vivant*, which Octave writes about in length in reference to the subtleties of reading the images: "In the motifs represented in several pictures [...] you recognize a propensity for scenes where violence is due to a cunning unveiling—not to the unveiled, not to the nudity, but to the unveiling, to what is in itself the least pictorial instant." "The eye," he says, "likes to rest upon a storyless motif, and our artist seems to unsettle this repose by suggesting to the mind what the painting hides. But as he is no less a thorough expert upon the space in which the object of his emotion is situated as volume, this suggestive vision comes from his skill at suspended gesture—one is almost prepared to believe he did his paintings after 'tableaux vivants.'" "In effect, though the *tableau vivant* genre is but one manner of understanding the spectacle life offers itself, what does this spectacle show us if not life reiterating itself in an attempt to right itself in the midst of its fall, as if holding its breath in a momentary apprehension of its origins; but reiteration of life

by life would be hopeless without the simulacra produced by the artist who, to produce this spectacle, manages to deliver himself from reiteration.”⁸

At the center of the *tableau vivant*, thus, for Octave, is the suspended gesture, the holding of breath by the actor of the enacted painting, who, attempting to maintain this ‘natural’ state, a gesture indicating the movement of its character, sways under the pressure of the forces of gravity upon him. This gesture supposedly indicates something to be interpreted, but is characterized instead by an uneasiness. This uneasiness, for Octave, exists as the effect of the intrusion of language (the intrusion of interpretation) into the flow of material reality, from which the ‘idea’ of the gesture is isolated. “To what words do these gestures relate?” Octave asks. “Probably to those the painter supposes said by his characters, no less than to those the spectator may be saying as he contemplates the scene.”⁹ This opposition between ‘gesture’ and ‘language’ becomes evident in the opposition represented itself in the fixed state of the gesture—immobile, but supposedly representative of movement: “life giving itself as a spectacle to life; of life hanging in suspense.”¹⁰ Octave explains this disjunct by reference to the phenomenon of the *solécisme*, an error in the gesture’s “syntax,” as if the ambiguous gesture proceeds from a grammatical mistake in the body’s own non-verbal language: “But if it were a matter of solecism,” he says, “if it were something contrary which the figures utter through this or that gesture, they must say something in order that this opposition be palpable; but painted they are silent; would the spectator speak on their behalf, in such a way as to sense the opposite of the gesture he sees them performing? It remains to be seen whether, having painted such gestures, the artist wanted to avoid solecism; or whether, from painting the kind of scenes he chose, he was, to the contrary, trying to demonstrate the positiveness of the solecism which could be expressed only through means of an image.”¹¹

What is at stake between Octave’s reading of the *tableau* and his fantasy, involving himself as voyeur to the exploitation of Roberte, the philosopher Deleuze summarizes in his essay from the appendix of *Logique du sens*: “He [Octave] attempts to multiply Roberte’s essence,” he writes, “to create as many simulacra and reflections of Roberte as there are persons in relation to her, and to inspire Roberte to emulate somehow her own doubles, thanks to which Octave, the voyeur, possesses and is able to know her better than if he had kept her, quite simply, for himself.”¹² The problem for Octave’s analysis of the *tableau* is precisely that it breaks with the singularity of the subject and implies, in the solecism, the conditions for recognizing the *insignificance* of the object. “One possesses thoroughly only what is expropriated, placed outside of itself, split in two, reflected in the gaze, and multiplied by possessive minds.”¹³ Hence, if vision takes the form of possession, consisting in a doubling, a dividing and a multiplying of the image, the voyeur, in witnessing what occurs, has a more intense participation than if he were immediately involved. Envisioning the object, in other words, in its *insignificance* means to ‘possess’ what exceeds personal experience, what is multiple in the object: “To possess is thus to give over to possession and to see the given multiplied in the gift.”¹⁴

To Lyotard’s critique of the drives in Freud’s project, it suffices to say that ‘reality’ “is only ever a sector of the imaginary field which we have agreed to renounce, from which we have accepted to withdraw our phantasms of desire.”¹⁵ The image, the phantasmatic object, is given first; it correlates to the vision of the subject; the solecism is negated, and hence the image is understood as grammatical. “Representation,” writes Lyotard, “is therefore essential to this phantasmatic; it is essential that the spectator be offered instances of identification, recognizable forms, matter for the memory, because it is at the price of going beyond this and disfiguring the order of propagation that the intense emotion is felt.”¹⁶ This price paid (‘disfiguring the order of propagation’) is the dissolution of the subject, of the productive self, and the sudden emergence of a ‘new’ “unproductive” subject, which Octave aspires for his wife Roberte: “This image of self, mirrored in the gaze of others upon her, only comes to her when inside her there wells up the irresistible urge to live, which she thinks she is obliged to curb, an urge to be free of her dignity, of this dignity that seems to be engraved in the regularity of her features.”¹⁷

The price of dissipation, and its resultant creation of a new subject, “is the same price” writes Lyotard, “that the cinema should pay if it goes to the first of its extremes, immobilization: because this latter [...] means that it would be necessary to endlessly undo the conventional synthesis that normally all cinematographic movements proliferate.”¹⁸ In the context of Lyotard’s early writings, acinema presents a theory tied to this larger project of libidinal economy: a project to render, against the ravages of institutional signification, an alternative political economy for the preservation of impulsive life. If classical cinema produces through its conventions of framing and editing a ‘glorious body’ in the form of a cinematic language, acinema retrieves its libido in the form of cinematic disruption. These disruptions (in reference to the critique of suture theory) would not have a ‘negative existence’ against the positive constructions of cinematic form. Disjunctions between soundtrack and image, between images themselves, contain the only essential form of cinema. The notion that a medium’s structure prefigures narrative content is undermined, from the seat of the spectator, by the fact that content is, again and again, eternally present. The difference for Lyotard is that the first shot (understood as the “phantasm”) eternally recurs, figuratively speaking. Its aesthetic is not simply that of a visual practice alternative to the classical paradigm; its aesthetic is that of vision itself, of Octave’s vision, a vision that doubles and redoubles and never in fact possesses what it seeks. Beyond the tragic dissolution of an ideal spectator, what emerges for Lyotard is the place of a creator (an editor, a director), who sees the image freed from conventional burdens. Narrative is thus known as that which offers the image (and the impulses) fictitious goals and meanings.

This revelation, however, is not the end of fictions once and for all, a total de-mystification. “If we demystify,” says Klossowski, “it is only to mystify more thoroughly.”¹⁹ What becomes revealed, after conventional narratives are unsettled, is a choice: either to produce simulacra in conformity to the constraints of communication or to produce them via the obsessional constraints of perversion. This choice, for Lyotard, marks the place of the artist—the place of Octave whose desires faithfully shape and distort his readings. The exchange of images according to this latter model represents a ‘fraudulent exchange,’ a rupturist form marked by the intensities of the voyeur-artist, who, in his brooding over the unified, immobile image, denounces his own inadequacy to reproduce it in thought.

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Notes

- ¹ Lyotard, Jean-François. “L’acinéma,” *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*. Éditions Galilée, 1994, 58. Originally published in *Revue d’esthétique*, n° 2-4, 1973. “Aucun mouvement [...] n’est donné à l’œil-oreille du spectateur pour ce qu’il est....[A]u contraire tout mouvement proposé renvoie à autre chose, s’inscrit en plus ou moins sur le livre de compte qu’est le film, vaut parce qu’il revient-à autre chose, parce qu’il est donc du revenu potentiel, et du rentable.”
- ² “Suture,” a term appropriated by Jacques-Alain Miller from Lacan, is applied for the purpose of designating the relationship of the subject to the chain of its discourse. The concept of suture was formally introduced in a lecture entitled “Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier.” *Cahiers pour l’analyse* 1, Winter 1966.
- ³ Silverman, Kaja. “Suture (excerpts).” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen. Columbia UP, 1986, 219.
- ⁴ Lyotard, “L’acinéma,” 65. “Le film agit ainsi comme le miroir orthopédique dont Lacan a analysé [...], la fonction constitutive du sujet imaginaire.”
- ⁵ Ibid. “Mais le problème véritable [...] est de savoir *pourquoi il faut*, aux pulsions éparées sur le corps polymorphe, un objet où se réunir. Dans une philosophie de la conscience, ce dernier mot dit assez que cette exigence d’unification est donnée par hypothèse; elle est la tâche même d’une telle philosophie; dans une « pensée » de l’inconscient [...], la question de la production de l’unité, même imaginaire, ne peut plus manquer de se poser dans toute son opacité.”

- ⁶ Klossowski, Pierre. *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*. Éditions de Minuit, 1959. In terms of publication dates, this novel was the second release. After the completion of the trilogy, Klossowski re-defined *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes* as prequel to the earlier *Roberte, ce soir*. Minuit, 1953.
- ⁷ Op cit, 145. "Ne serait ce pas déjà un risque suffisant pour ma propre description, si elle ne s'appuyait sur la réalité matérielle du tableau, qu'elle laissât transpire une rêverie morbide?"
- ⁸ Ibid., 14-15. "Dans les motifs que représentent les quelques tableaux [...] on reconnaît une propension pour des scènes dont la violence est due à un savant dévoilement—non au dévoilé, non à la nudité, mais à l'instant en soi le moins pictural"; "[L]'oeil aime à se reposer sur un motif sans histoire, et notre artiste au contraire semble contrarier ce repos du regard en suggérant à l'esprit ce que la peinture dérober. Mais comme il n'en est pas moins un connoisseur accompli de l'espace dans lequel se situe en tant que volume l'objet de son émotion, cette vision suggestive tient à son art du geste en suspens—au point que l'on pourrait croire qu'il a peint ses toiles d'après des « tableaux vivants »"; "En effect, si le genre du tableau vivant n'est qu'une manière de comprendre le spectacle que la vie se donne à elle-même, que nous montre ce spectacle sinon la vie se réitérant pour se ressaisir dans sa chute, comme retenant son soufflé dans une appréhension instantanée de son origine; mais la réitération de la vie par elle-même resterait désespérée sans le simulacra de l'artiste qui, à reproduire ce spectacle, arrive à se délivrer lui-même de la réitération."
- ⁹ Ibid., 12. "Quant à la parole? Sans doute à celle que le peintre suppose dite par ses personnages, non moins qu'à celle du spectateur en train de contempler la scène."
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 16. "[L]a vie se donnant en spectacle à elle-même; de la vie demeurant en suspens..."
- ¹¹ Ibid., 12. "Mais s'il y a solécisme, si c'est quelque chose de contraire que les figures font entendre par un geste quelconque, il faut qu'elles dissent quelque chose pour que ce contraire soit sensible; mais peintes, elles se taisent; le spectateur parlerait-il donc pour elles, de façon à sentir la contraire du geste qu'il les voit faire? Reste toujours à savoir si, pour avoir peint pareils gestes, l'artiste voulait éviter le solécisme; ou si, à peindre le genre de scènes choisies, il cherchait en revanche à démontrer la positivité du solécisme qui ne s'exprimerait que par l'image."
- ¹² Deleuze, Gilles. *Logique du sens*. Minuit, 1969, 328. "Il s'agit pour lui de multiplier l'essence de Roberte, de créer autant de simulacres et de reflets de Roberte, qu'il y a de personnes entrant en rapport avec elle, et d'inspirer à Roberte une sorte d'émulation avec ses propres doubles, grâce auxquels Octave-voyeur la possède et la connaît mieux que s'il la gardait, toute simplifiée, pour lui-même."
- ¹³ Ibid. "On ne possède bien que ce qui est exproprié, mis hors de soi, dédoublé, reflété sous le regard, multiplié par les esprits possessifs."
- ¹⁴ Ibid. "Posséder, c'est donc donner à posséder, et voir ce donné, le voir se multiplier dans le don."
- ¹⁵ Lyotard, *Discours, figure*. Klincksieck, 1971, 284. "La réalité n'est jamais qu'un secteur du champ imaginaire auquel nous avons accepté de renoncer, duquel nous avons accepté de désinvestir nos fantasmes de désir."
- ¹⁶ Lyotard, "L'acinéma," 67. "Il est donc essentiel à cette fantasmagorie d'être représentative, c'est-à-dire d'offrir au spectateur des instances d'identification, des formes reconnaissables, et pour tout dire matière à mémoire car c'est au prix, répétons-le, d'outrepasser celle-ci et de défigurer l'ordre de la propagation que se fera sentir l'émotion intense."
- ¹⁷ Klossowski. *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*, 56-57. "Encore cette image de soi, reflétée par le regard d'autrui, ne lui vient-elle que dans l'irrésistible montée du besoin de vivre qu'elle pense se devoir de réfréner, besoin de se libérer de sa dignité, de cette dignité comme inscrite dans la régularité de ses traits."
- ¹⁸ Lyotard, "L'acinéma," 67. "C'est le prix même que devrait payer le cinéma s'il allait au premier de ses extrêmes, l'immobilisation : car celle-ci (qui n'est pas l'immobilité) signifierait qu'il lui faut sans cesse défaire la synthèse convenue que tout mouvement cinématographique répand."
- ¹⁹ Klossowski. *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*. Mercure, 1969, 194. "[O]n ne démystifie que pour mieux mystifier."

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