Transmediation of the Real: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Film Adaptation of Literary Texts

By
Hee-Seung Irene Lee

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Abstract

The adaptation of literary texts for screen has been one of the most significant forms of filmmaking from the beginning. The ubiquity of this practice suggests that key psychical forces such as desire and drive must be operative there. Yet these have been less studied than the textual, aesthetic and industrial dimensions of screen adaptation. My intention is to interrogate how these unknown psychical factors function in the course of transferring what is on the page to screen. In this sense, this thesis sets to analyse the agency of the subject of the unconscious in the locus of screen adaptation. Such a psychological dimension is pivotal to understanding the reasons why this particular media practice has survived persistent fidelity criticism as well as irreducible dissatisfaction with films based on books, which is often captured in the phrase ‘the book is better.’ In order to trace what is buried and repressed in the process of textual transformation, the study employs the knowledge of psychoanalysis the ground of which was founded by Sigmund Freud and then elaborated by Jacques Lacan. Being guided by psychoanalytic concepts the thesis seeks an access to the level of subjectivity, where a speaking subject is permanently on the process of adaptation through the ongoing conversation with texts – both an original literary text and its film adaptation. To put it differently, a psychoanalytic approach to film adaptation will serve to liberate the term ‘adaptation’ from its limited definition as textual transformation and to lead it to the ambivalent locus in which subjectivity and textuality cannot be separated in a clear sense. Therein, I hope the study, positioned between media studies and psychoanalysis, can shed insight into the concept of adaptation as a philosophical notion that addresses the complexity of film adaptation as a practice of a speaking subject. In its conclusion, the thesis attempts to conceptualise adaptation as the fundamental mode of being of the human subject, as it is highlighted by our continuous desire and drive to adapt and to be adapted.
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Chapter 1. Introduction: Screen Adaptation, a Symptom of Culture

In the landscape of modern media, adaptation is omnipresent. As is claimed by many pioneers of adaptation studies, adaptation is ubiquitous and, moreover, continuously expands its territory into every branch of mass media as soon as a new trend or technology arrives on the scene. Linda Hutcheon captures the prevalence of adaptation when she writes, “[a]daptations are everywhere today: on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels and comic books, in your nearest theme park and video arcade.”¹ This description not only acknowledges the pervasiveness of adaptation but also implicates the almost organic flexibility of adaptation, which threatens to annihilate the presumed boundaries between different species of media.

Perhaps due to this trans-territorial nature, adaptation has largely escaped sustained disciplinary incorporation by academic discourses and consequently adaptation studies has remained unsettled as a discipline despite the lengthy history of adaptation as practice. However, the real struggle has been caused not by indifference but by implicit as well as explicit hostility toward the ambivalent nature of this cultural practice and its outcomes. In particular, screen adaptation, as the first and primary subject matter of adaptation studies, immediately became an object of scornful criticism from both literary critics and film scholars, who uniformly asserted that this act of transmission and transformation severely marred the purity and authenticity of the respective art forms. The pervasive negative view about screen adaptation, which is often captured in the phrase ‘the book is better,’ has also hindered theoretical efforts to grasp adaptation as a free-standing object of academic discourse. In response to such disapproval, adaptation studies was spearheaded by the

shared sentiment against such prejudiced critiques as well as a firm commitment to build up a locus of discussion to facilitate unbiased readings of screen adaptations. Individual and collective efforts by many scholars have followed George Bluestone’s book, *Novels into Film* (1957), which is generally regarded as a seminal work in the field. Since then, scholars have sought common ground accommodating diverse interests in screen adaptation, which has gradually been established and now consolidated to a certain degree. On one hand, the search seems to be still ongoing: in the introduction to the first volume of the journal *Adaptation*, launched in 2008, the editors – Cartmell, Corrigan and Whelehan – advocate the necessity of establishing and sustaining adaptation studies as “a discipline of its own right” without prejudice. A profound shift was made in this direction when adaptation studies moved from English departments to film departments. This transposition set adaptation studies free from fidelity criticism, where literary originals set

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up the guidelines for film analysis, allowing it to embrace a wider range of approaches to its object. Most of all, this change has signified that films, whether they adapt canonical literary texts or pulp fiction or video games or historical events, eventually occupy the place of a central text to be read and analysed. To me, this maturation of adaptation studies in film studies has now opened up adaptation studies as an interdisciplinary one, and allowed work such as this thesis to deal with screen adaptation from an ‘ambivalent’ position rather than from traditional methods of literary on film analysis.

Looking more closely at the development of adaptation studies, one can recognise a consistent force that has led adaptation studies to its present situation, namely the antagonism and resistance to a discourse of fidelity in which a film adaptation is bound up with the notion of ‘a copy’. Seen from the judgemental approach of fidelity discourse, an adaptation, by any measure, is destined to lose some of the meaning or value of the original literary text. The concept of fidelity becomes even more problematical when it is imposed on an adaptation by the claim that an adaptation ‘ought to’ be faithful to its original at the same time as most comments adopting fidelity as a parameter advocate the innate impossibility of completing this task. Often we discover an overt condemnation of using fidelity as a critical measure in the majority of the literature from the field of adaptation studies. For instance, in Cartmell and Whelehan’s book *Screen adaptation: Impure Cinema* fidelity criticism is described as an exasperating phantom which it is difficult to dismiss. As the authors remonstrate,

> Fidelity is tiresome as a critical strategy not least because it is an inexact science deployed to compare often something as inchoate as the ‘spirit’ of the thing; but the desire for it or the

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5 Thomas Leitch discusses the transposition of adaptation studies in academia and its significance in “Literature versus Literary,” in *Film Adaptation & Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 1-21.
dread of it haunts many a film spectator's imagination and the intent lurks behind many a
screenwriter's claim to get to the heart of the source text.\(^6\)

What is interesting about the above comment is the implication that the insistence on the
custom of ‘fidelity’ has something to do with the subjective and psychological, rather than
objective and textual, dimension that operates in the unconscious of critics, audiences and
adaptors alike. This, to me, accounts for the theoretical direction piloting the main body of
adaptation studies in a direction precisely opposite to impressionistic judgement in an
attempt to set adaptation free from the haunting spectre of fidelity. Studies of adaptation
constantly navigate possible positions in which an adaptation is ‘objectively’ analysed and
evaluated. Brian McFarlane’s *Novel to Film* (1996) epitomises such efforts to position the
methodology of adaptation studies firmly on the textual level by combining a structuralist
perspective with a narratologist approach. In particular, McFarlane utilises terms drawn
from Roland Barthes’ influential work *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*
(1977). The functional units of narrative are categorised in Barthes’ methodology in such a
way that a narrative can be dissected into transmittable units. Most of all, Barthes’ concrete
belief in the translatability of narrative remains the stance of many researchers in the field
of adaptation studies; as Barthes claims, “[A] narrative…is translatable without
fundamental damage.”\(^7\) This provides a conceptual ground for adaptation studies, which
attempts to find its place at the exact antipode to fidelity criticism and hence to deny the
impressionistic assumption that something must have been lost in the course of adaptation.

While the structuralist approach offers a methodological ground, adaptation studies also

\[^6\] Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (New York: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2010), 20.

\[^7\] Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image, Text, Music*,
explores new possibilities for grasping adaptation as a complex and multi-faceted practice than simply transfers a story from one medium to another. This enables adaptation studies to invite a more diversified set of questions, to the extent that the speculation even encompasses for ‘non-textual’ factors of adaptation such as the common experience of loss in the course of adaptation. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo’s Literature and Film series, for instance, opens up the discussion to the concept of intertextuality and, most interestingly, addresses loss as that which a subject inevitably encounters in his or her experience of the intertextual connection between a text and its adaptation(s). In particular, it is worth noting that, in Stam’s introduction to one of the three books in the series, he understands the loss not to be textual but rather psychical. He acknowledges that a sense of loss is unavoidable since adaptation is a site where one’s phantasmatic relation to a text is about to being reformulated in confrontation with “someone else’s phantasy.” 8 In a similar vein to the structuralist perspective, Stam ascribes this psychological loss to “the gaps between very different media and materials of expression,” and he remarks that the gap should be regarded as an inevitable condition of redistributing “creative energy” across the intertextual network of different mediums and texts. 9 What is most distinctive in his use of the phrase “creative energy” is the suggestion of a libidinal manifestation in the undercurrent of the modern media practice: he discovers in the vigour and ubiquity of adaptation “its anthropophagic hunger to devour and digest and change antecedent arts” and posits that it is this libidinal force which drives and even perpetuates the practice of adaptation. 10

9 Ibid., 46.
10 Ibid., 23.
Inspired by this link between adaptation and libidinal energy, which appears to invite psychoanalytic investigation, I would like to draw a parallel between adaptation and the symptom in a psychoanalytic sense. In general, from the very beginning of psychoanalysis as a clinical discipline, the symptom has been treated as a call for interpretation; Freud oriented his praxis around “the sense (or meaning) of neurotic symptoms” and sought to understand “how to translate them.” Following Freud, the discourse of psychoanalysis has inclined towards the reading and interpretation of symptoms insofar as the symptom is taken as a message. In this vein, the connection between adaptation and the symptom suggested that adaptation study might usefully unveil the hidden psychological motivation of adaptation through psychoanalytic methodologies. Ultimately, this association intends to bring a long neglected factor into the purview of adaptation studies – that is, the function of the human subject as an invisible agent behind the practice of adaptation. To put it differently, the key interest of the following discussion will lie with the subject of the unconscious, who is sending a message through this symptomatic practice of modern culture. Indeed, if adaptation is an expression of a libidinal energy – whether it is an “anthropophagic hunger” in Stam’s words or the desire for perceptual verisimilitude which Kevin Cohen terms “cinematic desire” – it cannot be regarded merely as a textual transformation of narrative which occurs in an autonomous

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Rather, adaptation is better comprehended as a symptomatic formation motivated by the psychical functions of human subjects who are themselves engaged in various modes of adaptation. In addition, insofar as adaptation signals psychical functions underneath its phenomenological dimensions, the act of adaptation arouses a need for interpretation as does a symptom in the psychoanalytic sense, which necessitates and even demands interpretation.

Nonetheless, a message is not at all straightforward when it comes to the human subject who always says something while meaning something else. Here, I would like to complicate the associations of the symptom and its meaning by examining the assumption of a linear connection between an index on the surface and its meaning underneath. In ‘adapting’ Freud’s theory, the French theorist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan redefines the relationship between a symptom and the repressed material that finds vent in symptoms by probing the formation of symptoms in a deconstructive vein. That is, although Lacan agrees that symptoms indicate the operation of the unconscious, he is suspicious of the formulaic and symmetrical connection between a symptom and what a symptom discloses. He believes that such an interpretation has the danger of underestimating the complexity of a message. Lacan’s teaching gradually relocates the symptom and its significatory function from the Freudian vertical topology with the conscious on the surface, the preconscious in the middle and the unconscious at the bottom to the structure of three co-existing psychical registers – that is, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Within this structure, a message, to the subject, can never be reduced to the sum of a signifier and a signified. It must be defined in fluid terms because the subject is permanently caught up in the ongoing

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interrelation of the three registers. In this light, the symptom provides a site of incessant conflict and compromise between the repressed and its symptomatic manifestation. Simply put, every message needs to go through the complex process of transformation or adaptation, but such a complication of the relationship between a symptom and its meaning entails the breakdown of a hierarchical relation between a prior, underlying and thus original meaning and its surface representation. Herein, it is not impossible to decipher a connection between the concept of symptom as seen in Lacanian terms and that of adaptation as understood according to the concept of intertextuality. Therefore, it is worth noting that the chapters that follow fall under the implicit influence of this line of thought in adaptation studies, which is based on the webbed intertextual relationship between a source text and its adaptation(s), while the focus will nonetheless remain on the position and the function of the subject of the unconscious in this intertextual web. In other words, the discussion aims to dissect the intertextual correlation between an original text and its adaptation insomuch as an adaptation is a symptom that characterises a speaking subject whose psychic complexity has the potential of complicating the linear transmission of any message.

However, despite the fact that this view certainly implies the possibility that an adaptation may create a new dimension in a source text and, thus, have a retrospective influence on an anterior text, it needs to be differentiated from a reductive application of the Darwinian view of the term adaptation. Often, the Darwinian use of adaptation advocates the evolutionary value of adaptations to modernise and improve the story-telling capacity of original texts from the past. However, if one maintains distance from the evolutionary model as such, the proper Darwinian conceptualisation of adaptation is useful for expanding and advancing the notion of adaptation as a symptom of modern mass culture.
Julie Sanders argues about biological examples from Darwin’s investigation, “Adaptation proves in these examples to be a far from neutral, indeed highly active mode of being, far removed from the unimaginative act of imitation, copying, or repetition.”14 In particular, stress should be placed on the definition of adaptation as a ‘mode of being.’ Although I shall come back to this idea repeatedly in the following discussion with reference to many different terms, I would like to remark here that adaptation above all is the fundamental mode of being of culture. In this vein, it is arguable that adaptation also explains the mode of being of a speaking subject, who is born into the sphere of culture and is subject to the codes of culture in the term’s broadest sense. In other words, a speaking subject needs to adapt its primitive self in accordance with the commands and the laws of the cultural environment. Moreover, the fundamentality of adaptation becomes apparent by the fact that adaptation remains ongoing. This is the ontology of the human subject, who is under the unavoidable task of adaptation whether adaptation is seen as a biological and genetic process or a cultural and psychical process. For both, this ontology of the human subject appears explicitly in the cultural loop of the incessant practice of adaptation, as will be confirmed from a psychoanalytic perspective in what follows.

At the end of her book Adaptation and Appropriation Sanders draws attention to the trajectory of a detour embedded in the presumably ‘forwarding’ motion of adaptation. She quotes Derrida to argue the point: “Perhaps the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you as much as possible in as many forms as possible.”15 This insight, which adapts Derrida to adaptation studies, is meaningful for the forthcoming investigation

in two ways. One is the significance of desire as a driving force in the course of re-telling a story. The key fascination in the following chapters lies with the centrality of this desire underneath the phenomenological dimension of adaptation. As Sanders points out, adaptation is not a neutral and accidental phenomenon but a symptom reflecting an underlying cause, which is human desire according to Derrida’s insight. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the following study thus aims to interrogate this desire in its particular relation to the incessant and ubiquitous presence of adaptation as a symptom of culture. Indeed, the omnipresence of adaptation seems to propose that the desire for creation is neither prior nor superior to the desire for adaptation, because the detour or return of a message through adaptation is doomed at the moment of its creation. The other aim of the prospective study is related to the circular trajectory of adaptation, according to which the desire to adapt a literary text onto screen eventually returns to the scene of writing. Here, I will insist on the significance of the scene of writing, which functions as a cause of admiration, repression and anxiety for screen adaptors and as the primary locus to which their desire tends to return. Without exception, reading an original text is the first move in every process of screen adaptation. Paradoxically enough, the journey for making a film adaptation begins by recalling the scene of writing and asking ‘what did the author mean by that?’ To me, this question ties filmmakers’ imagination to the scene of writing that begot the original texts they have attempted to adapt onto screen, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, owing to the complexity and the fluidity of the relationship between a message and its meaning, the question cannot be answered easily; the anxiety cannot be resolved, and, thus, the scene of writing must forever haunt the scene of adaptation. Therefore, the overall structure of the thesis is designed to detour back to the scene of writing after looping through various scenes of adaptation.
In the next chapter, I will open up the discussion with the mythical scene that transfixes the destiny of a speaking subject within the unavoidable task of adaptation. By reading two interconnected texts by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, respectively the chapter will attempt to comprehend the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel from which ‘translation’ – that is, an a priori concept to adaptation – turns into a task which comes as both a curse and the possibility of the speaking being. From there, I will take the discussion to the field of psychoanalysis, which was founded by Sigmund Freud and later elaborated by Jacques Lacan. The introduction of psychoanalysis, in this seminal section, forms the theoretical basis for the later investigation of the desire for adaptation. In particular, the theory of the Lacanian Real, which grounds the impossibility inscribed in any signification, will be used to clarify our understanding of the psychical mechanism that perpetuates the circular move, or *detour* in Derrida’s word, of adaptation to the extent that the interlocked relation of desire and its dissatisfaction transforms the desire for adaptation into an obligation or demand, as is foreshadowed by both Benjamin’s and Derrida’s use of the term ‘task’.

What follows from the second chapter onward are four case studies which attempt to analyse particular ‘symptoms’ caused by different variants of the interrelation between an original text and its film adaptation(s). While the four case studies will orbit around the concept of adaptation, each will take a unique approach and deploy a different set of psychoanalytic concepts in order to identify psychical dynamics which propel the ongoing practice of adaptation. In particular, the weight and length assigned to each case study will vary in response to the volume of theoretical history and psychoanalytic knowledge that can facilitate the discussion of individual cases. The first two case studies will be supported with more expanded psychoanalytic lexicons, which will also offer a theoretical foundation for the latter two case studies. By contrast, the latter two case studies will focus
on one film example respectively with the intention of interrogating less conventional facets of adaptation once the two previous cases have dealt with more commonplace ‘symptoms’ that emerge through the relation between an original and its film adaptations. However, while the four case studies have individual symptoms to interpret, the overall structure will contain within itself a resemblance to the historical development of the psychoanalytic conception of human subject. To open up the analysis of symptoms inscribed in film adaptation, the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex will serve as a main stem of analysis, coinciding with the beginning of psychoanalysis in its proper sense. The next theoretical basis will be the notion of anxiety, which resulted from Lacan’s diligent elaboration of Freud’s conception of anxiety in his return to Freud. Following anxiety as such will be a transcendental mode of adaptation encapsulated in Lacan’s interrogation of das Ding, in alignment with Lacan’s decentring effort to confront the Truth of his return to Freud only to discover the empty kernel at its centre. The last case study will articulate the concept of the traversal of phantasy, which indicates the desirable end of psychoanalysis in a clinical sense.

To introduce each chapter in a more detailed manner, the first case study will begin with the most typical case of screen adaptation, which is moulded by the Oedipus complex of cinematic sons in relation to their great literary fathers. This chapter will investigate the psychical configuration determining the respectful attitude of a film adaptation toward its original through analysing film adaptations of Hamlet. Various screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s Hamlet under the shadow of the Father’s ghost seem to epitomise the pervasive relationship between a canonical literary original and its film adaptations. In particular, the awe-struck attitudes of Hamlet filmmakers will be examined through the fundamental psychical configuration of a speaking subject, called the Oedipus complex. In
detail, the chapter will analyse three film adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – that is, Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948), Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1990) and Kenneth Branagh’s *Shakespeare's Hamlet* (1996) – to comprehend the traditional rapport between an anterior text and a posterior one. I will also interrogate the relationship between different film adaptations of the same material by analysing these three *Hamlet* films, which will manifest an extension of the Oedipal relation between the former adaptation and latter ones.

The second case study will focus on the opposite reaction to the influence of source texts as epitomised by Hitchcock’s resistance and defiance. The director, who is famous for his overarching control over the entire course of filmmaking, actively denied any literary sources he adapted onto screen, despite the fact that his filmography consists of forty-four adaptations of literary sources out of his fifty-three films. The chapter will attempt to explore the other end of the scale, asking what such resistance reveals about the hidden side of Hitchcock’s disrespect and ignorance of ‘cheap’ originals to be consumed and easily forgotten. The discussion, thus, forms a dialectic relation to the paternal authority of originals canonised by *Hamlet* films. I will employ the concept of anxiety signalling the subject’s abhorrence of the Mother by reading Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1941) and *The Birds* (1963), which intriguingly are based on a novel and a short story both written by the contemporary female author Daphne du Maurier. To me, Hitchcock’s vehement rejection of the influence of these originals offers an exemplary case of anxiety in confrontation with the alluring shadow of the Mother, in which Lacan reads an insatiable and devouring authority appearing in the disguise of the first love object. In a Kristevan sense, the abhorred Mother is represented as the uncanny object which masks and marks the lack or lacuna at the centre of the symbolic domain of the Father. The chapter intends to read
Hitchcock’s repressed anxiety through his cinematic representation of this uncanny object – that is, the Mother – and to suggest that this persistent anxiety is the hidden cause which ironically orients his six decades of filmmaking to the locus of adaptation.

The third analytic chapter will move from the dialectical tension between the Oedipal Father and the uncanny Mother to seek out a transcendental locus which escapes the two conflicting forces. In reference to the ternary topology or structure concocted by Freud and Lacan, the third case study will complete a triangle which resembles the psychoanalytic configuration of the unconscious. After scrutinising the apparent contest between the two types of super-egotistical forces, the chapter will consider Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), an adaptation of Stephen King’s novel of the same title, as a revealing trace of the most unfathomable dimension of the unconscious. Herein, the Real in the unconscious, which never comes to the surface through symptoms, will be the object of interest approached through employing one of the most mysterious concepts in Lacan – *das Ding* [the Thing]. *Das Ding*, to Lacan, points to that which is inaccessible through the subject’s imaginary and symbolic registers, yet speaks the Truth of the human subject. Interestingly, Kubrick’s adaptation of King’s conventional horror overlaps with Lacan’s path to *das Ding*: Kubrick took an exceptionally extended course to adaptation, in which he carefully peeled off the linguistic and imaginary masks from the nexus of the novel’s horror as if the filmmaker wanted to discover what is left when adaptation is understood as deprivation. Kubrick’s adaptation leads spectators through the enormous maze and makes them confront the hidden face of the nameless and shapeless horror – that is, the Thing. The Lacanian concept *das Ding* will be Ariadne’s thread in exploring the maze at the core of this adaptation.
The last analytic chapter will offer a close reading of Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation* (2002), which is an anecdote about adaptation rather than an adaptation itself. The story is about the onscreen persona of the real adaptor Charlie Kaufman, who pens the film’s script as remotely based on Susan Orlean’s popular non-fiction *The Orchid Thief*. As an exemplary film showing how adaptation can be treated in postmodern terms, *Adaptation* self-reflexively delineates the manifestations and operations of desire, drive, anxiety and obsession in the course of writing a screen adaptation. Even more overtly than previous chapters, this chapter will turn the discussion back to the scene of writing, in which the adaptor seeks to encounter the ‘original or authentic’ meaning so that he can begin his writing from there. Writing, as the film’s recurring metaphor, epitomises what Freud and Lacan termed as the original or fundamental phantasy and its irreducible gravity. Kaufman’s struggle with severe writer’s block illustrates the way in which this self-conscious and ‘neurotic’ film about adaptation finally resists confronting, yet continues being transfixed by the fundamental phantasy which is embodied in the repeated scene of writing. Consequently, the film’s narrative, like a dream, is barely coherent and features a dazzling array of phantasmatic scenes overlapping one another. The analysis will focus on how the film repeats the original phantasy within its disorienting narrative structure in order to capture the centripetal trajectory behind the seemingly linear move from the past to the present. Herein, I will attempt to understand the ultimate aim of screen adaptation by aligning it with the concept of ‘traversing the fundamental phantasy,’ which Freud and Lacan both understand to be the end of analysis.

With this last analytic chapter, the thesis arc will return to the fundamental phantasy deeply buried in the process of adaptation and suggest that adaptation is driven by the desire to fill the gap created by its inability to access the scene of its own birth, which Jonze’s film
envisions as the scene of writing. This enigmatic and ungraspable moment of birth is, more often than not, inscribed as the Truth or true meaning secretly buried in an original text. This inaccessible true meaning is admiringly desired, disdainfully rejected, contemplatively dissected or endlessly phantasied, as the four case studies will demonstrate. Adaptation, in this light, is a doomed process resembling the subject’s pursuit of the scene of his or her own birth, and hence the reason for one’s existence, by means of phantasy. Owing to the innate impossibility, this pursuit turns into a sometimes pathological symptom, which may result in the subject’s capture in an endless loop of lethal repetition. However, adaptation, like psychoanalysis in a clinical sense, also contains the possibility of breaking free from the loop by constructing a new and more pleasurable link to the constitutive lack. That is, adaptation provides a chance to traverse the fundamental phantasy by seeking the pleasure of creation even in the process of retelling the same story over and again. In the conclusion, I will to explore this paradox of human subjectivity with the help of the Lacanian concepts of metonymy and metaphor. By speculating the two fundamental functions in the unconscious the close of the thesis will attempt finally to touch the deepest layer of adaptation where subjectivity and textuality are no longer separable. At this point, adaptation becomes a new name or metaphor for the subject that is “a being in the process of becoming” and thus adapting.\footnote{Jacques Lacan, \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Techniques of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955}, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York and London: Norton, 1991), 105.}
Chapter 2. The Real of a Text and the Task of the Adaptor

Desire is a relation of being to lack. The lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists.

--- Jacques Lacan, Seminar II

Lost in Adaptation

I would like to start the chapter by asking what causes the sense of loss, which is shared and commented on not only by audiences and critics but also by filmmakers who adapt a literary text onto screen. This experience of loss, which appears as the common denominator of most disapproving reviews, is often justified by assuming a lack which the course of adaptation is considered to inflict. In other words, most complaints about the ‘missing part’ – whether this means actual elements of the original narrative or a measure of depth and complexity – presuppose something that must have been lost in adaptation and whose loss evokes the disappointment and dissatisfaction experienced by many. Therefore, my aim here is to speculate on what has been lost in adaptation and the irreparable lack thereby left in posterior texts, at least as the arguments go.

In general, various works of cultural studies have tried to locate the cause of the sense of loss in the gap between the two different media – literature and cinema. As sketched in the previous chapter, fidelity criticism is one of these attempts, specifically the one that is characterised by its hierarchical configuration of the two media, which relegates the loss as an outcome of the inferiority of film.17 Although adaptation studies does not discriminate

17 Robert Stam speculates on the origins of the pervasive ‘allegation’ of the superiority of literature
as such, it does admit the existence of an irreducible fissure separating literary representation from cinematic representation. The theory of media specificity supposes that the ‘different’ modes of representation should be placed in equal rank and the privilege of language over image and sound should be substituted by a parallel between the two media. In this view, screen adaptation can be conceived as a practice of translation, which denotes a ‘horizontal migration’ from the register of literary language to filmic language. Timothy Corrigan points out that, in this sense, adaptation “implies a translation between ‘languages’ that will always be only approximate.” Robert Stam also suggests that translation is one possible trope for making sense of adaptation: “[t]he trope of adaptation as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation.” This shift in perspective makes it clear that loss is always involved in the transition between any two languages, since it inevitably leaves something lost in translation.

However, while media specificity can save screen adaptation from prejudicial critique, it is still hard to explain the inexplicable persistence of the desire for adaptation or the desire to be faithful to an original text. To consider this fundamental desire is to shift adaptation studies into the psychoanalytic arena. Accordingly, the current chapter aims not to detect

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what is missing from an original text, but rather to utilise what is lost in translation as a locus for examining a persisting psychological motivation for adaptation under the disguise of negative emotions. In fact, the function of the lack or loss is pivotal to understanding the psychical dimension of adaptation, which has so far remained unexplored in the discussion of adaptation studies. As a theoretical frame, a psychoanalytic approach will enable the current study to relocate the lack from the textual level of screen adaptation to the ways in which human subjects are engaged with the process of adaptation and its outcomes. In this sense, the quotation from Jacques Lacan at the beginning of the chapter lends insight by suggesting that, even though lack seems to frame the experience of screen adaptation as a kind of deprivation, the ‘presence’ of lack can uncover the most powerful driving force in the human psyche: desire. In an attempt to interrogate the psychoanalytic correlation amongst loss, lack and human desire, this chapter will investigate the complex meaning of the common phrase ‘lost in translation’.

At first, based on the similarity between adaptation and translation, I detect a primordial desire driving at the heart of adaptation by taking the discussion to the almost mythical connotations of translation. In particular, the first part of the chapter will investigate the relation of a speaking subject to the loss invoked in adaptation with reference to the notion of ‘the task of the translator’ as pioneered by the two eminent thinkers Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. Both Walter Benjamin’s *The Task of the Translator* and Jacques Derrida’s *Des Tours de Babel* discuss the urgency manifested by the speaking subject’s unquenchable desire for translation. They point out the fundamentality of our desire for a ‘complete’ translation or adaptation by accentuating a sense of obligation in the subject’s confrontation with the practice of translation. The innate impossibility of completing this obligation, as Benjamin and Derrida maintain, will lead to a discussion of Lacan’s concept
of the Real, which points to the unknowable and unrepresentable dimension of our psyche. Through the Lacanian concept of the Real, I will attempt to associate the feeling of ‘lost in adaptation’ with the primordial and mythical sense of loss inscribed in the unconscious of every speaking subject. Interestingly, a closer look at the elaboration of the Real will uncover the fact that Lacan attributes this immanent sense of loss to the origin of human desire, as the opening quote proposes. In other words, the chapter will suggest that what seems lost in adaptation reflects the paradoxical nature of the subject’s persistent desire for adaptation because such desire is generated from the loss and deprivation which are characteristic of a ‘reality’ into which a speaking subject is born. Consequently, the conclusion of the chapter will orient Lacan’s teaching to the purpose of this study concerning screen adaptation by noting that this lack-in-adaptation never stops us from desiring to re-tell the same story over and again. On contrary, it keeps the desire for adaptation on track and ongoing.

**The Task of the Adaptor**

Benjamin, in his influential essay *The Task of the Translator*, conceives of translation as a fundamental mode of being to any text. He maintains that in order to “comprehend translation as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing

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20 In a recent version of the same English translation by Harry Zohn appeared in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.:Harvard University Press, 1996), the word ‘mode’ is replaced by the word ‘form’. Yet, although the word ‘form’ may be able to indicate a mode in which a thing exists, it also has an implication of a complete structure. Hence, ‘mode’, I believe, can convey a closer sense of what Benjamin meant by translation – that is, an indecisive and temporary status of a text in the long line of history – throughout the whole article.
the translation: its translatability.”21 This phrase, however, does not endorse the priority of an original to its ‘translation’, on the basis of which fidelity criticism keeps every translation or adaptation under the authoritative command of the original text. Rather, Benjamin’s argument draws attention to the role of translations and adaptations in understanding any text to be translated. He claims that there are certain works of art whose value and life span should be appreciated through “a vital connection” between the original and its forthcoming translations or adaptations.22 Hence, Benjamin defines the term ‘translation’ as a central and inclusive metaphor representing the ontological mode of a text in relation to the adaptations to follow. In doing so, Benjamin establishes the ground for comprehending translation not as a fringe of the cultural sphere but as a significant gateway to understanding a primal relation between human subject and text. Therein, Benjamin seeks to answer the central question that also goes to the core of this thesis – that is, why are we “saying ‘the same thing’ repeatedly?”23

Benjamin supports his concept of translation as the perpetually transitional mode of a text through a Hegelian understanding of history – that is, History in its constant dialectical progress. Based on this framework, Benjamin employs a series of metaphors to position the history of a text as an organic entity whose own life eventually arrives at its afterlife through translation. The question arises, what does Benjamin mean by the afterlife of a text? In accordance with the general understanding of afterlife as a life after the end, or death, the afterlife of a text comes about only after the ‘end’ of a text. This ‘death’ is interpreted from a Judo-Christian perspective in Benjamin’s article. On the one hand, it

22 Ibid., 73.
23 Ibid., 71.
signals the death of an original text as the extermination of direct access to the ‘meaning’ of the original through its translation or adaptation. On the other hand, however, the death enables the departure of an original through its perpetual rebirth “governed by a special high purposiveness.”

Most importantly, Benjamin stresses the role of the subject by suggesting that the passage from death to rebirth comes across as a task for a subject – that is, a translator or in this case adaptor – who is faced with terminating the core of a text in its original form and transposing it into another. Moreover, he regards this task as inescapable, for it is through such transposition that the ultimate purpose inscribed in the original text is eventually manifested.

We must ask, however, what is the nature of this task inscribed in the act of translation. In Benjamin’s own words, “translation…serves ultimately the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages.” Indeed, to me, it is this ‘innermost relationship of languages’ which permits the link amongst Benjamin, Derrida and Lacan because the three thinkers alike probe the core of the symbolic system in which a human being can exist as a speaking subject. In a modernist mode in comparison with the deconstructive tone of the other two, Benjamin uses the phrase pure language to indicate the primordial level of signification and communication at the nexus of the complementary relation between individual languages. In other words, what Benjamin refers to as pure language is the unrepresentable and inaccessible centre of languages, around which every language forms a complementary relation to another. By using poetic metaphors, he illustrates that languages in the practical use of human subjects are “[f]ragments of a vessel that are to be


25 Ibid., 255.
glued together [and] must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another.”26 Undoubtedly, this vessel is what he regards as ‘pure language’ which precedes or transcends the irreparable disjunction between the signified and the signifier in every semiotic system. For him, pure language is “the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intention.”27 In this sense, Benjamin’s conception of pure language is the language with no gap between the signifier and the signified, which relegates all other languages to a relationship with pure language that is “the law governing the translation.”28 Despite Benjamin’s aspirational tone, we can easily read the note of impossibility and inaccessibility in his conceptualisation of pure language and the task of reaching for it. Indeed, this ungraspable level of ‘pure’ language constructs a hole at the centre of the linguistic reality of a speaking subject. To me, Benjamin’s insight seems to foreshadow what Lacan implies by the Real, to which I will come back later in this chapter.

It remains to interrogate the relation between pure language and the task of a human subject who is constantly put in the place of a translator or adaptor. Either consciously or unconsciously a speaking subject experiences reality as a perpetual process of linguistic or symbolic construction and transposition. However, the innate impossibility within this structure creates an irreducible sense of discontent and, at the same time, an unquenchable desire for that which is impossible to achieve. In this sense, Benjamin illuminates the task of the translator as that which is provoked by “the great motif of integrating many tongues

26 Ibid., 260
27 Ibid., 260.
into one true language” and “ripening the seed of pure language in a translation.” Thus, the unavoidable task of the translator or adaptor is to ripen the buried seed of pure language, or the authentic meaning of an original, by means of transforming a text into another language, form or medium. What fixes the desire for translation and adaptation into a task is none other than the imperfection of any symbolic creation, which always leaves something yet to be translated or adapted. Turning back to the problematic sense of loss with which the chapter started, we see that the sentiment of loss or lack by which screen adaptations are often bedevilled is already inscribed in the literary texts to be adapted. Moreover, the fundamental lack found in the course of adaptation explains not only the sense of deprivation which is so persistent, but also the incessant longing for a perfect adaptation, which Benjamin would call the revival of ‘pure language’. In the next part, Derrida will clarify how this longing turns into a debt which places the subject under an inescapable demand.

**From the Debris of the Tower of Babel**

Seen through the lens of literary history, Benjamin’s concept of pure language echoes the craving for one perfect language that has been dreamt of by a poet. Umberto Eco, in a chapter called ‘Languages in Paradise’ in his book *Serendipities: Language & Lunacy*, delineates Dante’s life-long journey in search of Adam’s language, which, he believed, Adam had spoken with God in the Garden of Eden. Eco detects how Dante’s desire for this

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perfect language in paradise is embroidered throughout our culture in religion and myth. In Eco’s words, what is sought after is “the perfect forma locutionis whose principles permitted the creation of languages capable of reflecting the true essence of things, languages, in other words, in which the modi essendi of things were identical with the modi significandi.”

30 The great poet made every attempt to re-enact the language of paradise so as to transcend the inevitable gap between the signified (the modi essendi), and the signifier (the modi significandi). This not only echoes the desire and the task tying a speaking subject to the hole or lack which is discovered in the field of textual transformation. Eco also acknowledges that what drove this life-long journey of the great poet was nothing but a sense of sacred duty and, more interestingly, a sacred duty haunted by mythical inscription. In this section, I will look at how Derrida contemplates this relationship between a speaking subject and translation as a task which is fixed through the Biblical myth of Babel. Derrida adapts Benjamin’s text with reference to the collapse of the tower of Babel in Genesis, which not only dramatises the scene of traumatic confusion of languages but also ‘materialises’ the loss through the image of the collapsed tower. Herein, the tower of Babel is read as a mythological symbol which fuels the ‘demand’ for its restoration through the act of adaptation.

Jacques Derrida considers the story of Babel to be a fundamental myth that reveals the primordial mode in the constitution of culture. According to the Biblical parable, men after the Deluge enjoyed prosperity and ventured towards the East and discovered a plain in Shinar. There they began to build a city with a tower which would reach to the heavens so that they could ‘make a name’ – that is, to become king or God – for themselves. In a rage,

God confused their language so that they could not concoct their plan of usurpation, which was only possible because they were allowed to have one tongue. The construction of the tower had to be stopped since people could not communicate one another and this unfinished tower of Babel became the symbol of the one language which is forever lost. From that point on, men have needed to translate each other’s tongues to communicate. In the beginning of his essay *Des Tours de Babel* Derrida writes:

Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, of one place in the encyclopaedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense, [the myth of the Babel tower] would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on.31

As a critical response to Benjamin’s *The Task of the Translator*, Derrida suggests an association between the pre-Babelian language and Benjamin’s pure language insofar as both belong to “a kingdom which is at once promised and forbidden where the languages will be reconciled and fulfilled.”32 Most significantly, Derrida seeks to show how the alluring promise of pure language “fascinates and orients the work of the translator.”33 Moreover, the allegory of Babel allows Derrida to relate the Benjaminian *task* to the predominant presence of God. God, to Derrida, is a haunting name that stands in for the incontestable command ruling symbolic reality, to which a speaking being is subject. It is noteworthy that, in ‘adapting’ Benjamin’s essay into his own words, Derrida lends the text a more psychoanalytic direction. In particular, I would like to speculate on the implicit links between Derrida’s reading and rudimentary psychoanalytic concepts such as the

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32 Ibid., 191.
33 Ibid., 191
Other, desire and its forbidden satisfaction, and the Real.

First of all, Derrida expands the limited reference of the translator to every speaking subject in relation to God, who “destines them to translation [and] subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible.”

Indeed, owing to the fact that Benjamin’s *The Task of the Translator* was written as a preface to his own German translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*, the term ‘translator’ in Benjamin’s essay is easily taken as referring to a professional who is assigned to translate or adapt a certain text into another mode or language. In other words, in that Benjamin’s notion of the task is tinted with elitism, the task of the translator, who can handle languages other than one’s mother tongue, seems to connote the sacred duty of a chosen few. However, in a philosophical note, Derrida makes a parallel between a translator and a speaking subject and thereby turns translation into an ontological task. He notes that from the traumatic moment of the destruction of the tower, “translation becomes law, duty and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge.”

Herein, the task of the translator needs to be comprehended as the mission of all subjects who are destined to participate in the ceaseless process of transmission and transformation of messages.

In this sense, it is possible to say that Derrida’s ‘adaptation’ *grows* the word ‘task’ (*Aufgabe*), which is seeded in Benjamin’s essay. Derrida translates the German word *Aufgabe* as “the mission to which one is destined (always by the other), the commitment, the duty, the debt, the responsibility.”

In reading the word *task* through the allegory of Babel, Derrida suggests that, from its birth, a human being is subject to the fate of

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34 Ibid., 174.
36 Ibid., 175.
translating another’s tongue as well as being translated by others. This doomed destiny manifests itself in the field of translation and adaptation in the most intensive form. However, Derrida tries to read a positive note into the connotation of the task: he proposes that, although translation comes to a speaking subject as the inescapable task or debt, this debt is given to an heir who can ripen the seed in translation. The task of the translator from this perspective possesses the potential “to render what was first given” in his or her own terms.37 In this view, Derrida claims that although the translator is “an indebted subject, obliged by a duty” he or she is “already in the position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of survival.”38 Therein, it is possible to identify another intriguing and significant implication which Derrida brings to his encompassing notion of translation or adaptation: that is, Derrida interprets the translator as the “survivor or agent of survival” and translation as the “sur-vival” of texts.

Contrary to this positive nuance, Paul de Man, in his response to the same essay by Walter Benjamin, argues that “Aufgabe, task, can also mean the one who has to give up.”39 From the same word which Derrida translates as survival, de Man invokes a pessimistic verdict that sentences the translator to failure from the embarking moment: “the translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original.”40 In a condemning tone, de Man maintains that all symbolic activities aiming to restore what they were given in the first place “kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead.”41 To me, Paul de Man’s condemnation is not wrong if we recall the fact

37 Ibid., 178.
38 Ibid., 179.
40 Ibid., 80.
41 Ibid., 84.
that insofar as translation or adaptation is haunted by what is lost with the collapse of the tower of Babel, then every attempt of adapting an original must remain a predetermined failure. However, in this absolutely pessimistic frame, there is no room for explaining the desire intertwined with the sense of obligation. Hence, I would argue that Derrida’s seemingly optimistic view does not find a possibility of contentment, satisfaction or fulfilment in the task but rather grasps the paradox embedded in the survival of this Aufgabe. This reveals a psychoanalytic insight on the part of Derrida, who understands the paradox of human desire. Indeed, the inextricable coexistence of death and survival is captured in the Lacanian concept of jouissance, with which Lacan explains “the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom.”

42 Insofar as adaptation is the universal symptom of the human subject, de Man’s death and Derrida’s survival are two sides of the same reality – that is, the reality which determines the place of a speaking subject and its task as an adaptor under the prohibition of the universal language after the collapse of Babel tower.

If Derrida’s intention is to answer the question, ‘what drives the subject towards the endless loop of translation or adaptation?’, it is worth inquiring how he sees the function of an original text. Contrarily, for Derrida, an original text exists neither as an object to be translated nor as a container of the author’s ‘true’ intention to be transmitted by a receiver of the message. Rather, it stands in for a psychical site of command and law to which a speaking subject must subscribe: “[the original] requires, mandates, demands or commands in establishing the law.”

43 More significantly, it should be noted that there is no

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need for the prior presence of the subject since the demand of the original for its adaption – its death and rebirth in the line of history in Benjamin’s sense – is already there. Derrida says that “[t]he original requires translation even if no translator is there, fit to respond to this injunction which is at the same time demand and desire in the very structure of the original.”

To paraphrase, the command of the original lays down the law of textual transformation even prior to the emergence of a subject. This shows a remarkable similarity to the function of the Other in the realm of the Symbolic, which represents the locus of the Law in the human psyche as defined by Lacan. In a nutshell, the Symbolic is one of the three psychical registers – the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary – in Lacan’s theory of the subject of the unconscious. For Lacan, the Symbolic is characterised by its linguistic organisation, according to which the subject is destined to move from one signifier to another in search of the Truth as if commanded by the incontestable authority that is symbolised as the Other. Under the command of the Other, whose desire is absolutely incomprehensible to a subject, the sense of duty becomes merged with the construction of the subject’s desire. Hence, I would claim that a psychoanalytic framework is already utilised in Derrida’s comparison of an original text as a reminder of God’s prohibition of the universal tongue and the demand for translation.

As previously mentioned, the highlight of Derrida’s psychoanalytic insight is manifested in his articulation of the original text as a symbol of “this injunction which is at the same time demand and desire.” In his understanding of an original text as such, the task of translation and adaptation does not punitively force a subject to trudge along an utterly hopeless path, but rather fuels a subject with an ardent wish and irresistible desire. At the

44 Ibid., 182.
end of this path of desire, I will say, there waits the Real, according to Lacan, which lures a subject. The Real is none other than a different name for Benjamin’s pure language and Derrida’s pre-Babelian language – that which we have lost access to yet always wish for. Along the endless chain of signifiers the subject may catch a glimpse of the Real as a hole or a gap between two signifiers, or in our case two texts. The occasional glimpse of the hole can explain, for the purpose of the current discussion, the psychical experience of something that is untranslatable yet, like a Siren, calls out for translation and adaptation permanently. Overall, Derrida’s text delineates the ways in which the subject meets the demand for translation in his or her encounter with an original text as a command, and how it is interlaced with the constitution of desire for translation. This is a valuable insight, as it opens up a study of adaptation on the grounds where psychoanalytic concepts such as desire and the unconscious play a key role in contemplating the ubiquity and the ‘survival’ of this media practice.

To sum up, it is obvious that Benjamin and Derrida present the field of textual transformation such as translation and adaptation as a site which articulates the truth of the symbolic reality of a speaking subject at its most primordial, or mythical, level. In one sense, the two essays on translation form an exemplary pair of original and its translation (or adaptation), which continuously opens up new meanings in their perpetual conversation. Moreover, the dialectical move from Benjamin to Derrida introduces our discussion to a more psychoanalytic dimension by implying that adaptation is not in fact bound up with the textual relationship between an original and its remakes, but is profoundly interlaced with individual subjects including authors, readers and adaptors as well as audiences, who are altogether under an inexplicable sense of obligation yet at the same time are provoked by intense desire. The penetrating insight shared by the two
philosophers seems to suggest that screen adaptation is not an outcome of the recent technological development in modern mass media. Rather, a closer look at screen adaptation might return us to the constitutive myth – that is, the story of the Tower of Babel – which is unfolded through its infinite adaptations. The field of screen adaptation, therefore, might offer an opportunity to delve into the longstanding philosophical speculation about human subjectivity, which demands a detailed study of “men’s relation to the letter, [which] calls history itself into question,” in Lacan’s words.46

The Real of a Text

Previously I introduced a simplistic definition of the Real in Lacan’s configuration of the unconscious. Here I would like to accentuate the sense of impossibility which Lacan’s elaboration of the Real strives to embrace. Indeed, despite the very different disciplinary grounds, Benjamin’s manifestation of the task of the translator and Derrida’s deconstruction of the myth of Babel converge with Lacan’s conceptualisation of the Real at the point of acknowledgement of what is left indecipherable and untranslatable in the subject’s relation to a text. It is interesting to note how Robert Stam reifies the metaphysical nexus shared by the three thinkers and initiates speculation on this non-textual factor in the discourse of adaptation studies: “The author, Proust taught us, is not necessarily a purposeful, self present individual, but rather ‘un autre moi.’ Authors are

sometimes not even aware of their own deepest intentions.” Stam’s recognition of the
unstable and decentred subject in the place of the author allows me to shift the focus from
a gap between texts or media to a gap within subjectivity as an agent of creation,
adaptation and interpretation of a text. This shift depends upon a discussion of the void or
gap Lacan terms the Real, by which he means “a point which cannot be grasped in the
phenomenon, the point where the relation of the subject to the symbolic surfaces.” In
borrowing Freud’s expression, I would like to put forward this dimension of impossibility
as the *navel* of adaptation.

From a Lacanian perspective, adaptation is not a cultural phenomenon separate from the
ontological status of human subjects. Lacan supports such a point of view by noting that
“the living being is an adapted being.” Elsewhere, he again declares that the subject can
be defined only in transitional terms. Bruce Fink provides an exegesis of Lacan’s
definition of the subject in his book *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and
Jouissance*. Here, Stam’s question about the authorial intention quoted above is
conceptualised as the universal matter of human subjectivity: according to Fink, “the
speaker…is not entirely in agreement with what he or she is saying.” Indeed, the
irreversible split emerges like a mythical scar left behind by the collapse of the Tower of
Babel and is manifested at the moment when a speaking subject, “while saying one thing,

49 Ibid., 106.
51 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1995), 45.
insinuates another.” In this light, every message is already translated and adapted even before it is enunciated and written down as an original text which calls for adaptation. If this is so, however, what is the point of interrogating this vanishing point of human discourse – namely, the Lacanian Real – in a study of screen adaptation? I will seek an answer to this question by means of speculating on the Real in a Lacanian sense.

First of all, I would like to outline or attempt to capture the concept of the Real, by which Lacan means ‘what is ungraspable,’ in its relation to the other two psychical dimensions – the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Lacan’s conception of the Real, first, needs to be differentiated from what is called reality. In his elaboration of the three psychical orders at play, what a subject perceives as reality does not refer to a neutrally objective environment of his or her being. Reality, in a nutshell, is a construction of the Symbolic on the screen provided by the Imaginary. In other words, reality is none other than a sphere or bubble surrounding a speaking subject which is constituted and sustained by the linguistic structure of the unconscious, recalling Lacan’s famous aphorism, ‘the unconscious is structured like language.’ A closer look will reveal the fact that components of a subject’s reality are represented by an endless string of signifiers, like the matrix composed of infinite rows of letters in the Wachowskis’ movie *Matrix*, which are regulated by the Symbolic organisation of the unconscious. However, the subject is not entirely subscribed into the register of the Symbolic but is in a permanent relation with its partner residing in the realm of the Imaginary. Therein, everything is registered as the *imago* of self. The ego is the name for this agent, which is constituted through the imaginary function called identification. Overall, the subject in the Lacanian sense can be said to exist paradoxically in the ‘spilt’ between a speaking being and the ego and, thus, is defined in constantly

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52 Ibid., 45.
transitional terms.

With reference to this preliminary illustration of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, it is possible to designate the Real as that which is encountered at the very limit of these two psychic orders. In one sense, Lacan elucidates the position of the Real in its relation to the Imaginary by saying that “man…is interesting for the hollow the image leaves empty” in his 1960 seminar series.\textsuperscript{53} Later, he returns to the point with a newly elaborated concept of \textit{objet petit a}, which refers to “a nonsepcularizable remainder, a void (‘hollow’) that resides at the frontier between the Imaginary and the Real.”\textsuperscript{54} In the other sense, the Real is associated with the innate limitation of the Symbolic function, which always leaves something to be signified. The Real is beyond symbolisation and even resists symbolisation absolutely. Yet the paradoxical bond between the Real and the Symbolic is captured by Lacan when he notes that the Real is “the central defect around which the dialectic of the advent of the subject to his own being in the relation to the Other turns.”\textsuperscript{55} In this light, Lacan teaches us that the subject can encounter the Real as a hole in the Symbolic as well as in the Imaginary. Paradoxically, owing to this impossibility of representation a speaking subject is bound to repeated attempts to grasp it within the net of both literary and imaginary signifiers.

The above sketch of the Real in the Lacanian field may, to a degree, already insinuate how the Real is essential to understanding and identifying that which is (felt to be) lost in


adaptation. That is, the Real conceptualises the vanishing mediator between an original
text which was written in letters and a film adaptation which is realised in images.
According to Lacan’s configuration, the Real can be understood as the hole that emerges at
the juncture between the letter and the image. In this sense, I would like to suggest that this
hole or gap is manifested acutely in the course of adaptation because adaptation is an act of
crossing over between the two dimensions and hence the transposition is destined to
disclose the fatal disjuncture in the middle. Insofar as the Real is perceived as the
irreparable loss created by the split between the Symbolic constitution of a speaking
subject and the Imaginary arena of the ego, every attempt to transfer a story from page to
screen cannot avoid evoking a sense of loss and, consequently, some degree of discontent.
To put it differently, it is possible to conceive that the Real limits the subject’s ‘full’ access
to symbolic and imaginary dimensions of not only an original text but also film
adaptations, as long as the Real is present as the structural ‘defect’ of the split subject in its
restricted relation to both letter and image. Therein, insomuch as the current study is
organised around what seems lost in adaptation, as organised by the psychoanalytic
interrogation of an intrinsic lack in the human psyche, the ultimate psychoanalytic concept,
the Real, shall remain at the nexus of the following chapters, whether it is manifested or
implied.

Above, I attempted to identify the relative rather than definitive position of the Real in
terms of its relation with the other two dimensions of human psyche within Lacan’s
topology of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The next step I would like to take is
to interrogate the manifestation of the Real, which will allow me to seek an answer to the
question, ‘why does the long-lost Truth or Meaning haunt the field of adaptation?’ I would
also like to illuminate the relationship between the lack repeatedly discovered in any
adaptation and the persistence of the practice of adaptation which the previous chapter ‘diagnosed’ as a symptom on the surface of culture. First and foremost, Lacan pinpoints that the manifestation of the Real is glimpsed by “that which always comes back to the same place.”\textsuperscript{56} If we recollect that the Real points to the gap between the letter and the image, the repeated attempt of adaptation draws a very peculiar route of turning the subject back to the site of “impediment, failure, split” between an original text and a film adaptation, which is impossible to cross over.\textsuperscript{57} In other words, it is interesting to note that the task of realising the ‘Meaning’ implied in an original on screen is never stopped by the dead end where the subject encounters the impasse of every screen adaptation between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Rather, as Lacan describes, “this discovery becomes a rediscovery and, furthermore, it is ready to steal away again and, thus, establishing the dimension of loss.”\textsuperscript{58} In passing, I would like to comment on the significance of screen adaptation qua function which enables us to see the primordial level of psychical operation, which ironically emerges on the surface of mass media as an outcome of technological development far beyond the time of Babel. Indeed, as Lacan points out, the scene of Babel is rediscovered in the pursuit of what is lost in screen adaptation, inasmuch as the myth of Babel is the retrospective discovery as well as inscription of that which had been lost long ago. That dimension of loss organised by the repetition of discovery is what Lacan names the Real. In this sense, the Real of a text – where “the \textit{modi essendi} of things \textit{were} identical with the \textit{modi significandi}” – designates the primordial and almost mythical dimension of what seems to become lost ‘again’ in translation and adaptation.\textsuperscript{59} This loss

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 25.
which is embedded in a text and launches a journey of adaptation is, I would like to highlight, what this chapter has sought in Benjamin’s pure language, the irreparability of which turns every speaking subject into a debtor and heir at the same time. Therefore, the psychoanalytic concept of repetition explains how the task of the adaptor is permanently tied to the Real of a text, where every speaking subject makes the unwanted yet unavoidable discovery of what had to be lost even before his or her birth as a subject.

Before concluding the speculation of the relationship between the Lacanian Real and the loss which is repeatedly re-discovered in the field of adaptation, I would like to interrogate the gravity of this dimension of the loss from a psychoanalytic view. This, I hope, will clarify the enigmatic coexistence of demand and desire, which Derrida notes in the subject’s relation to the original text as the seat of the Law for adaptation. Without doubt, what drew Freud’s and Lacan’s attention to the dimension of the loss was the very gravity which seemed to tie the symptoms of their patients to the site of unbearable trauma against their unconscious and conscious will to seek satisfaction. In other words, the discovery of the dimension of the loss – that is, the Lacanian Real – made Freud and Lacan confront this enigmatic nexus which hauls a subject to the innate gap in human discourse. Indeed, it is not merely desire we are looking for here. In an attempt to seek the secret driving force of adaptation, the Real as a concept questions a conventional perspective, which sees desire as a primal cause of human discourse, and suggests a far more complex view in which the gravity witnessed in analytic experiences reaches out to the philosophical notion of cause. Cause, herein, refers to something that is prior to and beyond desire, which is often taken as an immediate motivation of the subject’s act. With reference to Kant’s essay *An Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Quantities into Philosophy*, Lacan explains that it is the dimension of the loss, or the gap in Kant’s term, that “the function of
cause has always presented to any conceptual apprehension.\textsuperscript{60} What Lacan means to set forth here by means of the conceptual elaboration of the Real as a gateway to the ultimate cause of any human act is the name for this cause in the knowledge of psychoanalysis which is, of course, the unconscious. Therefore, by encountering the Real as such, it is possible for psychoanalysis to approach the impasse of human reality named the unconscious. The phrase ‘approach’ needs to be read as literally as possible, since it never connotes ‘comprehend’ or ‘understand’. While being cautious not to make the unconscious an object of conceptualisation, Lacan’s intention is to mark the gravity and the centrality of the dimension of the loss through the conception of the Real. This becomes clearer when he compares the Real with the navel of the unconscious, that is, “to designate [the subjects’] unknown centre – which is simply, like the same anatomical navel that represents it, \textit{that gap} of which I have already spoken.”\textsuperscript{61}

The lengthy theoretical discussion above aimed not only to spell out the gravity of the Real of a text as a magnetic force behind the repetitive loop of adaptation. I also attempted to prepare a place for the ultimate psychoanalytic concept, the unconscious, at the nexus of the following chapters. Here, I wish to make it clear that the four case studies that follow aim to approach the unconscious as a primary cause operating in the field of adaptation from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Hence, the study may digress from a traditional frame of textual analysis which seeks to unveil a hidden connection between a signifier (a cause) and a signified (an effect). What is sought in the coming case studies is the moment of discontinuity, split and detachment between a text and its intended meaning, or an original and its film adaptation, or the spoken and written words of an adaptor and his or her intent.


\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 23.
since the unconscious can only be glimpsed when “something stumbles” in the seamlessly coherent ‘reality’ constituted by the operation of the Symbolic and the Imaginary registers.  

I would like to close the chapter by quoting the words of Bruce Fink, which seem to me to reiterate from a psychoanalytic view what Benjamin attempted to articulate in his use of the term ‘pure language’ and what Derrida strove to disclose through the image of the collapsed tower of Babel. Fink recapitulates what has been at stake in this chapter so far:

> It is the non-representational nature of the real that brings on repetition, requiring the subject to return to that place of the lost object, the lost satisfaction. Every other satisfaction pales in comparison with the one that was lost, and the subject repetitively returns to the site of that absence in the hope of obtaining the real Thing, and yet forever missing it.

As such, the subject is thus subject to the task of an adaptor, who feels the overpowering demand to translate the lost Truth written in the language in order to access to that which had been forbidden for long. However, we must remember that it is not bitter despair but rather incomparable satisfaction – if recalling what Lacan puts forward through the concept of *jouissance* – that moves the subject through the permanent loop of adaptation. Yet, at a more primordial level, this seems to condemn my wish to capture the Real of a text through the following four case studies by reminding me of the fate of every human discourse. In this sense, this is an introduction to the already failed attempt to understand the task of a speaking subject in that it gestures toward the Real of a text presented for adaptation. However, Fink’s verdict also shows how my fate is already bound to a path leading towards the impossible satisfaction I cannot help wishing for.

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62 Ibid., 25.

Chapter 3. “Adieu, adieu, adieu, Remember me”: the Oedipus Complex in Film Adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

We see, then, that the differentiation of the super-ego from the ego is no matter of chance: it represents the most important characteristic of the development both of the individual and of the species: indeed, by giving permanent expression to the influence of the parents it perpetuates the existence of the factors to which it owes its origin.

--- Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*

Claudius: But you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow: But to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness.

--- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act I: Scene 2)

The Ghost of the Dead Author

The name ‘Shakespeare’ holds a firm place in the field of modern culture, more so now than his own time. The name, just like the spectral presence of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, has thrown an inescapable shadow over many fields in mass culture and over every arena in the development of modern subjectivity. Harold Bloom notes that the force of Shakespeare is constitutive of our modern self or psychology inasmuch as his literary representation “compel[s] ‘reality’ (be it Platonic or Humean, Hegelian or Freudian) to reveal aspects of itself we previously could not discern.”64 Regarding this claim, there are many ‘reasons’ to explain the unusual expansion of influence and authority that accompanies this one name: most agree on Shakespeare’s genius as a dramatist and poet; some read his

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penetrating satire; some identify his hidden philosophical depth; some recognize his psychoanalytic insight. In this vein, the vast volume of Shakespearean scholarship has accumulated in order to search for more plausible evidence to support his perennial authority. Most of these ‘archaeological’ researches, in an attempt to discover the hidden values of Shakespeare, have little doubt about the fact that this eminent influence originates from the content of Shakespeare’s texts. In other words, it seems that such studies attempt to add a tangible materiality to the presence of the ghost named Shakespeare.

Yet, a different approach will allow us to conceive that the incontestable status claimed for the Bard’s name may result from a particular, even peculiar, psychical response of individual readers and audiences: that is, the way in which we experience Shakespeare’s dramas has already been drawn for us even before we recognise the value and virtue of his texts. To put it differently, what is significant in our relation to a cultural legacy such as Shakespeare’s dramas is not the message they deliver across the passage of time but how we are meant to respond to the message of a ghost. The apparently spontaneous respect paid to a certain cultural legacy is predetermined by a set of psychological codes regulating the reaction to what arrives as a heritage from the past. In this light, it can be said that the structure of the play *Hamlet*, starting with the awe-struck watchmen and Horatio, illustrates that what is pivotal in understanding the play is not the message of the Ghost but how individual characters and, most of all, the prince Hamlet respond to the apparition of the dead king. Herein, our analytic focus can be shifted from the textual level to the psychological dimension of human subjects in confrontation with the influence of past generations, which is experienced as the return of a ghost that ought to be buried deep and remain silent. This shift reveals more secrets about the present and ourselves than
about the past and the ghost – that is, the fundamental dimension of the civilised or speaking subject, who is necessarily the haunted subject “as being watched by the dead other and appearing before him as if before the law.”\textsuperscript{65} For a study of the cultural transformation performed in the name of film adaptation, the shift also enables a look at screen adaptation from a perspective that contrasts clearly with the traditional approach, which seeks to explain the reasons for the prolonged and obligatory authority of canonical texts over film adaptations. This chapter will suggest that the same rule or law commanding our relation to what emerges from the past may also pave the way for appreciating the adaptation of canonical texts such as Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}.

Governed by this ‘law’ of the dead, modern mass culture has been constantly exploring various ways to renew and perpetuate the authority of Shakespeare, who has been dead for four hundred years. Through the undeniable authority and influence, this dead author survives and interferes with the life of individuals living in a different time and space. Thus, it is not surprising that the forefathers of cinema started to experiment with using their new medium as a vehicle for the dramas of Shakespeare as early as 1899, that is, only three years after the Lumière brothers’ first film.\textsuperscript{66} Also, it is not difficult to imagine that, to those who wish to follow in Shakespeare’s footsteps by creating a \textit{vision} of his texts through the young medium, the words of the dead author function as an irresistible command which they dare not betray. As a result, the same words that were performed by actors on the Elizabethan stage are still being uttered by a rebellious gun-shooting teen


\textsuperscript{66} In 1899, William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, who was an associate of Thomas Edison, shot a scene from Shakespeare’s play \textit{King John} in London. See Kenneth Rothwell’s \textit{A History of Shakespeare on Screen, 2nd edition} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Samuel Crowl’s \textit{Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide} (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).
Romeo in a dystopian desert or an amateur filmmaking Hamlet in a contemporary urban landscape. Most filmmakers appear unwilling to modernise the words written by the hand of this dead father of literature and carefully limit themselves to updating the look implied and effected by his words. Therefore, despite the critical and commercial movement for the ‘democratisation’ of Shakespeare against elitism – that is, the attempt to regard Shakespeare as an entrepreneur – the cultural authority and the paternal influence of Shakespeare’s words on film adaptations of his plays have not been diminished and appear to have become even more resilient. Indeed, as history takes us further away from Shakespeare’s time, the material reality – that is, the authentic look – of his plays may fade, yet the words of Shakespeare become more compelling, like the clinging farewell which echoes long after the Ghost of Hamlet’s father disappears from the stage: “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.”

Super-ego vs. Super Ego

Even if we accept that there are some screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays that deliberately resist the influence of the originals, the process of adapting Shakespeare’s dramas onto screen is, of all adaptations, the most subject to the spectral existence of the author and the irresistible nature of his authority. Working from the undiminished influence exerted by the name of this dead author, this chapter will attempt to draw some characteristic psychological traits common to film adaptations of canonical texts. In order to construct a theoretical framework for investigating those characteristics, the study will

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employ, first, psychoanalytic concepts such as the super-ego and the ego, which are the two major agencies coexisting and contesting with each other in the individual psyche. The application of the psychoanalytic perspective, which sees human subjectivity as a site of the continuous contest between the super-ego and the ego, will add a psychological dimension to the pervasive cultural practice called film adaptation at a fundamental level. As quoted in the beginning, Freud observed the persistent and even haunting quality of the parental influence of the previous generation on the subject. Freud defined it as a psychical agency called the super-ego, and theorised the super-ego in a very close relation to the ego of the human subject. He studied how this supervising and controlling force from past generations operates not only in the individual psyche but also in the sphere of culture. By recognising the same traits in the relation between originals and their screen adaptations, it is possible to suggest that film adaptations of canonical literary texts such as Shakespeare’s are, to varying degrees, a cultural manifestation of the interrelation between the super-ego and the ego.

Among various canonical originals to be transformed into films, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* offers a most illustrative example for the investigation of the super-egotistical command of original texts to their screen adaptations. The play is centred on the problematic relationship between Hamlet and the Ghost of his dead father. The fundamental drama of Hamlet, his sizzling internal conflict, results from the confrontation with and command of the Ghost. As many literary and psychoanalytic commentators have claimed, the psychological orientation of the play leads a reader or audience to confront the space between the past and the present and between the dead and the living. In this sense, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* provides us with a proper locus for the discussion of the psychical dynamics between the ego and the super-ego in the course of the development of the
human subject. However, before investigating the relation between *Hamlet* and its screen adaptations as an exemplary site representing such a psychological organisation of the subject, the chapter will explore the Freudian conception of the super-ego and the ego in depth.

Freud, as early as his writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, recognises that there is in dreams a “mental agency which thus remains awake the censor to whom we have had to attribute such a powerful restricting influence” upon the works of the ego seeking pleasure through wish-fulfilment in dreams.\(^68\) After this initial acknowledgement of a self-censoring agency in the psyche, Freud stopped searching for the genesis of the segmented structure of the ego. Rather, he moved on to conceptualise the unconscious and to establish the core of psychoanalysis around the concept of the unconscious as a descriptive, topological and functional term.\(^69\) Thus, without much critical attention, the ego, including a self-regarding part within it, is often treated as opposing the unconscious and as a barrier, and even an encumbrance, to accessing the unknown territory of the unconscious.

Yet the significance and the complexity of the ego gradually occupy a central place in Freud’s writings from *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. He resumes the theoretical elaboration of the concept of the ego and positions it at the centre of his theory on narcissism: “The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed

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\(^{69}\) The major works in this period - such as “On Dreams” (1901; *S.E.*, V), “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life” (1904; *S.E.*, VI), “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905; *S.E.*, VI), “On the Sexual Theories of Children” (1908; *S.E.*, IX), “Analysis of Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” (1909; *S.E.*, X), “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1909; *S.E.*, X) - elaborate the relation of the unconscious to pathological symptoms as well as everyday experiences from a perspective particularly emphasising the libidinal, i.e., sexual, force working ‘underneath’. Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1910; *S.E.*, XI) provides a concise summary of these works.
to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism.” Hereby an ideal ego is formed as a part of the ego, whose aim is to return some part of the libido back to the ego. However, the constant interruption of external forces – the first and most fundamental of which Freud designates as the Oedipus complex – makes it hard for the ego to maintain the narcissistic enclosure centred on an ideal ego that has become the ego’s ultimate counterpart. Consequently, another idealised position emerges within the ego as “the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal.” This is the ego ideal that, for a certain period, Freud synonymously uses with the super-ego. The remarkable discovery about this psychical agency is that the ego suffers from the (co-)existence of the super-ego because it feels like there is an invisible eye that “constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal.” What we are reminded of, along with the vigilant nature of the super-ego, is that the super-ego, despite its overpowering force, cannot be perceived as a separate or independent entity: it can only be recognized in the ego’s illusory sense of being watched and supervised. Freud’s remark on this sense of being watched not only explains the psychological origin of the constant feeling of being judged and criticised, which the directors of Hamlet films confess to experiencing. It should also be considered in association with the fundamental task of adapting Hamlet to screen: the challenge is to actualise and materialise on screen the Ghost of the dead father, the super-ego, whose menacing gaze is omnipresent during the entire play despite its very limited presence.

71 Ibid., 94. Freud uses the two terms – an ego ideal and the super-ego – indiscriminately in a few works coming after. For instance, in “The Ego and the Id” Freud parenthesises ‘Ego Ideal’ and puts it next to ‘the Super-ego’ as if the ego ideal is another term for the super-ego for the title of the third section of the book.
72 Ibid., 95.
There is another analytic link between the Freudian theory of the super-ego and the study of *Hamlet* films: Freud conceptualises the emergence of the super-ego in terms of the resolution of the Oedipus complex, which has provided many critical reviews of the play with a key to understanding Hamlet’s (in)famous indecision. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud focuses on his second topographical structure consisting of the Ego(*Ich*), the Id(*Es*) and the Super-ego(*Über-Ich*), following and, to a certain degree, replacing his previous structure of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious. Here, he suggests that the link between the Oedipus complex and the formation of the super-ego elucidates the parental nature of the super-ego in its relation to the ego: with the increase of the fear and anxiety aroused by the Oedipus complex, the ego realises the need for repressing its own illegitimate oedipal wishes and imports a restricting, monitoring character from the parental figures. In this process, the libidinal energy is channelled into two kinds of identification – that is, the identification with the father (the positive complex) and that with the mother (the negative/inverted complex). The outcome of the Oedipus complex and its resolution through identification is expounded as follows:

The broad general outcome...may, therefore, be taken to be the forming of a precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two identifications in some way united with each other. This modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego ideal or super-ego.73

In forming the supervising agency within itself, the feeble infantile ego internalises the paternal authority borrowed from the figure of the father. This process of introjections represents the ego’s self-sacrificing efforts to repress its own forbidden wishes, even at the cost of incorporating the discomforting figure within itself. Freud assumes that it is more likely for the subject to introject the figure of the father, whom the child’s ego sees as a

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73 Ibid., 34. [Freud’s emphasis]
major obstacle in satisfying his Oedipal wishes. Consequently, “the super-ego retains the character of the father” and this internalised paternal authority functions as an innermost call for repression, inhibition and conscience for the subject’s life.  

However, it should not be forgotten that Freud, even though he does not resolve it, leaves open the discussion about the ambivalent positioning of the super-ego as a paternal authority, just as he leaves unexamined the maternal trace ascribed to the super-ego in its constitution as the outcome of identification with both paternal and maternal figures. Lacan attempts to address this ambivalence in his discussion of *Hamlet* by weaving a traditional interrogation of the play – a quintessential Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* as an oedipal drama – with Freud’s originality in reading both paternal and maternal aspects in the character of the super-ego. In this sense, *Hamlet* once again functions as a locus for the encounter between the past and the present in the form of the adaptation of psychoanalytic theory itself.

Apart from the fact that the super-ego occupies a dominating position in its relationship with the ego, the super-ego nonetheless cannot exist or function without the ego, which must be there before it. In regard to the formation of the ego as the nexus of our sense of self, Freud defines the ego as “the part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the Pcpt.–Cs. (the perceptual system of the conscious).”

Contrary to the formation of the ego as an outcome of the constant transaction between internal and external reality, the super-ego is the introjected form of the parental influence, which is an inner voice controlling the ego’s interrelation with the external world. Hence, it is possible to understand why Freud designates the relation between the ego and the super-ego as an ongoing battle rather than a transitional

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74 Ibid., 34.
75 Ibid., 36.
conflict – the continuous confrontation is what Freud describes as “the conflict between what is real and what is psychical.” For Freud, the ego as the representative of perceived external reality in the present (“what is real”) confronts the super-ego as the representative of internal command inherited from the parental authority of the past (“what is psychical”). In other words, the intersection between the ego and the super-ego is the very site at which the subject is endlessly re-negotiating the boundary between the surrounding world and internal impulses as well as between the present and the past. Moreover, it is noticeable that Freud’s theory of the super-ego expands its scope by recognising the same agency in the domain of culture based on the previous generation vigorously trying to leave its mark on the psyche of next generations. In his later work Civilisation and Its Discontents, Freud articulates a more discursive dimension of the super-ego and says that, through internalisation of the parental authority and influence on domestic and social senses alike, the super-ego “leads to the survival of what is past…[and] makes itself felt in the fact that fundamentally things remain as they were at the beginning.” Freudian theory suggests, therefore, that we should recognise a hidden meaning of the media practice under discussion here: adapting literary texts from the past into film texts of the present does not simply refer to the recycling or commoditisation of cultural legacy. Rather, the locus of screen adaptation is an exemplary cultural site where the permanent confrontation and negotiation between the super-ego and the ego in the construction of the human subject can be captured in its most ‘visible’ form.

As summarised above, Freud conceptualised the constitution of the super-ego as a

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76 Ibid., 36.
supervising agency residing ‘over and above’ the ego. In this light, it is possible to conceive that a canonical text such as *Hamlet* positions itself as a super-egotistical demand which dominates the process of adaptation and the film text itself as well as the way the audience receives it. However, it is equally noteworthy to identify the fundamental role of cinematic descendants, more precisely the ego of next generations, in initiating the process of transforming original texts. Although the present or the ego is under the spell of the past or the super-ego, the ultimate motivation for this cultural practice is none other than the *desire* of filmmakers and audiences to actualise images vaguely implied by written texts. In order to explore this other side of film adaptation, Lacan’s mirror stage theory will lead us to comprehend the narcissistic vigour reinstated by and in film adaptations.

Lacan’s influential theory on the formation and function of the ego in the constitution of the subject is germinated in his article ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ and is developed further in the first two seminar series conducted from 1953 to 1955. In these works, Lacan puts forward “the imaginary origin of the ego’s function” as a part of his attempt at setting up the boundary of the ego through articulating its functional limit in constituting and controlling the subject of the unconscious. It aims to reduce the supreme significance of the ego as a major site of psychoanalytic treatment, as claimed by the ego psychology. Lacan describes the

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process in which the infant “recognizes his own image as such in a mirror,” identifies with this *imago* which is exterior to its own body and misconceives himself to be this specular image.\(^80\) Unlike the presupposition that the ego exists from the start of a human being, Lacan’s notion of the ego has to be developed through this illusionary identification. Thus, Lacan carefully maps out the development of the ego whereas Freud put more focus on that of the super-ego. Most interestingly, the genesis of the ego is enabled by the auto-erotic instincts, which “are there right from the start.”\(^81\) This image invested with the primordial auto-erotic instincts appears desirable to the ego and this image is the *ideal ego*—that is, the counterpart to the narcissistic ego. From the genesis of the ego, the ideal image anticipated by the ego accompanies the ego till the end and “will also be the rootstock of secondary identifications.”\(^82\) The bond between the ego and its ideal image, as suggested by Lacan, is one of the most powerful ties in the human psyche and this primordial link will permanently affect the ego’s capacity to incorporate external reality into the ‘I’. Therefore, the desire to materialise pre-symbolic images provoked in the course of reading is associated with the most primordial unconscious wish to seek an image for the ego’s need for identification. These images are the ever unsatisfactory substitutes for its original form, which is an idealised image of the ego itself. Therefore, 

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the essence of Lacan’s theoretical elaboration is to explain the function of the ego in very close relation to a specular image or the other (autre) that stands in the place of the original narcissistic image.83

Lacan indicates that there is a very consistent dimension in the ego’s relation to every image offered for this relationship of imaginary identification: “this form [imago or the ideal ego] situates the agency known as the ego…in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming.”84 Hence, this ongoing demand of the ego for images for identification indicates that the subject cannot escape from the retrospective drive, returning to the site of the loss of the primal oneness between subject and the world before the Symbolic interruption of the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, the primal dimension of the ego’s preoedipal identification with the image keeps reminding the subject, which is captured in the Symbolic domain, of its imaginary origin. Indeed, this imaginary identification forever brings the subject back to “the joint between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.”85 Therefore, Lacan’s theory that the ego is formulated and fixed in the structure of the imaginary identification sheds a different light on screen adaptation from Freud’s theory of the super-ego: it contributes to understanding how film adaptations provide the canvas for the modern ego to become enlarged through the imaginary identification with the larger-than-life screen images while the commanding words of the literary ‘fathers’ such as Shakespeare function as the super-ego to regulate and inhibit the

84 Ibid., 76.
excessive expansion of the super ego, which is seeking a screen for projecting its magnified imago.

Interestingly, the theoretical development and discovery enabled by the acknowledgement of the mirror stage constructs a nexus with other concepts in the first period of Lacan’s return to Freud. The mirror stage theory opens up his detailed discussion of the formation of the ego as being elementary and constitutive of the subject. Indeed, in understanding the link between Freud and Lacan, the mirror stage theory can be considered to be Lacan’s elaboration of Freud’s theory of the ego, which ultimately leads Lacan to the concept of the Imaginary. As the development of his first two seminar series shows, the Lacanian structure of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real was gradually formulated from the conceptualisation of the Imaginary as the field of the ego into a more extended study of the super-ego as the basis for the Lacanian Symbolic. Therein, the psychical contest between the ego and the super-ego acts as a conceptual bridge connecting the Freudian topography of the ego and the super-ego with the Lacanian structure of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The ultimate intersecting point of these two domains is, of course, the Oedipus complex in its close relation to the conflict between the ego and the super-ego, as drawn above. Hence, it is possible to pinpoint the Oedipus complex as a central framework for tracing the adaptation of Freud’s reading of *Hamlet* to that of Lacan. In other words, the significance of the Oedipus complex does not arise from the fact that it is Freud’s answer to the riddle of Hamlet but from the fact that the Oedipus complex itself is a site of the fundamental enigma entailing an endless series of new ‘solutions’. Indeed, the Oedipal complex itself is the ghost that constantly returns through many artistic creations such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to sustain a mysterious and mythological domain of the human subject at the juncture between the ego and the super-ego or, in Lacan, between the
Imaginary and the Symbolic. Likewise, every theoretical move in or strand of psychoanalysis returns to this mythical locus, where an infant born in a state very close to animality mysteriously becomes a human subject that is structured through the net of the Law and civilisation. Most of all, the unremittingly conflicting agencies of subjectivity – that is, the super-ego versus the super ego – reveal the traumatic reality that the subject is never settled within the boundary of the Law even after having gone through oedipalisation. Just like the young prince himself, the subject is doomed to be perpetually haunted by the ghost that always looks for a chance to return and to place the subject once again at the traumatic site of oedipalisation. The audience in the auditorium, similarly, is haunted by the ghost of the dead author as much as it seeks the pleasure of the ego in its enlargement through onscreen images for identification.

Reading *Hamlet* through the Oedipus Complex

In order to measure the influence of the Oedipus complex upon the treatment of the play in screen adaptation, it is necessary to understand the link between Oedipus and Hamlet as they appear in the discourse of psychoanalysis as well as in literary criticism.\(^{86}\) Above all,

\(^{86}\) Here and later on, I refer to Ernest Jones’s paper “The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery: A Study of Motive” which was published in *American Journal of Psychology* in 1910 and is an original version of his much added and edited work in a book form *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). The reason for this adherence to the original version is that, apart from the fact that the 1910 paper offers an original form of Jones’ idea freshly influenced by Freud’s theorisation of the Oedipus complex, which appeared in *The Interpretation of the Dreams* (1900), this article is the text in the scholastic interrelation with Freud’s further elaboration of the Oedipus complex: immediately after its publication Freud himself read this article and referred to it in various occasions in his works revised or written after Jones’ article. For example, in the 1911 edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud makes a footnote on Jones’s article: “The views on the problem of
Hamlet is not an original character created by the author; rather his origin is as mythological as that of Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. This ultimate Shakespearean hero, who is often believed to represent the birth of modern subjectivity, ironically is adapted from a long line of Roman and other European legends of a noble young man set upon the task of revenge for his father’s death. Yet Shakespeare is the author who transformed the adventurous mode of the legend into a tragedy with psychological depth. This insightful transformation shed light on the complexity of the human mind and, three centuries later, attracted the interest of Freud, whose theory of psychoanalysis was then at its birth. At first, Freud intuitively rather than analytically linked this story of the Danish prince with the recently discovered theory of infant sexuality, a radical view of humanity which also originates from his reading of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. *Hamlet*, for Freud, exemplifies and epitomises the universality and the function of the Oedipus complex, which, as he observed in many pathological cases, results in various neurotic symptoms. In return, the psychoanalytic theory of the Oedipus complex offers many literary critics a more feasible and ultimate explanation of Hamlet’s *inaction*. Critical readings from both fields of study share the fundamental question of why the young prince forever delays slaying his father’s murderer, who has violated his mother, the Queen, and usurped the crown of Denmark from his head, despite having sufficient reason and means to kill his criminal uncle Claudius. Indeed, Hamlet seems to quite deliberately stumble at every opportunity. As Ernest Jones describes it, “[t]he central mystery in it, namely the cause of Hamlet’s hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for the murder of his father, has well been called the Sphinx of modern Literature.”

Freud’s first reading of the play and

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Hamlet contained in the above passage have since been confirmed and supported with fresh arguments in an extensive study by Dr. Ernest Jones of Toronto (1910).”

its hero, along with the analysis of the author, can be found in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and herein Freud opens up a way of seeing both the character Hamlet and the author Shakespeare in the light of the Oedipus complex:

Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*. But the changed treatment of the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilization: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind. In the *Oedipus* the child's wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In *Hamlet* it remains repressed; and – just as in the case of a neurosis – we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences. Strangely enough, the overwhelming effect produced by the more modern tragedy has turned out to be compatible with the fact that people have remained completely in the dark as to the hero's character. The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but the text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result.88

Here and in many other places, Freud puts forward two points: one is that Hamlet and Oedipus are the same in terms of the content of their veiled wishes; the other is that they are different in regard to the weight or intensity of repression upon the forbidden unconscious impulses. Hamlet has the same unconscious wishes as Oedipus has, that is, the wish for the mother’s love and that for the father’s death. However, the repression that inhibits these incestuous and murderous wishes is quite flimsy in the case of Oedipus. Although Oedipus did not know what he was doing when he killed his father and took his mother as wife, the truth of his deeds or crimes eventually becomes known to him and other characters in the play as well as to audience. By contrast, in *Hamlet* what is repressed in the deepest layers of the hero’s mind remains unknown and unconscious not only to the young prince himself but also to the author who created the character as well as to the

audience. Freud seems to have found the unconscious motive for Hamlet’s hesitation in the latent and ‘invisible’ Oedipus complex. Freud’s discovery of Hamlet’s Oedipus complex allows him as well as his disciples to find a plausible answer for the mystery of Hamlet’s vacillation. According to this psychoanalytic account, Hamlet unconsciously encounters his own repressed childhood wishes realised in Claudius’s crimes – to kill his father and to marry his mother. “Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.” 89 Therefore, the reason why Hamlet cannot carry out revenge, as he is commanded by the Ghost, is that what he ought to revenge is what he himself most desires. However, this desire in him, as realised by Claudius, cannot come up to a conscious level. According to Freud, the psychological complexity underlying Hamlet’s hesitancy manifests itself as none other than the accumulated weight of mental repression upon the more civilised individuals who wrote, acted, watched and read the play, whereas the childhood wishes of ‘the same soil’ can be acted out by the mythical figure and become conscious in the ancient drama Oedipus Rex.

Interesting is that the villain’s crime, driven by the oedipal impulses, is judged and abhorred only by both Hamlet Sr. and Jr. in the play. The indifference which other characters of the play show toward the matter of Claudius’s murder and his overhasty marriage to the King’s widow indicates that the play hinges more on an internal and psychological complex and less on external and moral conflicts amongst the members of society.

Jones’s essay starts with and expands on Freud’s insight that the play’s hero manifests the repressed Oedipus complex, and Jones emphasises the point that the play is an artistic

89 Ibid., 265. [my emphasis]
creation betraying Shakespeare’s unconscious. Jones, in detail, discusses how “[t]he artist...gives expression to the creative impulse in a form which satisfies his internal need, but in terms which he cannot translate into easily comprehensible language.”⁹⁰ Thus, the play’s multiply disguised expression of the unconscious impulses in Shakespeare cannot but appear obscure and blurred at the conscious level of the text. Yet it seems obvious that the latent level of the play strikes “problems of vital interest to the human heart”; otherwise Hamlet could not have achieved the unvarying and lasting appeals to its various audiences.⁹¹

Jones elaborately refutes pervasive critical views of the play’s hero, among which Goethe’s claim is predominant that Hamlet is “the type of an intellect over-developed at the expense of the will.”⁹² This assumption is particularly based on Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be, or not to be,” where his self-reproach provides a seemingly definite clue: Hamlet broods over his inability to act and says “the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”⁹³ Yet Jones disagrees with Goethe, finding counter-examples to prove Hamlet’s capacity for swift and bold action such as slaying Polonius in the Queen’s closet or sending his schoolfellows to their deaths by manipulating Claudius’s letter. From a completely different angle, Jones suggests that an important key to Hamlet’s secret is hidden from the rhetorical surface of soliloquy or dialogue and one has to use a psychoanalytic method to investigate the real motivation for his hesitancy.

On the one hand, Jones demonstrates in detail how Hamlet’s repressed childhood wishes

⁹¹ Ibid., 82.
⁹² Ibid., 76.
for the love of the mother and the death of the father become ‘re-awakened’ by the act of Claudius, whom he is bound to revenge. According to Jones, this particular “combination of crimes” committed by “an exceedingly near relative” reminds Hamlet of something repressed from his conscious mind while the repressed wishes insist on remaining inexplicable to his conscious speculation.  

94 What is more significant, Jones argues, is that Hamlet’s state echoes Shakespeare’s own Oedipus complex and further echoes with every reader/audience member who, without much exception, has had to go through the regulation of the same forbidden wishes. The other point he articulates at the end of his essay is the importance of understanding that the process of adaptation and appropriation of a cultural heritage is parallel with the psychological process of repression in the individual psyche. To support these points – the latter point in particular – Jones suggests a broader approach to the play than a textual analysis of the character. He historicises the genesis of Shakespeare’s Hamlet by pointing out the possibility that this literary masterpiece is the heir of many cultural forms of the same legend, such as the saga recorded by Saxo Grammaticus in the thirteenth century or the publication by Belleforest in 1564 or the play of the same title allegedly written by Thomas Kyd a dozen years before Shakespeare wrote Hamlet.  

95 In order to prove the universality of the Oedipus complex in the process of artistic creation, Jones maps out the process of ‘adapting’ the Hamlet legend into ‘the tragedy of the prince of Denmark’ on the basis of the Freudian theory of dream-work (Traumarbeit). Jones argues that Shakespeare’s Hamlet is an extraordinary example manifesting the creative elaboration, or distortion, of the oedipal wishes which are shared among most human subjects who, as a result, have created cultural products characterised by the same libidinal impulse.


95 Ibid., 103-4.
According to Jones, the play, on one level, presents a more civilised way of representing the primal desire inherent in the unconscious of the author Shakespeare. Yet, more significantly, *Hamlet* should be understood as an illustration of how civilisation has developed while projecting the most private conflict between one’s unconscious oedipal wish and super-egotistical repression onto discordance within intersubjective relationships. In particular, seen from a genealogy of the adaptation of the Hamlet legend, the Shakespearean tragedy demonstrates the course of redirecting and refining the oedipal conflicts within an individual unconscious into an antagonism between a new generation and the heritage of the past generation. The psychoanalytic interpretation of the play teaches us how these two dimensions are merged in an artistic creation. Therein the ambivalent nature of Hamlet’s dilemma is more clearly understood if one considers that the enigma and complexity of the hero’s psychology leads us to “the deepest problem and the intensest conflict that has occupied the mind of man since the beginning of time, the revolt of youth and of the impulse to love against the restraints imposed by the jealous eld.”96 Although his conclusion sounds slightly at odds with Freud’s reading, Jones’s insight appears almost prophetic. This is because he, perhaps without much conscious intention, confuses and overlaps the psychical tension of an individual’s struggle against forbidden wishes (“the deepest problem and the intensest conflict”) with the conflict between the self and what comes to it as a parental command or law (“the revolt of the youth…against the restraints imposed by the jealous eld”). When considering that the first published version of Jones’s article was immediately read and commented on by Freud, it is not impossible to assume that Jones’ shift in focus tellingly foreshadows Freud’s theory of the super-ego, which imagines the internalisation of the law of the threatening father in offering the resolution to the Oedipus complex.

96 Ibid., 113.
Over all, Freudian analysis of Hamlet as a character suffering from severe oedipal conflict, I suggest, represents the attempt of psychoanalysis to broaden the scope of its discourse beyond the level of the individual psyche. Indeed, this attempt successfully brought the attention of readers as well as audiences and critics to a veiled face of humanity. It is not difficult to imagine that the Freudian reading of Shakespeare’s drama was not only a ground-breaking interpretation of this masterpiece of Western literature but also a radically destabilising view of modern subjectivity. However, nothing can stay forever new. The power of what had once been innovative has given the analysis itself canonical status, turning it into another ghost that continually overpowers the perception of the drama, whether on the page, stage, or screen. As a result, Freud’s reading of *Hamlet* in the light of *Oedipus Rex* now haunts every film adaptation of the play.

**The Man who has lost the way of his desire**

Lacan, as mentioned in the above discussion of the relationship between the super-ego and the super ego, shifts the grounds on which we comprehend the psychical dynamics between the super-ego and the ego. That is, the relationship between the two psychical agencies can be conceived on the basis of the formation and the function of the ego rather than that of the super-ego. This change in perspective relates to a shift in the analytic position from which we seek to comprehend this immense power of the parental demand.

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97 Jacques Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller, and James Hulbert, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*,” in *Yale French Studies*, no. 55-56 (1977): 12. This article is based on Lacan’s 1958-9 seminar series ‘Desire and its Interpretation’ which has not been published officially. It is an edited manuscript for publication from three sessions on 15th, 22nd, and 29th April in 1959.
upon the young prince. In his reading of *Hamlet*, Lacan leads us to concentrate more on where this parental imperative operates – that is, in the field of Hamlet’s desire. According to Lacan’s seminars on *Hamlet*, the function of the super-ego is manifested not in Hamlet’s rather inadvertent final revenge but in his continual failure to cope with the command of the Ghost and his inability to desire what he is asked to desire – such as retribution, crown and Ophelia. In his sixth seminar series, conducted from 1958 to 1959, Lacan constructs a new perspective on the concept of desire in clinical treatment and emphasises the centrality of desire as “the determination of symptoms” in the neurotic subject.\(^{98}\) For Lacan, desire indicates that the subject is completely dependent on the signifier after the introduction and introjection of the Name-of-the-Father. With the advent of the subject’s reliance on the signifier, the libido is no longer “pleasure-seeking” but becomes “object-seeking.”\(^{99}\) His view of Hamlet as “the man who has lost the way of desire” points out that Hamlet is somehow returning to and being captured at the intersecting point where a subject, in part, renounces its pleasure in the imaginary identification of the ego with its specular image and organises its field of desire according to a tertiary relation based on its *symbolic* identification with the signifier. In articulating this juncture between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Lacan particularly emphasises the fact that the phallus plays a significant role which *knots* the two domains in a mysterious way. Hence, it is essential to begin the study of *Hamlet* with the phallus in order to understand not only Hamlet’s dilemma but also the dilemma of *Hamlet* films at the juncture between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, in which the ghost of the dead author functions ambivalently as the phallus with two faces – the *objet petit a* and the master signifier.


\(^{99}\) Ibid., 2.
The phallus, in Lacan’s excessively elusive account, is a nostalgic residue reminding the subject of the irreversible loss of the reciprocal relationship with the Mother as the Other (Autre); at the same time, it is a mark signifying the void or fundamental lack around which the subject’s symbolic structure of desire is constructed. The conception of the phallus in Lacan gradually moves from the distinction between the phallus and its primitive status as a real organ, the penis, to the theorisation of the function of the phallus initiating the signifying mechanism of desire as a whole. First and foremost, the phallus is recognised as a thing which is anticipated and demanded by the mother within the dyadic relationship between the child and the mother. Regarding this genesis of the phallus, Lacan clarifies the meaning and function of the imaginary phallus in the mother-child relationship in his seminars on psychoses: a mother requires an imaginary phallus and uses her child as a support for this demand and the child happily identifies with the ‘thing’ the mother demands over itself. Here, the phallus functions as a harmonising mediator of the symmetrical relationship between the two, yet this “common illusion of reciprocal phallicization” is based on the “the imaginary lack of the phallus” on both sides. Therein, the subject assumes the place of a thing, not yet an object, representing the lack in the Mother of the original demand. The father, in the advanced stage of the Oedipus complex, interrupts this reciprocity between the child and the mother and introduces

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100 Lacan briefly but emphatically mentions the dissimilarity between penis and phallus in *Seminar II* (1955) and puts forward the claim that the phallus emerges when the symbolic value is imposed on the real organ ‘penis’ in the imaginary identification of the female subject with “the imaginary man in the place of her own image, her narcissistic image or her ego.” [See *Seminar II*, 272]; in the 1956 seminar series on psychoses he applies the symbolic value of the phallus to the relation between the mother and the phallus with which the child identifies in order to be the object of her desire. (See *Seminar III*, 319); in the 1958 paper “The Signification of the Phallus” Lacan’s discussion is fully engaged with the transition or ambivalence of the status of the phallus between the Imaginary and the Symbolic and its symbolic function “to designate meaning effects as a whole.”[See *Écrits*, 579]

himself as a carrier, vehicle and holder of the phallus; he thus functions as a threat prohibiting the child’s pleasure in ‘being’ the imaginary phallus which is to satisfy the Mother’s demand. At the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, the phallus attains its symbolic function as the signifier that represents not an anchoring signified but its lack. This essence of the significatory function of the imaginary phallus – that is, the veiled lack at the centre of the meaning effect of the phallus – organises the whole system of desire in which the child’s renunciation of the pleasure of being the imaginary phallus circulates. This signals the birth of the subject, which sets in motion the symbolic system of desire to pursue an object to substitute for this ‘lack’. Yet the imaginary dimension of the phallus – that is, the image or the form of the phallus which is imagined by and identified with by the child and which links the child to the omnipotent Mother – does not completely dissipate. Rather, it is reduced to the objet petit a in the domain of the Imaginary, which operates in the chain of desire as “a kind of compensation for the missing phallus which, as missing, does not function in the open as an object of desire but makes its presence felt in an unconscious fantasy” as the object in desire.102

Lacan’s teaching on Hamlet resumes from the point where the ego is caught up with the reciprocal relation with the Mother. He says:

Our first step...was to express the extent to which the play is dominated by the Mother as Other [Autre] – i.e., the primordial subject of the demand [la demande]. The omnipotence of which we are always speaking in psychoanalysis is first of all the omnipotence of the subject as subject of the first demand, and this omnipotence must be related back to the Mother.103

According to Lacan’s previous explanation of the phallus in the Oedipus complex, Hamlet, in his childhood, conceived himself as the object of the Mother’s desire through the primary identification with the imaginary phallus, which Lacan designates as narcissistic in its structure and function. Then, in the advent of the Oedipus complex he saw that his father, not he, possessed the phallus, and renounced his being the phallus in the place of the father owing to the fear of castration that the father, or the super-ego in the figure of the father, invokes. His decision to leave the arena of the father’s authority for a while and to study in Wittenberg, in a way, indirectly shows the context of this character: the power of the castration complex has not been diminished for the young Hamlet and the reputation of old Hamlet as a warrior-king also supports this assumption.

At the beginning of the play, this overwhelming father is suddenly dead. The death opens up the gap resulting from the fatal loss of the imaginary phallus in his childhood and brings him back to the point where he lost it – that is, the very juncture of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, according to Lacan. Hamlet definitely needs some time to ‘mourn’ for this re-awakened loss with the help of sufficient communal rituals in order to symbolically incorporate the lost object into himself once again. In doing so, he would be able to transform the fundamental lack signified by the phallus into ‘the ultimate object in desire,’ which functions as the master signifier of desire in the domain of the Symbolic and as the objet petit a in the domain of the Imaginary. The process of mourning is necessary for this system of desire, structured round the lack of the phallus, to regain its power to let him live on as the subject of desire. However, Lacan says that the Queen’s “o’erhasty marriage” to his uncle Claudius confines Hamlet in the re-emerged status of preoedipal vulnerability in
relation to the omnipotence of the Mother’s desire.\textsuperscript{104} As a result of this marriage, Claudius assumes the place of the imaginary phallus and turns into the very real embodiment of the phallus in psychological, familial and political senses: he claims the place of the object of the Mother’s desire, the father of Hamlet and the king of Denmark. The sudden emergence of the real, not symbolic, object in the place of the recently lost phallus deprives Hamlet of a chance to properly mourn the loss of the phallus. Therefore, the tragedy of Hamlet is that even after the death of his father “the phallus is still here” and “the phallus is located here in a position that is entirely out of place.”\textsuperscript{105} In Hamlet’s own words, the phallus is now in “[a] king of shreds and patches.”\textsuperscript{106} Upon this paradoxical deprivation of the loss of the phallus, the reason why Hamlet cannot strike Claudius, Lacan says, is the “narcissistic connection” between him and Claudius, who is in the place of the imaginary phallus with which Hamlet still, at the unconscious level, identifies.\textsuperscript{107} Therefore, his famous soliloquy ‘To be or not to be’ shows that the prince Hamlet has returned to the stage of oedipalisation where the question of to be or not to be the phallus should have been turned into the question of to have or not to have the phallus.

In Lacan’s account of Hamlet’s uncanny confrontation with the ambivalent status of the phallus, it is possible to notice a parallel between the phallus appearing to Hamlet at the juncture of the Imaginary and the Symbolic and the spectral presence of Shakespeare’s play in the process of adaptation. The predominating and preoccupying literary masterpiece functions as the phallus at this intersection, which can be completely captured.

neither with the register of the Symbolic nor that of the Imaginary. On one hand, the written words of Shakespeare are the commanding master signifier in the domain of the Symbolic – that is, the absolute ‘written’ law which filmmakers and audiences must obey and constantly take into consideration in the course of making or watching film adaptations of the play. However, the words of this literary masterpiece can never be reduced to one definitive meaning; they are, instead, marked by the lack of a definitive signified, as the diverse and contradictory interpretations of the play confirm. In relation to its adaptations, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* functions as a signifier which refers not to a signified but to the inevitable and necessary void connecting the original text to its film adaptations in the same way as the imaginary phallus – or, more precisely, its absence – facilitates the illusion of reciprocity between the child and the mother. Indeed, the phallic status of the original text indicates that it operates as the illusory objet petit a which initiates the constant presence of the desire for a screen adaptation in the domain of modern culture. Further, this phallus at the intersection between the Symbolic and the Imaginary is an ultimate locus of jouissance – which Lacan defines as a painful pleasure and puts at the centre of his conceptualisation of the drive and its incessant force. In this sense, it is impossible for us to stop circulating around *Hamlet* or the absence of a *Hamlet* that we wish to read or imagine that we have read. Insofar as this lack of a signified is glimpsed behind the overwhelming fullness of the literary canon, the metonymic chain of desire for a film adaptation which would offer an imaginary fixation point or anchor for a floating or absent meaning is constantly set in motion. Indeed, there is no end to our desire to produce or watch another *Hamlet*. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* itself becomes a ghost that keeps returning to the sphere of modern culture to haunt the subject of next generations. What is significant is not the message of the original text, presumably intended by the dead author, but its spectral presence in close proximity to the domain of the living as well as its
readiness to drag the living towards premature death by interfering with the living subject’s field of desire. In Lacan’s own words, the ghost of the original text *Hamlet* is ready to take cinema audiences back to the site of the Oedipus complex, which would make them experience, along with the young prince, what it is to have lost ‘the way of one’s desire.’

**Three Film Adaptations of *Hamlet***

So far the discussion attempted to explain that reading the play’s hero through the Oedipus complex is aligned with the attempt to understand a mythological moment in the development of a human subject. Therein the subject is constituted by the course of repressing or regulating its wishes: the desire for the forbidden object, the mother, and the desire for the removal of the obstacle, the father. Similarly, most screen adaptations show their obsessive interest in how to make Hamlet’s incestuous desire for his mother visible on screen. All three film adaptations under discussion here – Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948), Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1990) and Kenneth Branagh’s *Shakespeare’s Hamlet* (1996) – as well as many more screen and theatrical productions strive to elaborate the direct and even exclusive connection between Gertrude and her enormous bed once shared with Old Hamlet and now with Claudius. In the process of adapting what one reads from the pages into images on screen, the erotic desire, mingled with the ego’s narcissistic demand for an image to identify with, enhances the sexual fantasy put on display. Without exception, the three films to be analysed make the cinematic treatment of the mother’s bed a central locus in adapting the original play to screen. Thus the observation of the films’ eroticised view of Hamlet’s oedipal conflicts should help us to identify a secretive and
fundamental motivation for adapting *Hamlet* on screen.

The other point asking for close examination is how the films materialise the Ghost of the father on screen. In a psychoanalytic understanding of Hamlet, the hero’s psychological relation to the paternal figure is characterised by the sense of guilt evoked in the unconscious by his incestuous and murderous desire. From this point of view, Shakespeare’s representation of the dead father as the apparition of the son’s guilt seems to epitomise the Freudian conception of the super-ego, which is a self-regarding psychical agent. Yet, according to what Freud as well as Lacan explain as the representational mode of the super-ego, this paternal authority ought to remain invisible and inaudible, while its affect should be omnipresent both at individual and socio-cultural levels. Therefore, for film directors dealing with the visual medium, to achieve a balance between invisibility and omnipresence is not an easy task. In the onscreen version of *Hamlet*, the dead father embodying the prohibitive psychical force of the Symbolic needs to be represented through the photographic image of the figure on screen. This materialisation often reduces the inextricable authority of the Ghost in the original play to the illusion or hallucination of Hamlet. Furthermore, since the imaginary dimension of the Ghost on screen appears to be the mere product of the ego of the young prince rather than the psychical dimension that overwhelms it, the ‘image’ of the Ghost in the two brief encounters may easily be replaced and overpowered by the constant presence of Hamlet on screen, since it is the young prince who demands more attention for film audiences. In this sense, I would like to suggest that adapting the play into a film manifests our desire to shift the super-ego’s ontological ground from the enigmatic juncture between the Symbolic and the Imaginary to the domain of the Imaginary. This is an attempt to overcome the anxiety arising from confrontation with what Freud ascribes as the coercive and persistent nature of the super-
ego which may indicate its origin coming from the Id or, in Lacan, the Real. Overall, eroticising the Oedipus complex and materialising the super-ego on screen constitute the two nodal points in a psychoanalytic approach to *Hamlet* films.

Furthermore, it is also remarkable that in the long history of *Hamlet* scholarship every account of the ‘mystery’ of the play, whether dealing with the mystery from a perspective of psychoanalysis or other disciplines, appears to be preoccupied with the demand of the Ghost. Without much exception, scholarly investigations deal with Hamlet’s duty of revenge as a determined goal of the narrative from the moment of the Ghost’s arrival, as if his words freeze not only Hamlet but the reader/audience, ordering them to *list* and obey the dead father. Once the position of the reader is set up by the urgent injunction to avenge, it is natural for us to experience difficulties in understanding the hero, in spite of his predominant presence on stage and the extended volume of soliloquies imparting his private thoughts to us. Indeed, it is a mystery why Hamlet hesitates. We neither accept nor approve his delay, even more so when finding out the delay costs many ‘unnecessary’ deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet himself.\(^{108}\) Therefore, we retrospectively confirm that he ought to have obeyed his father and ‘performed’ the revenge without having second thoughts. The power of *Hamlet* lies in this inescapable and quite incomprehensible authority of the dead father, who exercises power *within* and *outside* of the play’s diegetic space. In response to this compelling force of the Ghost’s command overflowing from Shakespeare’s text, the emphatic visibility of the Oedipus complex on the screen of *Hamlet* adaptations may function as an answer to Hamlet’s request with his last breath to “Report me and my cause aright/ To the

unsatisfied.”¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Hamlet himself becomes another ghost haunting the next
generation and his request to “report me and my cause aright” may arrive like the
command of the ghost of the son who wants us to make ‘a sense’ of his notorious
vacillation which could never satisfy his father’s ghost. The dialogical connection made by
the oedipal relation between the father and the son curiously and interestingly interweaves
the interior and the exterior of screen adaptations of this literary masterpiece. It is a veiled
Sphinx, the riddle of which the chapter attempts to unravel.

What follows is the analysis of the three film adaptations of Hamlet through which the
chapter will clarify the psychoanalytic points made above. From more than a century’s
production of screen adaptations of Hamlet all over the world, I have selected these three
films because they satisfy several conditions: the films use the original text in English, so
that Shakespeare’s original sustains a more direct and dominating influence over the films;
they are directed by filmmakers whose filmography contains Shakespeare adaptations
other than Hamlet, which indicates these directors’ psychical attachment to Shakespeare as
an ‘ideal’; they are also commercial feature films aimed at general mass audiences, no
matter whether they have read the original play or seen it staged. The clear commercial
purpose of the films is better at revealing the generally shared response to the original text
than films aimed at a small arthouse group or ones made for a pedagogical purpose to
educate students and lead them on to a reading of the original.

201.
Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet*: The Oedipal Drama of Shadows

Laurence Olivier wished for his adaptation of *Hamlet* to be known as “an ‘Essay in Hamlet,’ and not as a film version of a necessarily abridged classic.” Indeed, his ‘essay’, which interprets the hero in the light of the Oedipus complex, created an irreversible change in later screen adaptations of *Hamlet* and even in the question of how to understand the drama’s hero. Interestingly, the psychoanalytic prism of the film is under the direct influence of Ernest Jones’s article, discussed above. In 1936, as a young and rising star on both stage and screen, Olivier was seeking a different way of playing Hamlet from the standard performance of John Gielgud and many classic actors, who rendered the prince of Denmark as a personification of “the delicate-souled dreamers and thinkers of nineteenth-century tradition.” This is the romanticising view of Hamlet under the heavy influence of Goethe’s reading of the play. The producer Tyrone Guthrie then persuaded Olivier to leave a season at the fashionable West End and venture into the Old Vic, which allowed ambitious young artists and actors to stage their experimental attempts. With this suggestion, the producer brought Jones’s essay into the discussion. While preparing the leading role in the 1937 season at the Old Vic, under the influence of Jones’s “professional point of view,” Olivier had a chance to visit Ernest Jones in person and have a consultation about how to perform Hamlet. Olivier, in his autobiography *Confessions of an Actor*, recalls the meeting as a crucial and determining moment in his understanding of *Hamlet*: “I have never ceased to think of Hamlet at odd moments, and ever since that meeting I

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have believed that Hamlet was a prime sufferer from the Oedipus complex – quite unconsciously, of course, as the professor (Ernest Jones) was anxious to stress."¹¹³ More than ten years later, after the quite unexpected success of his first film adaptation of Shakespeare, *Henry V* (1944), he was able to produce *Hamlet* on screen with the freedom of artistic control and a generous budget of £475,000. In the 1948 film, thus, his Freudian understanding of the play is made more visible when compared with what he was able to do in his performance in Guthrie’s production at the Old Vic eleven years earlier. Here, it is helpful to focus on two pivotal points. One is the process of envisioning the Oedipal wishes of Hamlet – in particular, how to insinuate the erotic aspect of the unconscious wishes. The other is the materialisation of the super-egotistical authority of the overpowering dead author, especially in accordance with the influential Freudian reading that ties this to the relationship between Hamlet and the Ghost of his father.

Through the deferential attitude of the director-actor, Laurence Olivier, whose background lay in the theatre of Shakespeare, it is possible to understand that every (male) film director is haunted by the ghost of the dead author and consequently puts himself in the position of the young prince in the course of adapting *Hamlet* on screen. Olivier’s exemplary account recalls how he took a director’s artistic liberty but was limited by the boundary set for him by the author of the original text:

> Well, I suppose for a craftsman, who is always all the time made conscious that his craft is purely interpretive, who isn't given the opportunity to create, except insofar as the author will allow him to create within the precincts of the character that he has drawn for him, I suppose being a film director is the nearest one gets to feeling like a creator, because the film

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is entirely the director's medium.\textsuperscript{114}

From this context of production of Olivier’s \textit{Hamlet} we can read his paradoxical wish divided by the two psychical impulses related to the super-ego and the ego: namely, his remark expresses both his obedient attitude towards Shakespeare’s play and his ambition to acquire a screen for his own ‘images’ of \textit{Hamlet}. One thing is that Olivier saw himself as an interpreter rather than a creator, which means that Olivier felt as if he \textit{ought to} limit his own creative freedom within “the precincts of the character” that Shakespeare had drawn for him. Moreover, his interpretation of \textit{Hamlet} was deeply influenced and fixed by another authoritative figure, the professor Ernest Jones, whose psychoanalytic reading of the play in the light of the Oedipus complex had influenced Olivier’s interpretation long before he produced the film. Therefore, Olivier’s position as a film director, as he describes it, represents the place of the present generation revisited by a multitude of spectral presences from past generations that maintain parental influence upon their descendents. However, the paradox is that this directorial position is entailed by the adaptor’s hidden ambition to ‘feel like a creator or a father.’ The ambition of the director finds its own echo in the young prince Hamlet, who inherits the name from his father, a great king, and tries to position himself in the dead father’s shoes and ultimately replace old Hamlet. Hence, Olivier, at first, seems to modestly take the place of a son under the influence of super-egotistical fathers such as Shakespeare and Freud/Jones in his attempt to put the play on screen in the light of the Oedipus complex. Yet, this role of a son taken by Olivier also embodies the secret ambition of the film director, who believed that the silver screen would provide a screen onto which to project his own artistic autonomy. The semiotic shift from theatre to cinema is the ground, however illusionary or narcissistic, for

him to feel like the creator – in other words, a chance to identify with the ghost.

In spite of Olivier’s anticipation of exercising creative freedom as a director, the film itself starts with an image of his own death – the young Hamlet played by Olivier. After the opening credit superimposed upon the image of a castle which is isolated at sea, surrounded and troubled by surging waves, the camera dives from the foggy night sky into Elsinore castle from a bird’s-eye view. Then the voice-over of Olivier reads a part of the dialogue from Act 1, scene 4 which is also written on screen: “So, oft it chances in particular men…”

When the narration is over, the camera descends from the highest turret of the castle through thick cloud and fog to eventually find the hero who is ‘already’ dead and being carried by the four captains with Horatio standing alongside. The film’s retrospective narrative structure implies that the film is only interested in investigating why and how young Hamlet suffered from his psychological dilemma rather than in tantalising the audience with the mystery of the King’s murder or in surprising them with the multitude of tragic deaths in the last scene. Coarse as it may sound for many literary critics, Olivier inserts his own invented prologue into the voice-over narration while introducing the hero – “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his own mind” – as the camera moves closer to the dead body of Hamlet. Therefore, to Olivier the whole drama is about Hamlet’s vacillation and from this “stamp of one defect” the otherwise virtuous young prince is corrupted and driven to a tragic death. Hence, the main attention of the drama on screen is on the veiled unconscious reasons for the only “mole of nature” in him.\footnote{William Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet} (I. iv. 28-36), ed. T. J. B. Spencer (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 86.} The retrospective flow of the film reveals and emphasises the

\footnote{\textit{Hamlet}, directed by Laurence Olivier (1948; Two Cities Film Ltd.)}

excessively introverted nature of the original play, which was picked up by Freud and many other psychoanalytic commentators. This also safeguards the validity of the psychoanalytic approach, since the play is coded as a psychological drama of the subject stuck in the oedipal conflict between the ego and the super-ego. At the beginning of the film Hamlet, who has already become a ghost, embarks on a journey into his own psyche to find the unknown unconscious motive of the indecision that ultimately led to his death.

What is more interesting in Olivier’s film is the psychological complexity realised through its use of the camera’s gaze, which complicates the drama on the level of the audience’s psychological reactions to the narrative and its characters. From the start of the film, there is an inexplicable unease which prevents the audience from comfortably identifying with this formidable camera’s gaze. In the bird’s-eye view of the castle, the dynamic and self-revealing camera movement appears to invite the audience to join in with the inquisitive gaze of the camera. While diving into the mystical setting of the film, Elsinore, the camera seems to guide the audience on a search for the source of the fault in Hamlet’s nature, which is tragically unknown to him. However, as soon as Olivier’s voice-over summarises Hamlet’s tragedy as “the tragedy of a man who could not make up his own mind,” the identification of the audience with the camera is interfered with and confused: it is at this moment when we realise it is impossible for the third-person perspective of the camera looking down at the dead body of Hamlet to coincide with the voice-over of this dead prince himself. In other words, the gaze of the camera embodies a strangely detached scopic position from which Hamlet can see himself dead and, more mysteriously, the audience can see him seeing himself dead – a dimension absent from or, at least unlikely to be represented in, the original play for stage.
On the one hand, the impossible position of the gaze implies the fundamental split of the director’s/actor’s ego, which Freud points out when he articulates the position of the super-ego (Over-I or Über-Ich) within the ego: “the ego divided, fallen into two pieces, one of which rages against the second…We have called it the ego ideal (or super-ego), and by way of functions we have ascribed to it self-observation, the moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression.”¹¹⁸ The self-regarding gaze of the camera thus seems to set up the super-egotistical position of Olivier as a director who sees and measures himself as an actor in the role of Hamlet or, in other words, as an ‘image’ of Hamlet. On the other hand, this meta-narrative position embodies the psychical locus from which the knowing audience, as assumed by the director, may cast their doubtful eyes on the rest of the drama to judge how adequately he adapted Shakespeare on screen. Yet, on a more fundamental level, I would like to suggest that this particular gaze that comes from nowhere and remains detached from any living body is the very locus from which Shakespeare’s Hamlet, as it is inscribed in the super-ego of the following generations, watches over its film adaptation. In other words, this unusual cinematic apparatus, the gaze of Hamlet seeing himself dead, allows the representation of the gaze of the original text. It embodies the unconscious force of the past whose power remains and bears down by being introjected as and transformed into the super-ego of the director/actor as well as audience. Characteristically, the omnipotence of this self-critical agency casts its vigilant eye upon the ego while the ego is enjoying the pleasure of imaginary and narcissistic identification with screen images. Thus, Shakespeare’s original text seems to measure the way in which the egoistic and narcissistic young medium, cinema, envisions what is written and hidden on the pages of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Indeed, the recollection

of Olivier about the course of making and releasing this film exemplifies the spectral presence of the super-ego in relation to the ego which feels like it is being watched or criticised. He confesses, “[i]t was – as may well be imagined – with feelings of some trepidation, a kind of fearful awe that I approached the idea of a Hamlet film. Indeed, it will be noticed, and doubtless commented upon, that I took the precaution of being in Australia when the film opened in London!”

At one level, the use of the camera’s gaze as a representation of the psychological force of the super-ego reinforces the Freudian reading of Shakespeare’s text as an oedipal drama. That is, under the super-egotistical gaze of the camera, the hero appears to be better than his criminal uncle, whom he is to punish. In particular, this pressure of the camera’s gaze culminates in oppressive camera angles and movement occasionally framing Hamlet not as a hero of action but as a criminal or prisoner caught in his re-awakened incestuous wish, hovering around the bed of his father and mother. Interestingly, the power given to the gaze of the camera is signalled even before the drama of Hamlet’s Oedipus complex begins. In the next scene that follows from the opening scene discussed above, the film resumes the original narrative structure starting with the night watch and the first appearance of the Ghost to Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo. After the Ghost disappears at the break of dawn, the conversation of the three characters is concluded with Marcellus saying, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” Then the camera, leaving the characters still atop the battlement, embarks on a search for the reason why the dead King cannot sleep in his tomb. Unanchored to characters, the camera spins down to the Great Hall, which is empty except for a table, chairs and shadows. Empathetically, the camera

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zooms in on the empty chair of Hamlet, where we will see him sitting in the following scene and many more. From the chair of the hero the camera moves toward the window frame, through which the Queen’s bed is shown. With the camera zooming in and contemplatively pausing at the bed which has now been called “A couch for luxury and damned incest,” we comprehend the cause of the corruption that has awakened the dead King from the grave. At the same time, the cinematographic connection between Hamlet’s chair and the bed confirms Olivier’s interpretation of Hamlet as the tragedy of a young prince who suffers from an oedipal conflict between him and his parents ‘in bed.’

Herein, the authority of the camera’s gaze in the film’s narrative, which is structured as a retrospective investigation, is clearly portrayed as something ‘above’ and ‘over’ the hero’s conscious mind.

Later, this particular use of the camera’s gaze, unregistered and unattached to any human character, functions as a visual tactic for embodying the meta-narrative position that represents the authority of the Ghost, whose command to avenge binds Hamlet and the audience to its spectral presence throughout the film. At the end of the film’s first sequence, the camera clearly indicates that the return of the Ghost is related to the forbidden wish of the young prince hovering over the bed of his parents. It is natural for a modern audience with a dim awareness of the Freudian reading of the play to conceive that the gaze of the camera represents the reproachful gaze of the Ghost, who secretly accuses his son of oedipal wishes which are as incestuous and murderous as the crimes of Claudius. To confirm this reading, in the two scenes of Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost, first on the turret of the castle and then in the Queen’s closet, the super-egotistical authority of the Ghost is incarnated in the merciless gaze of the camera, capturing in oppressive high-angle

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shots the young prince, who throws himself on the floor and begs for the dead father’s mercy. As suggested above, the compelling force of the gaze of the dead father, that is Shakespeare, is here overlapped and given substance by the overseeing meta-narrative scopic position of the Ghost, in front of whom Olivier places himself on the ground. The gaze that signals the presence of the super-egotistical force, both the Ghost and Shakespeare, functions as the cinematic representation of what makes both Hamlet and Olivier feel that they are being watched and judged for their forbidden wish to replace the father. This gaze also affects, in the same fashion, every audience member, whose ego is under the pressure of and in constant conflict with the internalised paternal command – that is, the super-ego in the shape of what comes as a father to them in their own Oedipus complex.

In an exactly opposing sense, however, I would like to suggest that the visibility of Hamlet’s Oedipus complex in the film may function as a therapeutic screen onto which the barely representable psychical conflict between the super-ego and the ego is to be projected. If we consider the Ghost as a representative of all kinds of ghosts haunting and harassing the egos of the hero, the director, audience and reader alike, then the materialisation of this accusing gaze on screen seriously undercuts the command of the spectres that, otherwise, use their power in an ungraspable and unrepresentable dimension. In the film, the super-ego appears to be momentarily captured within the net of filmic codes and this visual representation serves to provide a kind of a psychic theatre for the collective and ritual sharing of guilt for illegitimate oedipal wishes. This also explains the desire and pleasure embedded in the incessant attempt of the cinematic generations to keep adapting this canonical text.
What is noteworthy above in the film’s characteristic portrayal of the Ghost is the fact that the scopic register of cinema articulates the gap or void residing between the ego and the super-ego, or the Imaginary and the Symbolic in Lacanian terms, more successfully than the original medium. As discussed so far, the alignment of the Ghost with the gaze of the camera manifests a level of subjectivity where the subject sees itself as an object. This psychical dimension is also envisioned with the help of the spectral figure of the Ghost, which has two black holes in place of eyes and a voice which does not seem to come out of its mouth directly, but rather resonates in the whole of the frame. The characterisation of the Ghost as such, unlike the other two films which portray the figure of the Ghost as a humanised character, seems to enable Olivier’s film to capture on screen the fundamental gap in the human subject which otherwise must remain unrecognised. The director, indeed, makes the most of the uniquely cinematic apparatus – that is, the camera – to actualise on screen the gaze of the super-ego detached from any human ‘eye’, whereas in a theatrical production of the play this overwhelming psychical dimension cannot but be realistically reduced to a human figure – an actor playing the Ghost. Seen in a Lacanian sense, the peculiar representation of the Ghost in the film makes the uncanny gaze of the super-ego per se visible as it emerges in the imaginary field of the ego. Herein, the capability of the new medium may direct our attention to Lacan’s claim that “[t]he objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.”121 Definitively, Lacan’s designation of the gaze as the objet a, the object-cause of desire appearing in the domain of the Imaginary, links us back to the signification of the imaginary phallus, or its lack on a more fundamental level, as the objet petit a, as has been explained in the previous discussion of Lacan’s theory of the phallus. In other words, the visual apparition of the gaze of the super-ego is parallel to the symbolic

appropriation of the lack of the imaginary phallus between the child and the mother into the object in desire. Therefore, as the objet petit a, both the gaze without the eye and the empty place of the imaginary phallus function as a transitional space as well as a permanent knot linking the imaginary domain of the ego and the symbolic domain of the super-ego. Further, this is the locus of the subject which, in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, is constituted on the basis of the lack or void initiating the metonymic chain of desire at the juncture between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In this sense, Olivier’s adaptation of Hamlet suggests that screen adaptation is precisely the cultural site capable of representing this ambivalent locus in the human psyche.

If we take into account the centrality of the lack of the phallus in understanding the Oedipus complex in Lacan’s reading of Hamlet, it is also important to recognise the mise-en-scène of the empty bed, chairs and tables only occupied by shadows as an important visual metaphor. The much emphasised ‘emptiness’ in the ghostly setting of Elsinore signals that Hamlet, hit by the worst luck of confronting his father’s “most foul, strange and unnatural” murder and his mother’s second marriage at “most wicked speed,” is brought back once again to the transitional point – the void between the Imaginary and the Symbolic where the Oedipus complex should be terminated and dissolved.\textsuperscript{122} In this sense, Hamlet is positioned at the psychical border between a neurotic formatted by the symbolic phallus and a psychotic still overwhelmed by the imaginary phallus; hence, the ambivalence of Hamlet’s madness leads to various interpretations of the play. As a response to the trouble posed by Hamlet at this void in-between, Olivier, throughout the film, emphasises the empty place which the dead father should occupy until Hamlet gains

enough power and authority to claim for himself the place of the father through an appropriate process of mourning. As long as the empty throne is occupied by Claudius, who symbolises Hamlet’s illegitimate oedipal wishes, or the shadow of the dead father, whose return from the grave provokes Hamlet’s guilt about his oedipal wishes, Hamlet cannot overcome the dilemma that disarms his desire and the will to act upon it. Nevertheless, the film, driven by both artistic and entrepreneurial ambitions, needs a closure which can safely return Hamlet to the proper place for a hero – that is, the place where Hamlet is poised to take back the king’s throne and where his desire becomes central in the progress of the narrative. Eventually, Olivier’s Hamlet restores the hero’s status as the lawful heir and secures for him the throne of Denmark, unlike the original play, which concludes with the dying breath of Hamlet lying lifelessly on the floor, having managed to do nothing but bequeath his right to the young Norwegian prince Fortinbras. Cinematographically, in the last scene of Olivier’s film, Hamlet is represented as both the imaginary and symbolic phallus; in a low-angle shot, he physically occupies the throne and stands above the courtiers kneeling around him and marking the dying king’s last words. On the surface level, the film indicates that, after overcoming his oedipal conflicts, Hamlet can erect himself as a king who stands in for the dead King – old Hamlet.

However, the film’s ending, on another level, still refuses to close the irreducible gap which has been opened between the prince and the king, the ego and the super-ego, the eye and the gaze, and the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The scene that follows the scene of Hamlet’s heroic and kingly death once again questions Hamlet’s complete identification with the king and renders it doubtful: in the closing scene the super-egotistical gaze of the camera returns and brackets the film with a floating camera movement that corresponds with that of the film’s beginning. The camera rather haphazardly follows the four captains
bearing Hamlet’s body while freely lingering and pausing on the same objects shown in the opening sequence – the empty chair of the prince and the Queen’s bed and the dead body of Hamlet. Perhaps the gap is inerasable, for the sense of being watched, measured and judged, even after finishing the production and viewing of the film adaptation of *Hamlet*, seems to remind us that the film, or any film, must leave something of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* unsaid, unseen and unsatisfied under the scrutinising gaze of the father Shakespeare.

**Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet: A Close-Up on the Oedipus Complex***

Contrary to the retrospective structure of Olivier’s *Hamlet* and its meta-narrative contours sustained by the super-egotistical gaze of the camera, Franco Zeffirelli gives his version of *Hamlet* a linear plot proceeding “with uncanny speed” towards a climax where the libidinal energy of the play explodes to reveal the undisguised face of the undercurrent of Shakespeare’s drama.123 The film opens with the scene of Old Hamlet’s funeral to explain what has happened even before the start of Shakespeare’s play. The invented scene of the funeral, which is absent in the original play as well as in Olivier’s film, sets up the triangular relationship of Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude which is firmly based on the Freudian reading of the play as oedipal drama. In this respect, it is possible to read Zeffirelli’s film as an extension of what Olivier does in his *Hamlet* – that is, to write ‘an essay’ about the play on the basis of the psychoanalytic understanding of the hero suffering

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from the Oedipus complex. Zeffirelli’s well-known admiration for Olivier confirms that the director is attempting to reinstate Olivier’s rather metaphorical use of the Oedipus complex as the psychological backbone of the play, albeit in a more direct and visible fashion.

The opening scene of Zeffirelli’s film confirms its close relation to Olivier’s *Hamlet* through various cinematic details. Importantly the opening of Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* starts with an extreme long shot of the battlements of Elsinore castle standing alone above the sea, and the following shots rapidly approach the royal castle as if the film is attempting to echo Olivier’s bird’s-eye view swooping down on the maze-like Elsinore castle. The opening scene thus establishes the characterisation which the director, following Olivier’s interpretation, imparts to Elsinore: the castle is not only the physical location in which the drama is set, but also a psychological space where we will find the innermost voice of the hero. In addition, it is not difficult to recognise the similarities between the two films in terms of mise-en-scène characterised by endless staircases and panoptical interiors. The intention behind these analogous visual representations of Elsinore is to portray the royal castle of Denmark as a claustrophobic background for the traumatic (re-)encounter with the Ghost as well as to make it a non-human character embodying the omnipresence of the Ghost oppressing and imprisoning the hero. Overall, Zeffirelli’s film, under the heavy influence of Olivier’s interpretation of *Hamlet* in the light of the Oedipus complex, introduces Elsinore as a sinister stage, physical as well as psychological, for the oedipal drama.

However, the opening also indicates a difference between the two film texts. As discussed above, Olivier’s opening sequence emphasises the self-exposing camera diving into the
castle and capturing the dead Hamlet in an extreme high-angle shot, as if it intends to devour the whole scene, including the dead prince. The camera movement as such signals the severe gaze of the predominating super-ego in relation to the suffering ego of the hero aligned with that of the director and the audience. I have suggested that, insofar as this super-egotistical gaze is not anchored to any human eye, the non-humanized gaze can embody the specific psychical dimension present both in the original *Hamlet* and in the process of adapting and viewing the literary masterpiece – or a master signifier in a Lacanian sense – on screen. But unlike the omnipresence of the super-ego borne by the uncanny gaze of Olivier’s camera, Zeffirelli’s camera remains naturalistic and thus invisible throughout the film. For example, the final scene of the film uses a crane shot only to neutrally ‘show’ the entire scene of the catastrophic denouement of the oedipal drama without being invested with the uncanny ‘perspective’ of watching over. A closer look at the opening credit sequence, despite its resemblance to Olivier’s opening scene on the surface, also indicates that Zeffirelli’s film introduces Elsinore in a few static eye-level shots that overlap each other while gradually moving into the interior of the castle, whereas Olivier’s film captures the same scene through the continuous movement of the camera rapidly diving into the centre of the location from nowhere. Zeffirelli’s subtle alteration, replacing Olivier’s somewhat radical and self-revealing movement of the camera with a series of static shots, articulates that his film is adopting the conventional mode of Hollywood’s naturalistic storytelling in creating a neutral screen for the Oedipus complex to be narrativised. In other words, the film will unpack the repressed and entangled incestuous relationship between the characters through the transparent cinematography and the seamless continuity editing of Hollywood’s conventions.

The inserted funeral scene, indeed, foregrounds the incest theme by confirming that the
screen offered by Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* is intended for nothing but the most primal fantasy – the origin of all sexual fantasies – revolving around the familial triangle of a son, his mother and his father. In the forecourt of the castle, the camera slowly moves toward the underground crypt where the funeral of old Hamlet is taking place. Inside, the mise-en-scène resembles a proscenium, at the centre of which the coffin lies with a spotlight falling on it and with the family members standing around it. The theatrical set highlighting the locus of the oedipal conflicts manifests the centrality of the incest theme to the plot of the film. On this *stage* prepared for the royal family of Denmark, incestuous desire constitutes two different triangular relationships among the characters: on one hand, the order and the size of the shots showing Gertrude, Old Hamlet, and Claudius express the oedipal triangle of the old generation; on the other hand, the editing with elaborate eye-line matches reveals another triangle composed of Claudius, young Hamlet and Gertrude. The editing juxtaposing Gertrude, the dead King and Claudius reveals the erotic rivalry between Old Hamlet and Claudius over Gertrude: the reciprocity between the medium shot of the dead King and that of Gertrude who sobs at her husband’s death is brutally interrupted by a close-up of Claudius, whose beaming eyes expose his desire for her and his intense jealousy of the dead brother whose death she bitterly mourns. Then, the scene moves toward the other triad between young Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude. As Claudius declares that Hamlet is “the most immediate to our throne” over the body of his murdered brother, we see the close-up of Hamlet darkened by the heavy cloak covering his head. Then Gertrude and Claudius exchange a covert and significant look, which is immediately followed by a close-up of Hamlet who appears to catch the secret glance between his mother and his uncle. The juxtaposition of Hamlet’s close-up with the two shots connecting Gertrude and Claudius makes visible the fact that Hamlet’s frustration is

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caused by his alienation from the erotic triangle as well as his disgust for the uncle’s sexual desire for his mother. Emphatically, the invented scene of the funeral reveals the editorial frame through which the film adaptation reworks Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. That is, the film means to proffer the pictorial locus on which the forbidden sexual fantasy imagined by the young prince can be actualised – in other words, on which the oedipal impulse is given a chance to be acted out and projected on screen, as in *Oedipus Rex*, in a most literal and visible way.

There is one salient cinematic strategy that enables Zeffirelli’s film to weave a ‘comprehensible’ cinematic fantasy out of Shakespeare’s extremely evasive *Hamlet*. That is the film’s tactic of setting up Old Hamlet, the Ghost, as an ideal ego rather than an ego ideal or super-ego. From the start, this figure is deprived of his original authority and is reduced to being only one of the participants in the romantic triangles in the inserted funeral. The film offers the realistic image of the corpse of Old Hamlet, which is carefully hidden and suppressed in most *Hamlet* texts. From this moment, the demystified image of Old Hamlet lying dead in the first scene seems to defy the role of the devouring dead father whose unseen gaze and threatening voice persist in the psyche of his trembling son. Later, the dialogue between young Hamlet and the Ghost confirms this suggestion: in the first confrontation with the Ghost, the ‘conversation’ between the dead father and the son is presented in a shot-reverse-shot sequence alternating close-ups of the two figures on relatively equal terms. Further, the scene begins by framing the dead father in a rather ‘belittling’ high-angle shot from the point of view of Hamlet, who is still standing. While the scene of murder is unravelled by the Ghost, who in this film is completely deprived of his “warlike form” – “Armèd at point exactly, cap-a-pe (from head to toe)” – the film refuses to use a flashback which would confirm the truth of what the Ghost imparts and
consequently the authority of his command to avenge.\textsuperscript{125} In a very clear sense, the film employs a visualising strategy to diminish the authority of the Ghost, which differentiates Zeffirelli’s film from other film adaptations whose foci lie on the dead father’s super-egotistical power and his Ghostly omnipresence. Moreover, this calm, gentle and sad figure of the Ghost is represented with no mystifying visual devices such as a threatening metallic costume, low-angle shots, shadows or foggy mise-en-scène. In a psychoanalytic sense, the erotic performance between Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene brings the repressed oedipal fantasy onto the textual surface, on the premise that the repressive power of the Ghost has been sufficiently reduced. Overall, the cinematic representation of the Ghost as having diminished super-egotistical authority enables the film to actualise the incestuous coitus on screen as literal, as it might have been wished by the son in his unconscious.

As mentioned above, Zeffirelli’s film clarifies its intention to visualise the Freudian interpretation of the play with the same weight as it envisions Shakespeare’s original words. Consequently, the film quite bluntly employs the Freudian interpretation as a central plot device rather than indicating the subtle nuance of its Freudian perspective as in Olivier’s film. Indeed, Zeffirelli’s notorious closet scene puts on explicit display the erotic dimension hidden in the incestuous relation between Hamlet and Gertrude. While charging his mother with having an incestuous and adulterous relation with Claudius, Hamlet, played by Mel Gibson, physically performs sexual intercourse with Gertrude, played by Glenn Close, whose facial expression and scream cannot but be seen as sexual ecstasy. Of course, many critics have not tried to conceal their discontent and resistance in

commenting that the film “extends the oedipal impulse to an almost obscene limit.”126

What is remarkable in the closet scene of the film is that the explicit textual representation of the incestuous relation between a son and his mother bears the mark of an unusual level of challenge to Freud’s theory of the super-ego. In other words, the incestuous sex performed on screen, without being repressed in the unconscious, indicates the film’s ignorance or removal of the super-egotistical force Freud himself clearly describes as the persistent agent of repression and regulation which is necessary for the ego to construct its sexual fantasy. Ironically, then, Zeffirelli’s film dismantles itself as either a Shakespearean text or a Freudian text by attempting to make itself a Freudian interpretation of Shakespeare’s play in a too literal sense.

If we accept the above-mentioned unintended misfit between Zeffirelli’s film and its precursor authorities, how shall we understand this undisguised attempt to display the oedipal desire on screen? Zeffirelli, in his multi-million dollar project of bringing the melancholic prince of the Elizabethan stage to the late twentieth century’s screen, intends to create a version which is more friendly to contemporary young audiences, with the help of the star personas carried by the actors who play the major characters. In particular, Mel Gibson as Hamlet and Glenn Close as Gertrude saturate Hamlet with the heavy shadow of their roles in commercially successful films prior to Zeffirelli’s film: Mel Gibson as a macho action hero with manic depression in Mad Max and Lethal Weapon and Glenn Close as a femme fatale with the sexual power to endanger a hero in Fatal Attraction and Dangerous Liaisons.127 The unabashed use of star casting serves Zeffirelli’s intention to

“[bring] Shakespeare to the mass” as well as his desire to create “a new kind of Hamlet” – a man of action rather than speculation, whose nature and character will be delivered by cinematic images rather than language. From a psychoanalytic view, the film’s casting provides the audience with a more comfortable and familiar screen for narcissistic identification with characters whose psychological motivation is notoriously ambivalent in the original. Although many critics accuse the film’s casting of flattening the multi-layered original text, we can read here one of the most powerful desires at play in the process of film adaptation, that is, the desire for a less interrupted and more complete imaginary identification with one’s own image. This desire can function in narrative cinema upon the assumption that, although the primordial attachment to the original object of one’s narcissistic desire has been lost, it can be replaced by secondary identification with the silver-screen images of the characters. However, this wish for undisrupted identification with the image is complicated in the process of actualising and enlarging the familiar literary characters such as Hamlet on screen. The imaginary identification in this case is constantly interrupted by the symbolic dimension of the original text, which escapes the grasp of the imaginary register of onscreen images. The paradoxical coexistence of the intense desire for imaginary identification without interruption and the predetermined impossibility of imaginary identification in film adaptations, however, touches on the core of the paradox of human desire, according to Lacan. He says that, after oedipalisation, it is the very impossibility of “the being’s identification with its pure and simple image” not accompanied by the interruption of the Symbolic order that allows the subject to move along the metonymic chain of desire which has no end but death. Therefore, the process

of screen adaptation is to adapt literary characters into screen personas for identification against the ‘paternal’ intervention of the symbolic signifiers of the originals. This manifests the fundamental loss of the narcissistic link in the course of the Oedipus complex and the ego’s perpetual attempt to find a substitute for this lost original image. As such, the course of adapting and perceiving literary works on screen represents the trajectory of the ego in its relation to the super-ego, I would suggest, more closely than any other artistic expressions.

The film aims to envision the forbidden scene repressed in the unconscious of the oedipalised son in a tightly edited narrative with unambiguous characters. The single-mindedness of the film leads us to speculate how, in psychoanalysis, the construction and function of fantasy is related to the Oedipus complex and, in particular, the repression of oedipal desire. The connection is firstly recognised by Freud, who defines the fantasy as a scene “which stages an unconscious desire,” the most fundamental of which is the oedipal wish for the love of the mother and the death of the father.130 Freud also emphasises the importance of the visual realm in constructing fantasy, while Lacan, following Freud, “compares the fantasy scene to a frozen image on a cinema screen.”131 Yet, in Lacan’s later teaching, he concentrates on the link between the imaginary structure of fantasy and the trauma of castration at the resolution of the Oedipus complex. In his Seminar XI, Lacan suggests that “the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something

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quite primary” and thus traumatic – that is, castration. Herein, it is possible to see that Zeffirelli’s film, which renders the compound and polysemous original text as a simplistic sexual fantasy, is a reactionary text which resists the conscious recognition of the traumatic inaccessibility to meaning that readers routinely believe Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* embraces. Indeed, as many literary critics complain, for any reader the play is a “hermeneutic trap.” The traumatic memory of castration awakened by the impossibility of ‘knowing what Shakespeare really meant’ provokes the resistance to the traumatic void experienced in reading *Hamlet*. This resistance spurs the desire for the specular image, a desire which seeks to rivet meaning onto the screen for a direct and immediate identification – one which, instead of the traumatic frustration of not being able to understand, provides us with narcissistic pleasure. This screen is what Freud and Lacan call fantasy. What is not to be forgotten is that Franco Zeffirelli is not the only one who responds to the absence of concrete meaning in the text of the original play by throwing the fantasy on the screen and giving it a comprehensible ‘narrative’ with a seemingly clear-cut causal relation between signified and signifier. The appeal for fantasy as a resistance to the anxiety about the void in our symbolic system is, to various degrees, involved in every film adaptation of a literary work: that is, every filmmaker’s desire to adapt literary texts to the screen is none other than the expression of the subject’s resistance to the sheer impossibility of finding one true, unchangeable and unchallengeable meaning in a text. Further, the function of fantasy in this respect is also shared by every reader who is destined to repeat the process of transferring the symbolic register of a written text to the imaginary signifier of images in confrontation with the lack of a confirmed meaning in a

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linguistic signifier.

More interestingly, resistance through constructing fantasy is a characteristic psychological reaction of Shakespeare’s hero Hamlet. In his father’s death, Hamlet encounters the meaninglessness of the world. The young prince desperately needs to overcome this inertia, which means death to the subject of desire. His ego appears to impose the function of the super-ego onto the Ghost of the dead father, who chides him for his inability to live on by desiring revenge, crown and another woman, all of which will ultimately enable Hamlet to replace the dead father. From this point of view, it is possible to see that the Ghost articulates Hamlet’s sizzling jealousy over the mother’s remarriage and the man occupying the place of the phallus for no other reason than that it speaks for the unconscious of the young prince whose oedipal wish, contrary to his uncle, cannot find an escape but through “the very coinage of [his] brain.”134 The dialogue of the Ghost, in the very place of Hamlet’s unconscious, appears to obsessively and exclusively dwell on the imagined sexual scene between his “most seeming-virtuous Queen” and “that incestuous, that adulterate beast.”135 Oddly enough, the Ghost of the dead king never seems to care about Denmark’s war-like state in the hands of Claudius, a deceptive political animal. On the unconscious level, this sexual fantasy, constructed by Hamlet himself and uttered through the figure of the Ghost, is nothing but the illusionary screen resisting and trying to mask the traumatic deprivation of the phallus in Hamlet, from a Lacanian perspective. Indeed, the two Hamlets in Shakespeare’s play call for the screen of the incestuous fantasy. This demand is the urgent call sent out to the reader, who is also suffering, like young Hamlet, from the sudden confrontation with the traumatic lack of the phallus, caused by the

135 Ibid., 91.
difficulty of understanding this literary masterpiece. Thus, Zeffirelli’s Hamlet perhaps manifests the two folds of the super-ego as such: the overlapping faces of the Ghost and young Hamlet represent the two faces of the super-ego which, on the one hand, prohibits the son’s pleasure, yet on the other hand commands him to ‘enjoy’ the transgression. Therefore, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, for Zeffirelli, may function as the two discordant sides of the super-ego with the traumatic gap in-between. In the encounter with the void at the centre of the symbolic system, Zeffirelli’s somewhat obscene disclosure of what should be hidden provides a screen for a specific and detailed fantasy only to keep something more traumatic at bay. In other words, Zeffirelli’s film is made as a close-up of the mother’s “enseaméd bed” to keep at distance the trauma of castration, which otherwise would come too close – to Hamlet and us both.¹³⁶

Kenneth Branagh’s Hamlet: The Return of the Phallus in the Dream of a Complete Hamlet

Kenneth Branagh’s William Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1996) is, as Samuel Crowl claims, an extravagant commercial epic that “stretches and challenges our assumptions about what is possible in a Shakespeare film.”¹³⁷ Along with his screen adaptations of other canonical literary materials, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Branagh has the longest list of Shakespeare films directed and acted by one film director to date. In particular, his populist approach to Shakespeare has sought to capture mass audiences by aiming to create a

¹³⁶ William Shakespeare, Hamlet (III. Vi. 93), 149.
“Shakespeare set free from the taint of elitism and ‘restored’ to his proper status as a commercially viable, accessible playwright for the masses.”138 Yet a complete screen adaptation of the four-hour play *Hamlet*, which is the longest of Shakespeare’s plays, is not merely an outcome of commercial calculation but is a personal dream with psychological complexity and depth. As Branagh confesses, “[t]his film is simply the passionate expression of a dream. A dream that has preoccupied me for so many years.”139

Although the intense psychological investment of the director is not uncommon in Shakespeare films and in particular screen adaptations of *Hamlet*, there is one noteworthy point in Branagh’s life-long dream of making an unabridged *Hamlet* on screen – that is what Branagh calls his obsessional dream of ‘*Hamlet* uncut,’ in spite of his experience and knowledge assuring him how difficult and unrealistic it would be to make a full-length commercial *Hamlet*. The completeness of an adaptation, illusionary though may it be, can be explained in two ways. Consciously, what a filmmaker strives to achieve in an adaptation is a textual scope that embraces all inconsistencies and fills inextricable gaps in the Symbolic structure of the original text. This process seems to express the respectful awe a film director feels about the unchallengeable law, or words, written by the author of the original. However, at the unconscious level, the attempt to make a complete adaptation may indicate the ambition to produce a metaphor rather than a metonym – in other words, a dream for a complete ‘replacement’ of the original. From a slightly different angle, this ambitious wish for a replacement rather than a representation of the original text

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corresponds to the engulfing frustration experienced in the traumatic confrontation with the very impossibility of accessing the one ‘true’ meaning of the literary original. Humbly Branagh lets his ignorance be known, saying that “I believe I’ve come happily to realize that of course I cannot explain Hamlet.” Yet he raises his own film to the same level of incomprehensibility by imparting that he also cannot explain his own interpretation of Hamlet. Most interestingly, he seems assured of the unique position of this full-length adaptation of Hamlet for screen as a substitute for the authority of the original on stage: he says in the introductory comment in DVD, “no one’s done this before, and no one will do it again.”

To produce a metaphorical screen adaptation of Hamlet, Branagh does his utmost to keep his distance from the memory of other film ‘interpretations’ of Hamlet prior to his. First of all, he discards the ghostly, gloomy medieval look of Elsinore, which originated from Olivier’s claustrophobic and labyrinthine Gothic castle and is repeated and only modestly transformed by Kozintsev (1964), Richardson (1969) and Zeffirelli (1990). Branagh radically revises the locus of the Elizabethan drama based on the medieval legend into a Victorian palace with excessive decoration and light. In addition to the dazzlingly lit interior set, his film presents a crisp winter landscape sparkling with snow covering the entire estate of Elsinore. In a practical sense, the cheerful use of the full range of the colour palette surely draws the attention of the late twentieth-century audience and sustains their interest during the excessively long screening time. Also, as we learn from the production documentary To Be on Screen: A History of Hamlet, the Victorian look of the film is the backdrop for replanting Shakespeare’s words into a historical period which would allow

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140 Ibid., viii.
141 Kenneth Branagh, introduction to William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996: Waner Brothers), DVD.
contemporary audiences to more easily understand the drama. Yet, at the same time, the Victorian setting provides a landscape of the past that maintains a necessary distance from the present in order to comfortably host Shakespeare’s Elizabethan language.

However, the self-differentiating visual strategy of Branagh’s film is not the only factor that makes this unabridged onscreen Hamlet unique. Branagh disagrees with the overwhelming psychoanalytic trend in adapting Hamlet to screen and clearly ‘resists’ it by offering his own, different approach to Shakespeare. The film’s focus deliberately shifts away from Hamlet’s incestuous relation to his mother; that is, Branagh deprives his film of the entangled psychical complex mingled with unconscious guilt in Hamlet’s repressed oedipal wishes and jealousy of Claudius’ ability to ‘have’ her. In Branagh’s interpretation, the young prince shows straightforward contempt for his mother, whose untimely passion makes him disgusted rather than jealous. There is no sexual connotation in the closet scene, which is often in other films saturated with visual cues signalling the erotic desire of the son for his still young and attractive mother. Instead, Kenneth Branagh, by preserving the whole of the play, tries to support the critical points of view that have been thwarted by many commercial productions of oedipal Hamlet. Much more attention is paid to male-male relationships in this film by focusing on the political and historical context of the play, which consequently or intentionally pushes the drama into a male-oriented direction. Hamlet is thus represented as a ‘young prince’ under the pressure of the public gaze rather than as an oedipal son whose mind is torn between the unconscious sexual desire for the mother and the internalised gaze of the dead father. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Victorian age, to which Branagh transfers the setting in order to reinforce his intention to shift the focus from the play’s psychological dimension to its political and historical coordinates, is the very period that birthed the psychoanalytic
understanding of human subjectivity, paradoxically due to its hypocritical and phallocentric ethos suppressing the sexual dimension of human civilization. I would like to dwell on this irony a little longer by analysing the paradoxical effect produced by the film’s obsessive accentuation of the relationship between male characters, resisting the mediation of the Mother as the Other (Autre).¹⁴²

This film, from the start, seems obsessed with the panoramic view enabled by 70 mm, which is believed to provide the ultimate cinematic experience of Shakespeare’s play as an epic rather than a psychological drama. In attempting to stress the epic quality of the drama, the dead king firstly appears as a larger-than-life metal statue of old Hamlet clad in full armour for battle, which is captured in extreme low-angle shots. Such an envisioning of the dead king at the beginning of the film, in one sense, can be linked to the conscious intention to bring out the drama’s political subtext, as the play starts with Denmark’s volatile state in a war between Denmark and Norway, triggered by the unexpected loss of the heroic warrior-king of Denmark. The conscious intention to render the Ghost as the apparition of the heroic king of an epic brackets the film by inserting close-ups showing the collapse of this statue of old Hamlet as a symbol of the finale of Denmark’s monarchy, or the end of the reign of the Hamlets.

However, the two scenes of Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost ironically confirm the psychological peculiarity of the film’s rendition of the Ghost – that is, the radical inconsistency in the film’s mode of representing this figure on screen. The fissure in the representation of the Ghost is found in the scene of Hamlet’s first encounter with his

father’s spirit. Herein, the film suddenly shifts away from the majestic representation of the Ghost as an epic hero and formulates the Ghost as a supernatural monster by using the conventions of the horror genre, such as extreme close-ups, shaky camera movements and a gaseous explosion accompanied with thundering sounds. However, as soon as Hamlet starts his conversation with the Ghost, this monstrous introduction of the dead father is undercut and replaced by a romanticised flashback with the swell of emotionally charged music. This seems to aim at emphasising the tender intensity of the Ghost as a loving father of Hamlet. From this moment, the Ghost is reaffirmed as a loving and beloved father in flashbacks that are repeatedly inserted. Even the closet scene, where the Ghost of the original play looms in front of Hamlet to ‘chide’ him for his indecision, attempts to reinforce the melodrama of the Ghost’s love for his son and his wife, whom he unexpectedly had to leave behind.

From the outset, it is possible to consider that the epic and spectral appearance of the Ghost simply highlights the melodrama to follow and emphasises how affectionate the Ghost of Hamlet’s father was to Hamlet through the sheer contrast. The melodramatic formulation, moreover, has an effect of alleviating Hamlet’s hardship in completing the duty evoked by the Ghost’s command. The revenge in question in this film turns into a moral responsibility that Hamlet takes up voluntarily, out of his affection for the father. The shift as such simplifies the psychical complexity of suffering from the Oedipus complex as it appears in other Hamlet films. However, in another sense, the inconsistency in characterising the Ghost in Branagh’s film may indicate the further complexity of the relationship between Hamlet and the Ghost. First of all, the overtly melodramatic rendition of the dead father, which immediately follows the representation of the return of the Ghost in epic and horror conventions, suggests the internal conflicts Hamlet has to go through in
order to accept the Ghost as the father whom he used to love. In this sense, the real psychological difficulty of Hamlet may lie in his acceptance of the Ghost not only as the apparition of his dear father but also as the father who is still able to love and be loved. In other words, through the self-contradictory process of characterisation the film seems to unintentionally disclose how traumatic it is for Branagh’s Hamlet to encounter the Ghost as a character with the emotional capacity to sustain a relationship with his son even after his death. The Ghost here does not function merely as a representative of a super-egotistical command or a law prohibiting the son’s secret desire for the mother. The Ghost is even more demanding, since it is an un-dead father who claims ongoing love for his son and asks the son’s love in return forever. Consequently, in the place of oedipal conflicts between Hamlet (the ego) and the Ghost (the super-ego) through the Queen as a mediator, Branagh’s film puts forward the exclusive relationship between a father and a son. However, the inconsistency in terms of the mode of characterisation of the Ghost hints at an inextricable psychological complexity hidden underneath this idealised filial relationship, to which I shall return shortly.

The deliberate exclusion of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the play also affects the characterisation of Claudius, who is often understood as a foil for the ideal father and a rival in the oedipal triangle. The scene that follows the scene of Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost presents the celebration of the marriage between Claudius and Gertrude. This scene of a happy marriage between Claudius and Gertrude, as well as between Claudius and Denmark, even more clearly suggests the male orientation of the film’s dramatic focus. In the other two films under discussion, Claudius is depicted as an incestuous and adulterous villain from the very introduction of the character. In Olivier’s film he is firstly seen gulping wine and ruthlessly throwing the cup towards servants standing next to him;
in Zeffirelli’s film his desiring eyes eagerly seek Gertrude, who is weeping over the dead body of the brother he just murdered. By contrast, Branagh’s film admirably sets up Claudius as the best answer for the war-like state of Denmark as well as for the Queen, whose status in the royal court of Denmark is seriously threatened by her husband’s sudden death. This politically experienced and capable Claudius speaks of his grief and joy eloquently and appealingly to the public gathering to greet the new king. This competent and loving king apparently is a better option than an inexperienced student-prince who sulkily alienates himself from the hopeful path toward a prosperous future for Denmark. In his opening speech, Claudius displays dexterity in dealing with public expectations and the dignifying yet passionate embrace of the Queen. Here, the splendid mise-en-scène and the majestic background music played by a brass band saturate the scene with vividness and grandeur. Most of all, the optimistic mood of Claudius’s coronation is supported by the sincere and confident delivery of the actor Derek Jacobi playing Claudius, who is ironically famous for his long acting career in the role of Hamlet on stage, radio and television. Interestingly, it is Jacobi’s performance at the New Theatre in Oxford that changed the fifteen-year-old Branagh’s life forever and led him to theatre and Hamlet.  

The fact that Branagh repeatedly emphasised, in the making-of documentary and various other interviews, the autobiographical tie between himself and Jacobi as a father figure who led him to the theatre of Shakespeare certainly discloses the director’s unconscious will to render the film’s Claudius as another paternal figure rather than a villain and romantic rival competing for the incestuous love of the Queen. Jacobi’s Claudius shows no sign of mockery or cynicism towards Hamlet when he talks about his “unmanly grief.” Instead, this father figure seems to have a true affection for his one-time nephew and now...

son. Further, there is “the remarkable physical resemblance of the ‘son’ to his ‘uncle-father’” to intensify the link between Claudius and the prince: he is related to Hamlet not through Gertrude but more directly as his ‘living’ father. In return, the film’s phallocentric redirection signals its undercurrent of resistance to unconscious involvement with the mother.145

In addition to the underlined presence of Fortinbras and the psychological complexity with which the relation of Claudius to Hamlet is endowed, Branagh’s Hamlet is full of onstage and onscreen Hamlets of past and present, such as John Gielgud (as Priam), who is a legendary Shakespearean actor and an archetypal Hamlet on stage; Derek Jacobi (as Claudius), who is one of the most influential Hamlets; Richard Briers (as Polonius), who once played a passionate and hysterical Hamlet; Michael Marloony (as Laertes), who is the Hamlet of contemporary theatre. The casting, with the help of the mise-en-scène surrounded by numerous mirrors, may imply the ego-maniacal tendency of Branagh’s Hamlet seeing himself in every direction, whereby other ‘Hamlets’ in the film function as nothing but a mirror reflecting diverse fragments of Branagh’s ‘complete’ Hamlet. Apart from these former and present Hamlets, an assortment of authoritative masculine icons from both stage and screen, such as Brian Blessed (as the Ghost), Charlton Heston (as Player King), Lord Richard Attenborough (as the English Ambassador) and John Mills (as old Norway, the uncle of the young Fortinbras), demonstrates the film’s excessive interest in returning Hamlet to its Elizabethan stage with no actress or, in a metaphorical sense, no woman interfering in the transaction between men. Indeed, here we see Hamlet surrounded by too many fathers.

On the one hand, it may manifest that this onscreen Hamlet, on both a personal and historical level, has overcome the long-lasting Oedipus complex envisaged and projected onto the screen of many *Hamlet* films: this Hamlet seems to succeed in making the incestuous sexual desire for the mother “desexualised and sublimated.”

The desexualisation of oedipal desire is what Freud designates as the signal of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. However, the excessive focus on fathers is, ironically, a sign showing the male ego’s anxiety about the suffocating Mother. This unspoken Mother becomes far more dangerous, since she cannot, even for a moment, be embodied by Julie Christie’s completely desexualised Gertrude. Gertrude in this film cannot function as a foil for the Mother as the Other, which partly overlaps with the uncanny side of the mother as the primal sexual object of the son’s secret desire, as the original play and other *Hamlet* films try to capture. Instead, Gertrude, to Branagh’s Hamlet, is a romantic rival with whom Hamlet competes for the love of the father(s), living or dead. This psychological configuration may explain Hamlet’s straightforward contempt and hostility towards her with no undertone of a son’s sexual desire for the mother.

The film reaffirms the unambiguously hateful relation between judgemental Hamlet and hysterical Gertrude in the closet scene: here Hamlet shows nothing but disgust and contempt towards his mother and Gertrude responds to his despicable charge with a nervous shriek. In fact, the insignificant and alienated position of the mother in Hamlet’s psyche is already insinuated in a flashback where we see Hamlet and his father embrace each other heartily and leave Gertrude behind with Claudius. Throughout the film, the mother is never given a chance to express her genuine love for her son, who always stands

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aloof from and looks down upon her. The bond between the mother and the son is dysfunctional, even to the extent that Claudius appears to be utterly mistaken when he delivers the line, “the Queen his mother/ Lives almost by his looks.”\(^{147}\) The way Branagh actualises the problematic closet scene assures the film’s intentional exclusion of the incestuous nuance of the original text; the incestuous or at least libidinal intensity is replaced by the unveiled grudge against the mother’s betrayal and debauchery. Moreover, Hamlet in this scene again shows the heightened sympathy and tender love towards the dead father when the Ghost, in drapery rather than armour, beseeches Hamlet to show mercy to Gertrude in a melodramatic and even effeminate fashion. Therefore, the closet scene of this film reinforces the simplicity and explicitness of a mother-son relationship which seems to defy the accusation of being charged with the son’s repressed sexual desire for the mother. Rather, the film’s closet scene connotes a different type of psychological complexity by secretly suggesting that the ultimate love object of Hamlet’s unconscious sexual desire is not his mother but his father. It is possible to assume that, in this reversed and more problematic relationship, it is the Ghost not Gertrude, in whom Hamlet senses the invisible yet threatening omnipresence of the Mother as the Other. The paternal command of the dead father herein seems to overlap with the Mother who is “the primordial subject of the demand.”\(^{148}\) This sudden encounter with the Mother in the figure of the father is quintessentially uncanny and becomes the source of Hamlet’s inexplicable anxiety, as revealed through the film’s obsessive and exclusive engagement with fathers in every corner.


In response to the aforementioned anxiety, the focused directorial efforts to dispel the oedipal involvement of Hamlet with his mother result in an unprecedented accent on the erotic relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. In the scene where Polonius questions what is between Hamlet and Ophelia, the flashback unveils their overtly sexual association, which does not appear and is only faintly implied in Shakespeare’s play. Further, the film demonstrates the romantic and erotic attachment of the young couple as an ongoing undercurrent through the repeatedly inserted flashbacks. In other words, the film’s deliberate removal of the Oedipal complex of the hero from the surface of the narrative seems to allow him to have a proper sexual relation with an object of his desire. From Lacan’s perspective, this Hamlet is not to be ‘lost in the course of his desire’ since he is capable of setting a particular object in the place of the lost phallus which functions as “the signifier of his alienation in signification.”149 In this light, the ability of Hamlet to operate within the symbolic system of desire seems to articulate that this Hamlet is capable of desiring what he ought to desire, such as revenge, crown and Ophelia. However, if we accept this superficial level of Branagh’s interpretation, it becomes even more enigmatic why Hamlet delays his revenge despite there being no gap emerging in the symbolic function of the unconscious. I would like to suggest that the twist mentioned above might offer an answer to this question. All of the extra inserted love-making scenes to prove that Hamlet is capable of making a heterosexual relationship with Ophelia may imply a phobic reaction to a fundamental and unspeakable anxiety invoked by his encounter with the Ghost as the Mother.

The director’s dream of a complete *Hamlet* may explain the motive behind the film’s deliberate efforts to make Hamlet into a hero who is not in trouble with his own desire or

149 Ibid., 28.
lack thereof. Often, the dilemma in reading Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is due to the fact that the
play depicts the trauma of the phallus being suddenly out of place and thus the subject
cannot properly make sense of anything. The inextricable ordeals of the hero echo the
inability of readers, audiences, critics and directors to pin down what they have read from
the text, which then returns like the ghost – incomprehensible, unrepresentable, and
irresistible. Whereas other Hamlets in screen adaptations reflect the deeply troubled ego of
the son(s) in confrontation with the super-ego embodied in Shakespeare’s masterpiece,
Branagh’s heroic and masculine Hamlet is the expression of the director’s dream for a
complete substitute of the original *Hamlet*. Therefore, the Hamlet that Branagh plays does
not seem to suffer from bitter frustration at his inability or alienation in signification.
Rather, he is the one who is most busy on screen making sense of everything and
explaining it to the audience. Most of all, he seems to make himself and his state of mind
clearly understood in his unabridged soliloquies, dialogues and speeches, which are
frequently accompanied by expatiating flashbacks supported by the explanatory use of
diegetic or non-diegetic sound and music. In this sense, the film’s controversial rendition
of sexual intercourse between Hamlet and Ophelia can be aligned with the effort to make
Hamlet have more ‘normalised’ relationships with other characters. Indeed, every effort is
made to confirm that for this Hamlet the phallus is in the right place – in the idealised
father(s) who pass it to their beloved son – and his oedipal desire is well repressed and
properly channelled into something other than the forbidden object, the mother. In a
historicising view, the ‘long deferred’ consummation of sexual contact between Ophelia
and Hamlet may be intended to signal the dissolution of the Oedipus complex determining
the field of film adaptations of Shakespeare’s master signifier. However, Branagh’s effort
to make a *Hamlet* that is neither shredded nor patched, from a slightly different angle, may
be motivated by his unconscious wish to guard against a more traumatic anxiety in
confrontation with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – not as super-egotistical command but as the devouring Mother, whose demand for love is more primordial, affective and destructive than the Father’s demand for obedience and respect. In this sense, the Ghost appears to return in a more ‘complete’ shape.

**The Play’s the Thing**

This chapter has addressed the film adaptations of *Hamlet* in the light of the Oedipus complex. In doing so, the argument has involved theoretical speculation upon relevant analytic concepts such as the super-ego, the ego and the phallus to comprehend the movement and variation of this fundamental ‘law’, the Oedipus complex, from various angles. Within the outlined psychoanalytic framework, I have analysed different responses to the authority of the original text as found in three *Hamlet* films – Olivier’s *Hamlet*, Zeffirelli’s and Branagh’s. The close reading of the three films has been an attempt to discover or, at least, revolve around an alternate correlation amongst seemingly contradictory interpretations represented by each film. However, I do not know which term might name this unrepresentable and unknowable centre shared by all films adapting the play on screen. Therefore, in concluding the chapter, I would like to speculate upon this ‘thing’ between *Hamlet* and its adaptations – that which resists being named and hence remains as “the thing”.

At the end of Act 2, Hamlet once again falls into deep remorse about his hesitation to avenge his father’s death and inability to act out his passion after watching the player king
recite the tragic end of Priam with “all his visage waned,/ Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s
aspéct,/ A broken voice, and his whole function suiting/ With forms to his conceit.” ¹⁵⁰

Then, with the help of the power of fiction to extract what sits in the depth of the human
mind he plans to expose the murderous heart of the criminal uncle: “The play’s the thing/
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.”¹⁵¹ Like many other puzzles in Hamlet, the
use of the indefinite noun ‘thing’ here is obscure and enigmatic. Simply on a textual level,
Hamlet is referring to the play ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ within the play Hamlet, which re-
enacts the murder scene in front of the murderer himself. Claudius, in watching the play,
sees himself in the character Lucianus who kills his uncle, the king Gonzago, in the exactly
same way as he himself murdered his brother in the play Hamlet.

Yet, if we focus more on the function of the play which Hamlet assumes will catch
something which is hidden in the human mind, ‘the play’ Hamlet talks about cannot be
reduced to ‘The Murder of Gonzago.’ In other words, the play as “the thing” is not any
specific closed structure of a text. Rather, the term signifies the universality of ‘the play,’
wherein something that is present at the core of the human subject while remaining
inaccessible becomes suddenly and momentarily presentable and perceivable as an
external ‘thing’ which nonetheless remains unnameable. From this perspective, there is a
remarkable similarity between Hamlet’s comment on the play as ‘the thing’ and Lacan’s
elaboration of the Freudian term das Ding. Similar to Hamlet’s assumption that in the play
he will discover the tragic secret buried deep within his father, Lacan says “what one finds
in das Ding is the true secret” – that is, “the beyond-of-the-signified.”¹⁵² This is the primal

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 121. [my emphasis]
nucleus of the subject which, through the circular trajectory of the drive, is repeatedly and constantly brought back to the castrated point of access to the pre-oedipal state. As Lacan says, “it is around das Ding that the whole adaptive development revolves, a development that is so specific to man insofar as the symbolic process reveals itself to be inextricably woven into it.” Likewise, in the unceasing desire to adapt Shakespeare’s Hamlet to screen, Hamlet is not an object of desire but the object in desire, owing to ‘the Sphinx of modern Literature’ or ‘hermeneutic trap’ which Shakespeare’s Hamlet is believed to embrace and embody. The unnameable in this masterful literary signifier, indeed, has too many names and meanings. The multitude of names and meanings centred on this Thing in Hamlet manifests the existence of the beyond of the signified that escapes the castration of the Father and the Law. Nevertheless, I do not mean that Shakespeare’s original play ought to hold a central, dominant position in understanding film adaptations of literary canons. Rather, film adaptation is an exemplary field which displays the human subject’s desire for, and even pathological pleasure in, playing with the Thing which masks and marks the abyss of castration, especially under the menacing gaze of the super-ego. In the course of repeated attempts to adapt Shakespeare’s Hamlet on screen, the original play is positioned as the Thing, or the Ghost that haunts us forever, while each film adaptation which transfers the ungraspable Ghost onto the screen of modern mass media functions as a thing, like the play-within-a-play in Hamlet, epitomising the psychical drama of the Oedipus complex through which each one of us organises our own oedipalised, and hence civilised, self.


153 Ibid., 57.
Chapter 4. The Resistance to the Originals and the Horror of the Destructive Mother in Hitchcock’s Adaptations of Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca and The Birds

A huge crocodile in whose jaws you are – that’s the mother. One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That’s what the mother’s desire is.

--- Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII

Texts of Doubt: Uncanny, Unpleasure, Anxiety and the Mother

This chapter aims to pose a ‘counter-thesis’ to the previous chapter, in which I argued that precursor texts function for adaptors as the command of the oedipal father to be obeyed and followed. In her book Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud’s Cultural Texts, Diane Jonte-Pace uses the term “counterthesis” to refer to that which undercuts Freud’s ‘oedipal master-thesis’ built upon the child’s murderous wish for the father and incestuous desire for the mother. The Freudian texts that she reads as counter-theses characteristically associate death with the figure of the mother, not with the threat of the oedipal father. In particular, the second chapter of the book, “Death, Mothers, and the Afterlife: At Home in the Uncanny,” highlights The Uncanny and Beyond the Pleasure Principle as the prime locus among Freud’s texts of this ‘counterthesis,’ based as they are on the oedipal thesis yet secretly subverting this premise from within. Similarly, the use of ‘counterthesis’ here reflects the relationship between the previous chapter and the current one with reference to the shift from the oedipal father to the fearful mother. On the basis of close scrutinising of three of Freud’s counterthetical

tests, I will address the fact that, in adapting works of literature into films, the influence of the original is not always welcomed. As opposed to a respectful and awe-struck attitude toward the gravitas of classic authors, the super-egotistical authority of original texts becomes radically reduced and even refused when filmmakers adapt relatively contemporary texts of less privileged writers.

The works of Alfred Hitchcock offer an epitome of such a tendency. Throughout six decades of producing, writing and directing films, Hitchcock self-consciously chose originals for his adaptations that would allow him egoistical freedom, making his films out of ‘cheap’ originals to be consumed and then forgotten. Widely known as a voracious reader, reading seems to have been Hitchcock’s major source of inspiration. As a result, forty-four films out of fifty-three in Hitchcock’s filmography are, in various degrees, adaptations based on literary sources such as novels, short stories, plays and libretti. Such statistics surely indicate that adaptation is symptomatic for Hitchcock rather than a practical choice based on commercial or aesthetic calculation. Nevertheless, none of these originals survives the director-adaptor’s notoriously irreverent manner of adapting. Consequently not many of the original texts on which his films are based remain in the memory of audience and in the consideration of film scholars. The famous interview with François Truffaut reveals Hitchcock’s imperious relation to the original texts he adapted on screen:

“[w]hat I do is to read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema. Today I would be unable to tell you the story of Daphne du

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Maurier’s *The Birds*. I read it only once, and very quickly at that.”

Such a dismissive attitude might make one curious, then, about what drove the director to constantly adapt literary works while vigilantly excluding the residues of original texts. Indeed, the above comment discloses not only Hitchcock’s conscious rejection of the interference of a literary text with his own ‘vision’, but also the unconscious resistance to the influence of the original source in the course of adaptation. In other words, the interview leads us to detect the ironic co-existence of an obsession with literary texts as an inspiration for his films and an anxiety about their permeation of his creations. In interrogating the counterthesis, or the ‘other’ side of film adaptation, the current chapter will address the paradoxically incompatible relationship between a literary original and its film adaptation, as epitomised by Hitchcock.

In particular, a close analysis of *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Birds* (1963), both original texts written by the female author Daphne du Maurier, will elucidate the operation of the hidden drive this chapter seeks to investigate. Indeed, the fact that Hitchcock adapted three of Daphne du Maurier’s works – *Jamaica Inn*, *Rebecca* and “The Birds” – indicates a very unusual level of engagement between the two artists. Among these three adaptations of du Maurier’s stories *Rebecca* and *The Birds* form an interesting antithesis. *Rebecca* is faithful to the original novel to an extraordinary extent when compared with Hitchcock’s other adaptations. The extraordinary fidelity, of course, might be the outcome of the pressure and

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157 Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) is based on du Maurier’s best-seller of the same title, which was published in 1936 and found immediate and phenomenal popularity in the UK and US market. *The Birds* (1963) is remotely based on her short story “The Birds” that was first published in 1952. Several years before adapting the story, Hitchcock optioned it for the television series he produced and included the story in an anthology called *My Favorites in Suspense* (New York: Alfred Hitchcock Presents, 1959).
influences which he would have felt in a completely new environment at the time of the
film’s production: Rebecca is his first Hollywood film, made soon after his arrival at the
centre of the world’s film industry. By contrast, The Birds can be counted as his most
subversive adaptation, which radically changes not only the setting, narrative structure and
characters of the original story but also its thematic pivot – that is, the psychical dynamics
between human characters and birds. More significantly, the latter film appears to revisit
the former, Rebecca, by interrogating the ‘psychological’ element which he had not yet
found or had not been able to actively engage with in making his first American film. In
the interview with François Truffaut, Truffaut suggests that the influence of du Maurier
permeated many of his later films, which Hitchcock concedes:

F.T Making that picture [Rebecca], I imagine, was something of a challenge... The experience,
I think, had repercussions on the films that came later. Didn't it inspire you to enrich many of
them with the psychological ingredients you initially discovered in the Daphne du Maurier
novel?

A.H That's true.158

However, the work of detecting what the director deliberately attempted to defy and reject
in the process of adaptation requires a different approach than analysing what is visible
and audible in film adaptations. This chapter thus aims to interrogate the operations of the
negative psychic tendency, which cannot be captured on the textual surface of a film
adaptation.

The presence of such a negative tendency is confirmed, paradoxically, by the vigorous
denial that attempts to negate the genesis of a film as an adaptation. Working with the
negative, moreover, is precisely what the discourse of psychoanalysis has sought to do as a

158 François Truffaut, Hitchcock: The Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock (New York: Simon &
Schuster Paperbacks, 1983), 129.
way to access what is denied and thus invisible to consciousness. Nevertheless – or, due to the very genesis of psychoanalysis as such – in the course of constructing and formulating the discipline of psychoanalysis as a route towards the negative, Freud came to realise that his discourse was always haunted by an insistent gap or hole at its heart which is resistant to any theorising speculation. The founder of psychoanalysis tried to capture this ‘something’ of pure negativity by endowing it with a multitude of names, such as the unconscious, the uncanny, the drive, anxiety, death, and woman. In a number of his works, Freud clearly tried, almost in vain, to integrate this impasse into the discourse of psychoanalysis, while allowing that it persistently remained outside his meticulous case studies and all-encompassing theorisation. Among those texts, I will focus on three works – *The Uncanny* (1919), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926) – as a starting point for interrogating the insistent drive behind the process of film adaptation that finds negative expression.

The unusual level of ambiguity found in these three works requires a more cautious and tactful approach than a straightforward application of psychoanalytic concepts to the case study of Hitchcock. In order to effectively use these Freudian concepts in the search for the other side of film adaptation, it is helpful to take up Lacan’s return to Freud, which considers the works of Freud by means of a subversive and revelatory re-reading. Lacan’s usefulness for this chapter is prompted by the fact that he paves a way into the Freudian field by framing it with a double negation in his attempts to approach the deadlock embedded in Freud’s negative concepts. The *lack of lack* and anxiety which “is not without an object” demonstrate and even epitomise the characteristics of Lacan’s reading of
Freud.159 This chapter will take a close look at the radically reformulated notion of anxiety associated with Lacan’s subversive speculation on the Mother. The reformulated concept of the Mother offers a gateway to the elusive, self-negating and uncanny dimension of screen adaptation – that is, the dimension characterised by a different set of psychical dynamics than the oedipal relationship discussed in the previous chapter. Ultimately, through the investigation of the other side of screen adaptation, the chapter aims to correlate the *drive* behind this particular form of media transformation with the uncanny side of a speaking subject “that ought to have remained…secret and hidden but has come to light.”160

The Uncanny at Home

In his 1919 essay *The Uncanny* Freud addresses a psychical paradox in his search for the origin of uncanny feelings, a paradox which may offer a key to understanding Hitchcock’s ambivalent attitude to literary source materials. At first, Freud takes a philological approach to the psychological ambivalence of the uncanny, wherein “feelings of a positive nature” related to what is “beautiful, attractive and sublime” are fused “with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress.”161 After a lengthy quotation from a German dictionary, Freud tries to draw a conclusion to his speculation by pointing out a circular trajectory that

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161 Ibid., 219.
links the two opposites: *heimlich* as being homely, familiar and intimate, and *unheimlich* as being spooky, frightening and fearful. He writes, “Thus, *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*.” In a similar vein, the uncanny casts a light on the existential paradox of film adaptation manifested in the psychic urge that spurs an adaptor to move away from his/her own starting point. To put it differently, an adaptor like Hitchcock appears to be anxious about differentiating the domain of one’s visual creation from the origin of inspiration, as if there were something unbearable in a written text initiating his or her vision. To avoid the unwanted interference of original texts of adaptation, Hitchcock’s strategy is to restrict himself to reading an original literary text very quickly. If possible, he seems to suggest that one should read it only once in order to thoroughly wash away the traces of those words on the page, and then to start creating purely cinematic images free from all those haunting emotions, impressions, imagery and other residues aroused by the literary text that provokes the desire for adaptation. In this sense, Freud’s association of the *heim* with a tinge of the *unheimlich* appears to illuminate the hidden psychological dynamic of Hitchcock’s self-contradictory relation to literary originals as a ‘home’ of creation which contains something ominous, repellent and needing to be spit out – that is, in Freud’s account, something *unheimlich*.

As a rule, Freud’s attempt to ‘articulate and explain’ the uncanny as a concept resonates with a note of inherent impossibility. He steers his way through conceptualising the uncanny with the intention of anchoring it to his master structure based on the Oedipus complex, despite the fact that the uncanny is something, by his own account, which resists

162 Ibid., 226.
repression by any signifier. In the second section of the essay, Freud analyses E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story *The Sandman* as well as other mythical narratives to highlight how these texts contain elucidatory examples regarding the nature and the origin of uncanny experiences. An anticipated aim of the discussion is, of course, to subsume the concept of the uncanny under his “Oedipal masterplot” by proving that all these cases perceived to be uncanny indicate the occasional return of the repressed castration complex.¹⁶³ Yet, contrary to his intention to strengthen his masterplot, the essay on the ghostly concept of the uncanny cannot proceed further than to link the uncanny to the subject’s encounter with the return of ‘something’ that has been and should remain repressed.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, towards the end of the essay Freud eventually reveals his own doubt about a psychoanalytic investigation of the uncanny: he says that an extensive enquiry “would be to open the door to doubts about what exactly is the value of our general contention that the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed.”¹⁶⁵ Through the attempt to conceptualise the uncanny, Freud involuntarily proves that it is impossible to achieve a solid understanding of the term that would reaffirm his oedipal masterplot. A similar impossibility of bringing out an analytic concept from the purely affective realm of the uncanny, I would like to suggest, appears to echo in Hitchcock’s film career, in which he did his utmost to engender something that is “anti-literary and purely cinematic” paradoxically on the grounds of the literary sources which he would reject and repress in


¹⁶⁴ The second half of “The Uncanny” remains obscure and indecisive in terms of the content of what is repressed and Freud refers what is repressed and, hence, uncannily returns as ‘something’. This rhetorical characteristic shall be examined further in the second part of the chapter where I will explore the unrepresentable locus of fear and horror in Hitchcock’s two adaptations in discussion.

the course of adaptation. Moreover, the impasse of the two masters in confrontation with that which forever frustrates the desire for Symbolic mastery is none other than a reflection of the impasse the speaking subject suffers in the face of a text which sustains an uncanny ‘note’ that is always escaping the subject’s comprehension. If this is the case, then the repeated process of adaptation functions as an allegory of the subject’s constant search for complete command of such a text.

Therefore, it is more significant to pay attention to what is tangentially touched upon in *The Uncanny* than to produce a coherent formulation of the uncanny as the text appears to promise. In so doing, it is possible to identify a few interesting points relevant to a further analysis of Hitchcock’s ‘case’ and the two adaptations under discussion. The first is that, although Freud fails to attribute uncanny feelings to the return of the repressed castration complex, his hypothesis marks a speculative path from the domain of the uncanny to a point that is crucial for the discussion of Hitchcock’s film adaptations – that is, the ambivalent notion of anxiety. Freud once designated the castration complex as the cause of anxiety; however, he suddenly dismissed this causal relationship, in which he had long believed, in his essay *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Through probing that essay we shall discover another example of the doubt, negation and anxiety of the master. The second point of interest in *The Uncanny* is what Freud calls “a beautiful confirmation of [his] theory of the uncanny,” in which he suggests that the “mother’s genitals or her body” is the ultimate locus of the uncanny. This is not an anticipated conclusion for an essay in which Freud tries to reaffirm his theory of the threatening and unquenchable power of

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patriarchal command in the formation of the subject of the unconscious. Nonetheless, his insight penetrates the affective, sensuous and primordial nature of the uncanny and links it to the mother’s genitals. In addition, it is noteworthy that, as he points out, the uncanny is often manifested in the form of “repetition of the same thing”: it is “the double being” that, Freud believes, “is responsible for the impression of uncanniness.” Together, Freud’s association of the uncanny with the maternal body and with the notion of the double provides a clue to interrogating the association between Hitchcock’s symptomatic practice of adaptation and his films’ frequent representation of the sinister mother with two faces. Indeed, the director deftly arouses a sense of disorientation and insecurity in his audience by disclosing the double-sidedness of maternity and revealing the other side of the loving and nurturing mother at home through “those domineering mothers he excels at portraying.”

Interestingly, the above seminal points put forward in The Uncanny may allow us to formulate a feasible psychoanalytic hypothesis, based on Hitchcock’s biographies and interviews, which shall further our discussion of resistance and anxiety involved in the process of film adaptation. According to a detailed biography written by Patrick McGilligan, Hitchcock’s first and major formal education took place at a disciplinary Catholic school, St. Ignatius College. The school boasted an ambitious curriculum including “Longfellow, Defoe, Dante, Dickens, and Shakespeare” taught by many fathers. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine that for Hitchcock, as the previous chapter discussed, the world of literature must have been inscribed in the realm of the Father’s

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168 Ibid., 236.
command, establishing an overdetermined oedipal complex that he may have addressed throughout his six decades’ career of ‘writing with the camera.’ However, before he was introduced to these overpowering and fearful fathers of literature, someone had already aroused his life-long fascination and obsession with storytelling: it was the intimate figure of the mother, weaving the threads of a child’s imagination by telling him bedtime stories. In an interview, he explained his central drive to be a cinematic storyteller by using a noteworthy metaphor: he said, “I put myself in the place of a child whose mother is telling him a story...When there’s a pause in the narration, the child always says, ‘What comes next, Mummy?’”¹⁷¹ This anecdote, improvised in the interview, indicates that his wish for storytelling, which he strove to convert completely into his passion for filmmaking, originates from a maternal locus in which he becomes an inquisitive child eagerly listening to his storytelling mother. Therefore, for Hitchcock, the position of a film director as an heir of the storytelling art may be a psychologically ambiguous locus because it is ruled superficially by the symbolic father whose influence the director seems to have successfully overcome, yet it is permeated, at a more profound level, by the persisting presence of the mother who does not allow him an easy escape. As a screen adaptor, it is ambiguous whether Hitchcock took the position of a legitimate heir to the Father’s literary world or was unconsciously caught by the ‘Mother’ who constantly demands his return to the psychical site of the pre-oedipal and exclusively reciprocal relationship between a mother and a child, precursor and adaptor. The speculation leads us to Lacan’s account of the omnipresence of the mother as the Other [Autre], who is “on his back” all the time and, therefore, is surely more intimidating than the mother as the object of the child’s incestuous desire forbidden by the threatening father.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 9
¹⁷² Lacan describes the entrapping power of the mother as the subject of the demand whose
Hence, it is possible to assume that ‘something’, that which is repressed, returns in the course of Hitchcock’s repeated practice of literary adaptation and through his numerous portraits of ‘domineering mothers.’ This ‘something’ is aligned not with the cultural castration complex under the force of the super-egotistical father from the world of literature, but with the province of the uncanny contaminated by the ambivalent figure of the loving yet feared Mother. Hitchcock’s filmic treatment of the maternal figure suggests he conceives of the mother not simply as an angelic figure of nurture and care but also as that which is closer to “the Mother as Other [Autre] – i.e., the primordial subject of the demand [la demande],” in Lacanian terms. The persistent nature of literary adaptation as a principal form of Hitchcock’s filmmaking, then, finds its connection to a subject’s anxiety which cannot absolutely be integrated into the oedipal masterplot. According to Lacan, this patriarchal plot should articulate how the subject suffers the oppression of the paternal command, yet at the same time it bespeaks how the castration complex endows the subject with an escape from the engulfing mother who defies the division between subject and object, internal and external. If I may draw out this speculation a little further, the incomprehensible drive for adaptation, whilst defying the influence of original texts, can be related to the subject’s anxiety about something more primordial and prior to the advent of the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, the anxiety of an adaptor, as detected in the heterogeneous mixture of fascination, obsession with and resistance to originals, may be linked to “the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, omnipresence is the ultimate cause of anxiety. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety 1962-1963*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Gallagher Press, 2002), (IV, pp. 10-11).


fascinating and abject” Mother, to use Julia Kristeva’s description. In this sense, Hitchcock’s anxiety of being overpowered by originals finds its unintended and unconscious expression in his beloved motif of the ambiguous mother, a figure repeated in many of his films which eventually culminates in his masterpiece *Psycho* (1960). At the end of that film, a lengthy pedantic explanation provided by the psychologist’s phallic discourse is retrospectively paralysed by the undead Mrs. Bates’ face superimposed on Norman’s face, which looms large on screen. The close-up gradually dissolves into Marion’s car as it is pulled out of the swamp; the headlights, like the empty gaze of her lifeless eyes at the end of the murder scene, cast a sinister gaze directly at the viewer. Indeed, like Freud, who discovered the *unheimlich* at the heart of the *heim*, Hitchcock as a director repeatedly found something uncanny at the mother’s bosom in the course of his obsessive practice of adaptation, while vehemently defying the unavoidable ‘return’ of original texts.

So far, the chapter has scrutinised how *The Uncanny* manifests a counter-thesis to Freud’s previous theoretical elaboration in an attempt to look into the ‘beyond’ of Hitchcock’s imperious practice of screen adaptation. Now I would like to further the discussion by introducing the concept of anxiety in order to better understand the complicated relation which Hitchcock had to precursor texts and their potential influence. Before speculating on the concept of anxiety as defined by Freud, however, I would like to outline how the concept of anxiety was first brought into the cultural domain of aesthetic creation, interrelation and adaptation by Harold Bloom. His book entitled *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), not without controversy, was the first investigation of anxiety as a pivotal notion in

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meditating the complex interrelation of an author to precursor texts and their influence. In particular, Bloom elaborates on anxiety as a universal impasse which every ‘poet’ must experience owing to “the immense anxieties of indebtedness” to precursors.\textsuperscript{176} In one sense, Bloom’s concern is with a few ‘strong’ Romantic poets who struggled against the overpowering influence of their precursors’ poetry, which once had fostered their poetic skills and nurtured their passion. However, as Paul de Man suggests in his review of the book, the value of Bloom’s study lies in the fact that “Bloom’s essay has much to say on the encounter between latecomer and precursor as a displaced version of the paradigmatic encounter between reader and text.”\textsuperscript{177} In other words, the book contains a more fundamental insight into an affective state called anxiety as a universal experience of the speaking subject positioned as a reader in his or her encounter with a text. Citing Oscar Wilde, Bloom establishes the concept of influence as the object of anxiety before moving on to a detailed account of “[t]he six revisionary movements” in a poet’s attempt to deviate from precursors – or, in our broader view, the speaking subject’s attempt to interpret and understand a text in his or her own terms.\textsuperscript{178} Oscar Wilde himself, according to Bloom, suffered from the anxiety of influence severely enough to think himself a failed poet. Yet Bloom points out that in his novel \textit{The Portrait of Dorian Gray} Wilde, with remarkable psychoanalytic insight, elucidates the notion of influence as the threat of invasion and deprivation of one’s subjectivity. Through the voice of Lord Henry Wotton, Wilde argues:

\begin{quote}
All influence is immoral...Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{177} Paul de Man, “Review of \textit{The Anxiety of Influence} by Harold Bloom,” \textit{Comparative Literature} 26, no. 3 (Summer, 1974): 273.
him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. 179

Here we can read the essence of what Bloom sees as the cause of anxiety in psychoanalytic terms, since the influence of a text comes to a subject as a threat of the negation of one’s own subjectivity. If we narrow this to understanding the process of adapting precursor texts into one’s own, it is possible to assume that the anxiety of influence becomes more intense, more secretive and more ‘uncanny’ in a case such as Hitchcock’s in proportion to the conscious efforts he made to erase the influence of the literary tradition from his creation of the purely cinematic. To put it differently, he, as a master of cinematic language, put his art at the antipode of the literary tradition and, in return, the influence of the written came to pose a threat of annihilation or negation of his newly bred artistry.

Unpleasure and Anxiety

Freud wrote the short essay The Uncanny (1919) as a precursor to his ground-breaking Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), in which he provocatively argues that “[t]he aim of all life is death.” 180 The semantic paradox in the above statement is nothing but a metapsychological variant of the syntactic paradox that threads the canny and uncanny into one circle. The titles of both texts are similarly permeated with a tone of disruption and disorientation, which negates the rational ground of previous understandings of the experience as well as the existence of the human subject. Just as The Uncanny is Freud’s

claim that the prefix ‘un-’ functions as “the token of repression,” so *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is an attempt to unleash intellectual repression in a way that undermines his own theory of the pleasure principle.\(^{181}\) He thereby opens up the discourse of psychoanalysis to the deadly force that drives living beings in a phenomenologically opposite yet ontologically same direction as the ‘life instincts.’\(^{182}\) If we concede that the use of the term ‘adaptation’ in reference to a media transformation from a precursor text to a posterior text is saturated with a Darwinian nuance, then the desire for adaptation in response to the Oedipus complex can be seen as a life force operating under the pleasure principle. However, on the basis of what Freud ‘was forced to discover’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the repeated attempt to adapt a written text to screen cannot be regarded merely as culture’s evolutionary movement towards the future or its dialectic progress towards a newer and higher synthesis.\(^{183}\) On the contrary, the very persistence or compulsiveness, as exemplified in Hitchcock’s case, suggests the existence of “something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides.”\(^{184}\) Therefore, I would argue that the incessant driving force behind screen adaptation, which goes beyond the bounds of the pleasure-seeking desire to set up

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\(^{182}\) Here, it is important to note that the German term ‘Trieb’ is controversially translated into ‘instinct’ in *Standard Edition*. However, many Freudian scholars, including Lacan, argue that the meaning and the use of the term would correspond better to the term ‘drive’.


the screen for oedipal fantasies, intersects with the dimension of the ‘beyond’ that Freud is in search of in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, even at the cost of renouncing his own “twenty-five years of intense work” to establish and consolidate the oedipal masterplot.185

The backbone of his theory about the pleasure principle as a fundamental psychical tendency is based upon Freud’s economic or quantitative account of cathexis, which regards an increase of excitation present in the mind as unpleasure and its diminution as pleasure. As a natural mental reaction to such an unpleasant excess of psychic excitation, Freud explains that “the work of the mental apparatus is directed towards keeping the quantity of excitation low.”186 In short, stability or homeostasis is the aim of the pleasure principle. From *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (1911) he began to elaborate the dual system of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The latter is his attempt to explain the deliberate ‘detour’ the ego must make in response to the uncontrollable forces from the external world – reality – which do not allow the ego to immediately obtain the homeostatic level of excitation in its advanced phases of development. Nonetheless, the reality principle that forces the subject to endure a level of unpleasure is not a complete replacement of the pleasure principle, but is rather a supplementary regulation that is put in operation owing to the subject’s increased understanding and experience of external reality. As such, it is a necessary adaptation of the pleasure principle, which remains a move toward homeostasis. What is to be remembered is that the reality principle is ultimately subject to the ever persisting pleasure principle inasmuch as it “does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining

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185 Ibid., 18.
186 Ibid., 11.
pleasure.”\textsuperscript{187} Overall, within a broader scheme of the pleasure principle, the reality principle enables the ego to facilitate “the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure.”\textsuperscript{188} In the course of theorising the pleasure principle and its adaptation to the environment, Freud establishes the capacity of a human subject to prolong its existence by means of protecting itself from fatally excessive excitation.

The complication of the duality between the pleasure and reality principles emerges on the surface of his theorisation when Freud stumbles over the difficulties of clarifying the nature of the unpleasure which the ego endeavours to avoid or maintain at a minimal level. To simplify a lengthy speculative account Freud makes in the essay, unpleasure – that is, excessive mental excitation – is present in two states in the human psyche: one is in a bound state so that it is governed by the pleasure principle; the other is the excitation which is received without the protective shield in effect and, hence, forever remains in an unbound state. This ‘freely mobile’ form of unpleasant excitation is “incapable of obeying the secondary process,” a term used by Freud to refer to the pleasure principle inclusive of the reality principle.\textsuperscript{189} The unbound unpleasure, never being subject to the pleasure principle, continues to be of an instinctual nature \textit{[triebhaft]}. On the basis of the above hypothesis, Freud detects “the track of a universal attribute of instincts and perhaps of organic life in general” which functions as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” – that is, a state prior to birth or existence.\textsuperscript{190} Freud recognises this as an instinctual tendency toward annihilation, which he traces from the ego’s masochistic tendency and positions ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ because it comes before the

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 36.
incursion of the pleasure principle as a life force which prolongs and preserves the life of a being. In other words, it is a primitive and primordial psychic force which moves toward the restoration of the initial inorganic status of organic beings. Characteristically, this force is manifested, Freud argues, in the form of compulsive repetition, defying any interpretive effort of the analyst. Freud, interestingly, admits that his speculative reflection, which began in the fields of biology and psychology, eventually leads into a philosophical meditation on death as a purpose of life. That is how this provocative text encounters the notion of ‘the death drive,’ whose haunting existence is uncanny and beyond the systematic functions of the pleasure principle. Or, in Lacan’s understanding, that is how the death drive was forced upon Freud.

Threading the death drive together with anxiety as a response to the threat of one’s negation, I will now turn to the anxiety aroused in the mind of the master of psychoanalysis himself. This anxiety perhaps appears most clearly in his counterthetical text Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety in relation to the concept of the engulfing Mother, which Freud had a glimpse of in the speculation of the uncanny. In Inhibition, Freud gives up his “earlier view that the cathectic energy of the repressed impulse is automatically turned into anxiety.”¹⁹¹ He begins to formulate a new view, as follows:

Anxiety is not newly created in repression; it is reproduced as an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemic image. If we go further and enquire into the origin of that anxiety – and of affects in general – we shall be leaving the realm of pure psychology and entering the borderland of physiology. Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primaeval traumatic experiences, and when a similar situation occurs they are revived like mnemic symbols...In man and the higher animals it would seem that the act of

birth, as the individual's first experience of anxiety, has given the affect of anxiety certain characteristic forms of expression.\textsuperscript{192}

Here Freud suggests that anxiety, as “an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemic image,” is related to the unpleasure in an unbound state which is beyond the pleasure principle.\textsuperscript{193} Also, later he confirms the temporal priority of “primaeval traumatic experiences” by saying that “the earliest outbreaks of anxiety, which are of a very intense kind, occur before the super-ego has become differentiated.”\textsuperscript{194} In other words, anxiety has nothing to do with the loss of the mother as the first object of one’s erotic desire because in this ‘primaeval’ stage before the Name-of-the-Father arrives the mother is not an object but the Other \textit{[Autre]} itself. This primitive \textit{Autre} operates not on the level of the threat of separation and castration but on the level of the fear of negation or the “fear of being devoured.”\textsuperscript{195}

Interestingly, Freud reveals a sign of his own anxiety in stretching to the ‘beyond’ of his theory of anxiety. As he did in \textit{The Uncanny} and \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, Freud attempts to support and maintain his oedipal masterplot by incorporating this discovery into the concept of the castration complex. In the fourth part of \textit{Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety}, Freud explains that the anxiety is aroused by “the fear of impending castration,” which cannot be transformed into a symptom by repression since anxiety comes before and produces repression, not vice versa.\textsuperscript{196} The great irony of this statement is that Freud is attempting to reconcile two incompatible ideas here: one is that anxiety is an affective precipitate of traumatic experience prior to the paternal function of the Oedipus complex,

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 93. [my emphasis]
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 93-4.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 108.
and the other is that anxiety is a reaction to the untransformed threat of castration evoked by a ‘real’ father figure. Consequently, in agony and anxiety Freud has to punctuate this part of the essay with “Non liquet,” meaning “it is not clear.” However, I would like to focus on his use of the term ‘real’ or ‘realistic,’ which in the German original is written as ‘Realangst’: he refers to anxiety as “a realistic fear [realangst], a fear of a danger which was actually impending or was judged to be a real one.” Often, this term is used to support the idea that the threat of castration as an origin of anxiety belongs to the threat aroused by a ‘real’ father whose presence in the familial triangle is not symbolic but physical. However, if we accept Lacan’s more sophisticated theorisation of the Other, this ‘real father’ evoking ‘a realistic fear’ is none other than the subject of the original demand existing before the advent of the paternal super-ego: that is, the mother as the Other. As a result, the term ‘castration’ is not simply the deprivation of the penis; it is a more primordial attack on the subject, which implies the annihilation or negation of oneself. At the point that the subject experiences the anxiety of this existential ‘castration’, it uncannily encounters the precondition of human existence as a manifestation of the death drive. Anxiety as a signal of the ‘real’ danger as such “has a very marked character of unpleasure,” which tends to return the subject to the same traumatic locus over and over.

I have been attempting to read Freud against Freud, yet also not entirely against him. What is at stake is only a slight temporal dislocation. In the later part of Inhibitions Freud explains that the ego deals with the danger of ‘real’ castration by directing the castration anxiety “to a different object and expressed in a distorted form, so that the patient is afraid, not of being castrated by his father, but of being bitten by a horse or devoured by a

197 Ibid., 110.
198 Ibid., 108.
199 Ibid., 132.
wolf.” Whereas Freud starts “this substitutive formation” with a ‘real’ father and moves to another object such as a horse or a wolf, I would suggest that prior to such a substitutive formation there comes a more primordial object that is hidden even from the consciousness of Freud owing his own anxiety: that is the very first substitution of the mother as the Other – the Mother in Lacan’s terminology – by the real father. However, this first substitution in the chain remains outside the course of oedipalisation and, thus, leaves a gap in the symbolic constitution of the speaking subject. The gap accrues a fundamental gravity around which the subject circles forever, but whenever it approaches too closely the subject experiences anxiety as a signal.

It is possible to find traces of the same gap in Hitchcock’s mode of narrativising his ‘castration anxiety.’ In various interviews Hitchcock repeatedly emphasised that he was not frightening or scary but the most scared person of all, and his primordial experience of fear was when his stern father had the 5-year-old Hitchcock locked in a jail cell of a local police station briefly for being naughty. This anecdote is heavily saturated with the Freudian oedipal masterplot in which a boy is believed to construct his relation to the world through perceptions of paternal rules and authority. This fear of paternal authority remains in the mind of the film director, who obsessively depicts the police as the ultimate representatives of oppressive authority in his films. However, we can find an even more interesting disclosure in a television talkshow where Hitchcock accounted for fear as the most primitive emotion of human beings by saying, “I think my mother sacred me when I was three months old. You see, she said BOO. It gave me the hiccups. And she apparently was very satisfied. All mothers do it, you know. That is how fear stuffs in everyone.”

200 Ibid., 125.
201 The Dick Cavett Show: Hollywood Greats, DVD, (originally aired in 1972 on ABC; Sony Music,
First of all, in Hitchcock’s attempts to relate ‘traumatising’ events of his childhood in two different and contradictory ways, it is possible to discover the subject’s effort to incorporate what Freud calls “precipitates of primaeval traumatic experiences” into one’s conscious mind or one’s memory: the subject strives to turn the inaccessible moment attached to the affective state of anxiety into a narrative which is constructed under the phallic or symbolic order, but does so in vain.\textsuperscript{202} Since the subject has already gone through oedipalisation, the symbolic register tends to knit the anxiety-inducing trace of the engulfing Mother together with the fear of the castrating father. As represented in Hitchcock’s oedipal anecdote the director substitutes a threatening father with the police and organises a narrative pinpointing his ultimate source of anxiety, all the while leaving a gap in the very first substitutive formation which his conscious cannot incorporate within this personal ‘myth’. This also can refer back to the hypothesis that the obsessive nature of his screen adaptation implicates the persistent residue of the maternal storyteller in Hitchcock, which he sought to replace with the fathers of the literary world whose influence he seemed to successfully defy and overcome. The point I will leave open at the moment but shall come back to later is that, interestingly, Hitchcock also dwells on the deeply sadistic pleasure of the mother in making her infant child scared, which recalls his portrayal of the mother as a secret origin of the protagonist’s anxiety in various films. Often the sadistic character of the Mother is transmitted to the paternal super-ego, which Hitchcock represents in his films as masculine authority such as the police, Nazis and fathers/husbands who “become harsh, cruel and inexorable.”\textsuperscript{203} Such an attribution also


affirms the above assumption of the substitution of the threatening and devouring figure of
the Mother at the very back of his conscious with the sadistic phallic Other visible on the
narrative surface of the film adaptations.

I have been suggesting that anxiety signals the pre-oedipal and thus pre-symbolic
dimension of the Other, which is captured in the flip side of the mother as the origin of life.
In this sense, Joan Copjec, in her work *Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety*, duly points
out that anxiety is an extraordinary and affective signal “because it works without the use
of any signifiers.”204 In other words, what anxiety signals is the unrepresentable realm of
the death drive, which fails every attempt to encapsulate it with the net of signifiers. For
Freud as well as Copjec, danger-provoking anxiety signals the approach of the gap which
threatens the subject with the annihilation of its own symbolic ground. Therefore, anxiety
coincides with the failure of the Name-of-the-father and reveals the hole or gap in the
symbolic domain, which is the outcome of oedipalisation. In a similar vein, what Bloom
points out in his designation of influence as a cause of anxiety is, at a deeper level, an
encounter with the gap that is glimpsed in one’s experience of ‘influence’ in the process of
reading others’ texts and differentiating one’s own text from theirs. In the process of
adapting literary texts onto screen the subject more intensely suffers from this gap because
screen adaptation is a process of seeking the substitution of linguistic signifiers with
‘cinematic’ signifiers, in which the fundamental gap of the subject aligns with the gap he
or she perceives between the language of literature and that of cinema. The attempt to
‘stuff’ the gap between the two different symbolic systems recalls a more primordial level
of human subjectivity in which the speaking subject ardently seeks a signifier to keep the

Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), 166.
gap at the centre of its subjectivity at bay. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the subject seeks to endow this affective danger with a more substantial and symbolic locus such as a regime of the paternal superego. Yet there may be something that recalls a more primordial real angst which cannot be completely attributed to the paternal authority of original texts or the authors, as in the case of an overpowering name like Shakespeare. Here, Hitchcock’s treatment of female characters, which is often criticised as misogynistic, can be seen as related to the anxiety this devouring Mother, placed in the gap of the Symbolic, evokes in the course of adaptation. I shall return to this in the following section with a focus on the relation between the gaze and the Mother. In so doing, I will attempt to separate the operation of the Mother from the overseeing gaze of the Father, which is always accompanied by commanding words like those of the Ghost in the Hamlet films.

The Mother and the Gaze

When we think of Hitchcock’s film texts in relation to the Mother and the gaze, it is worth starting with a return to Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In this highly influential essay Mulvey reveals, on the basis of Freud’s account of scopophilic pleasure and Lacan’s mirror stage, an ideological mode of visual pleasure embedded in narrative cinema. The focus of the essay is on Hollywood films’ “skilled and satisfying manipulation of the visual pleasure” by means of the sadistic impact of the masculine gaze upon the female object of the erotic desire.\(^\text{205}\) Mulvey argues that the gaze of the camera objectifies a female character on screen in the service of voyeuristic pleasure

(of male characters and audiences alike). To support the argument of the essay, Hitchcock’s films such as *Vertigo*, *Marnie* and *Rear Window* are analysed as a salient example of the male gaze in search of voyeuristic pleasure from mastering a female object to be looked at.

Although Mulvey’s seminal article opened the discussion regarding the filmic gaze from a psychoanalytic perspective, there have been various critical comments on Mulvey’s association of scopic mastery with masculine power and pleasure. Among those, Kaja Silverman’s reconsideration attempts to draw out the paradoxical relation between pleasure and unpleasure beyond the logic of Mulvey’s reading of Hitchcock. To do so, Silverman turns our attention to Lacan’s three diagrams appearing in his *Seminar XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where Lacan complicates “the relation of the subject with the domain of vision” to emphasise the complexity of our scopic desire and its object. 206 What Silverman takes from Lacan’s elaboration in *Seminar XI* is, above all, the idea that the scopic pleasure promised by the objectifying and voyeuristic masculine gaze is illusionary, since at a more primordial level, the viewing subject is looked at by the impersonal gaze coming from the side of objects he or she sees. In deciphering Lacan’s three diagrams from *Seminar XI*, Silverman claims “the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency [the gaze], or of him or herself escaping specularity,” since Lacan’s teaching confirms that the gaze is on the opposite side of the subject. 207 Further, Lacan notes that the power and mastery entailed in the gaze must be differentiated from the eye’s agency and power, which constitutes the subject’s identity through misrecognition. Indeed, the gaze in Lacan’s theory is different from what Mulvey refers to as the male gaze affiliated with patriarchal power over the female object, since the latter

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eroticising look (Silverman’s term) operates in the Imaginary domain of the ego and its identification with objects it sees. In Lacan’s topology, the gaze under discussion is the objet petit a, which, although appearing in the scopic field, belongs to the realm of the Real, not the Imaginary. In the inextricable and unknowable territory of the Real, the drive manifests itself through the repetitive circular movement around this small object, objet petit a, signifying the lack at the heart of the Symbolic as the locus of the speaking subject. The threat of the gaze, therefore, originates from the fact that it leads the subject to confront the traumatic instability of “a scopic Cartesianism” – the belief that “seeing constitutes being” as well as the power of seeing – on which Mulvey’s argument is based. The other point to be reminded of is that the screen in Lacan’s elaboration of the gaze functions as “the locus of mediation” between the intimidating gaze and the subject. Lacan teaches us that the human subject is placed on the opposite side of the screen behind which the gaze is positioned and, unlike animals, the subject “isolates the function of the screen and plays with it,” being aware at least unconsciously of the gaze behind the screen although the gaze itself is completely invisible.

From a Mulveyan point of view, images of women on screen may indicate the director’s mastery over the objects Hitchcock transferred from page to screen, since the male gaze is synonymous with that of his camera. Similarly, his incessant practice of adaptation may be read as a continuous pursuit of the satisfaction of pleasure-seeking voyeuristic desire which is imposed on the eye of his male protagonists. Yet, according to what Lacan discovers about “the gaze that is outside” and split from the eye, what Hitchcock captures

208 Ibid., 146.
210 Ibid., 107.
as the most threatening gaze is the gaze that looks at characters from the side of ‘objects’, arousing anxious reactions from characters and audiences alike, especially at the moment when they seek to satisfy their voyeuristic desire.\textsuperscript{211} For example, in \textit{Rebecca} there is a scene in which the young protagonist, the second Mrs. de Winter, is drawn to the closed doors of the room of the deceased first Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca. Hitchcock’s cinematographic signature – the camera zooming in while tracking away from an object – captures the moment of the uncanny when the heroine is looked at by the closed doors while approaching the room with curiosity and a desire to peep inside the forbidden realm. In the scene, the heroine’s point of view shot insinuates that the pair of doors decorated with a symmetric array of panels and knobs somehow reflects the look or the desire to see by returning a sinister and unpleasant gaze back at ‘us’. In \textit{The Birds}, the scene where Melanie sneaks into the house of the Brenners to surprise Mitch also stages a similar interplay between the protagonist’s look and the gaze looking back at her from the side of objects; this time, it weighs the comically romantic scene with an unpleasant premonition of this impending catastrophe – the birds’ attack.

If we assume a link between Hitchcock’s repetitive use of this visual motif presenting the gaze and the reaction of the director himself to the intimidating world of things, it is possible to conceive that what those heroines encounter is the reworking of the very gaze which Hitchcock sensed and tried to resist in the process of adaptation. The gaze, in this light, would function as the \textit{objet petit a} which returns the director to the same encircling trajectory around adaptation. In other words, Hitchcock’s allegedly obsessive pursuit of voyeuristic pleasure in the persistent practice of adaptation may well be the manifestation of the indestructible drive circling around the gaze that is detached from his seeing eyes as

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 106.
well as the camera. In this sense, the purely cinematic images that Hitchcock believed he could extract from the literary originals should be conceived as themselves being the screen for the intimidating gaze looking at him from behind the things he ‘saw’ in the originals. Nevertheless, Hitchcock as an astute film auteur knew how to play with this screen by transferring the uncanny gaze onto this surface and making it felt by the spectators. Indeed, Hitchcock’s obsessive pursuit of the ‘looked-at-ness’ of his female leads is only a foil for the gaze itself, which returns the voyeuristic look of the male characters, camera and audience to make the human subject an object and ultimately to point at its own nothingness. Interestingly, if we recall Mulvey’s inadvertent comment about the image of woman whose “look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content,” this gaze is re-presented in the figure of the threatening Mother whose uncanny and unpleasant ‘other’ side penetrates the Hitchcockian screen to reveal our place in the picture as being looked at from every side.212

The Function of the Negative

As the chapter has discussed, Hitchcock’s defiant attitude toward the influence of the literary texts he adapted on screen seems to disclose an anxiety in confrontation with the gap of adaptation rather than reaffirming his mastery over the literary materials he used. In reading this anxiety, I have been using a psychoanalytic method whose function Freud explains in his short essay Die Verneinung [Negation]. Freud begins his essay by claiming:

The manner in which our patients bring forward their associations during the work of analysis gives us an opportunity for making some interesting observations. ‘Now you’ll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I’ve no such intention.’ We realize that this is a repudiation, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. Or: ‘You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s not my mother.’ We emend this to: ‘So it is his mother.’ In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association. It is as though the patient had said: ‘It’s true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don’t feel inclined to let the association count.’

Similarly, I read Hitchcock’s ‘No, I read the original story only once and I cannot remember it’ as ‘Yes, I read it many times and can remember it well down to its minor details.’ Later in the essay Die Verneinung (1925), Freud explains the function of negation in the transaction between the unconscious and the subject’s conscious mind: “[w]ith the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper function.”

It is with this logic of negation as a guide that I would like to read two of Hitchcock’s films which adapt stories by Daphne du Maurier – Rebecca and “The Birds” – in order to understand how to re-present original stories while negating their influence. Before moving on to a reading of the two films, however, it would be useful to embed the logic and function of negation in the philosophical conceptualisation of anxiety, as a platform for closely considering Hitchcock’s manifestation of anxiety as a negative phenomenon through the uncanny figure of the mother at the centre of the two films.

In the line of philosophical investigation of anxiety as a concept, Kierkegaard’s The Concept of Anxiety has a unique place. Lacan holds Kierkegaard to be the first and seminal

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214 Ibid., 235.
reference when it comes to intellectual efforts to “come to terms with anxiety.” Written under one of several pseudonyms of Kierkegaard – Vigilius Haufniensi – *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* addresses anxiety as an existential experience of human beings: “[t]hat anxiety makes its appearance is the pivot upon which everything turns.” Above all, Kierkegaard argues that anxiety is not the result of hereditary sin – that is, the Fall of Adam – but its presupposition. This subversive account of anxiety as being primordial rather than reactionary or symptomatic is precisely resonant with Freud’s second account of anxiety as being prior to repression and a signal of the impending danger; Lacan’s elaboration of the concept basically follows this argument. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Kierkegaard relates anxiety to ‘nothingness’ as its object: throughout the book he repeatedly maintains that “it remains true that the object of anxiety is a nothing.” The philosopher further presents a very intriguing metaphor of this ‘nothing or nothingness’ in which we confront an uncanny rendezvous with the gap at the centre of the constitution of the subject as mentioned above. However, what makes the gap or ‘nothing’ a real threat is the fact that it can bring to the edge of our consciousness of that which is never bounded, or un-boundedness itself – in Lacan’s words, the lack of lack. Insightfully, Kierkegaard describes anxiety as a ‘dizziness’ which one experiences when his or her eye “happens to look down into the yawning abyss.”

Here, the task of capturing the concept of anxiety in relation to nothingness as its object

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217 Ibid., 77. [my emphasis]
218 Ibid., 61.
leads the discussion into the domain of Existentialism and to Jean Paul Sartre, who follows Kierkegaard’s account of anxiety as a confrontation with the abyss at the centre of human existence. Although Kierkegaard and Sartre consider this abyss as the limitless potential of human existence and positivistically call it ‘freedom,’ the way in which Sartre refines Kierkegaard’s concept of ‘nothingness’ as the object of anxiety illuminates the philosophical basis for Lacan’s elaboration of anxiety. Herein, setting aside Sartre’s violent objection to psychoanalysis and limiting the discussion of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* to the first part, where he conceptualises nothingness in the pursuit of being, Sartre’s speculation on the notion of ‘nothingness’ might be seen as an attempt to meditate another possibility of conceptualising nothingness beyond Hegelian dialectics. To put it differently, Sartre tries to break the oppositional relation between being and nothingness and to see nothingness not as an antithesis of being with a distinguishable ontological locus, but as that which is concurrent with being. Being draws a boundary around its locus so that nothingness “exists only on the surface of being” and is, consequently, “surrounding being on every side,” haunting it.219 Since to Sartre nothingness is a negative notion which lacks any bounded locus, it is possible to take Sartre’s concept of nothingness as the logical grounding for Lacan’s concept of the lack of lack which evokes anxiety – or, ‘anguish’ in Hazel Barnes’s more immediate translation of Sartre’s *l’angoisse*. It also elucidates the philosophical foundation on which Lacan ‘invented’ the *objet petit a* as a non-object whose function as an object is based on its lack. Moreover, Sartre suggests that the only way to encounter nothingness as the negation of being is through anguish or anxiety; Sartre writes, “there is even a permanent possibility of finding oneself ‘face to face’ with nothingness

and discovering it as a phenomenon: this possibility is anguish.” Therefore, it is possible to conclude that anxiety is a signal through which we experience nothingness as a phenomenon, no matter whether we would define this affective experience as an existential encounter, like Kierkegaard and Sartre, or as a psychical one, Freud and Lacan argue.

In probing plausible ways of conceiving the conceptualisation of nothingness in relation to Hitchcock’s resistance and anxiety, the problematic influence of the original texts Hitchcock strives to resist in his imperative mode of adaptation is not evidence that the cinematic auteur dismisses the influence of what he read from literary materials. Rather, Hitchcock’s resistance ironically becomes associated with his anxiety in confrontation with the gap or ‘nothing’ at the centre of his subjectivity, to which he might have been particularly prone as an émigré auteur dependent on populist literary originals. The shadowy presence of du Maurier’s originals in Hitchcock’s films, however, is different from the super-egotistical dominance we saw at work in the case of adapting classic authors with an overpowering reputation. Rather, I would describe this presence as a sort of ‘nothingness’ that shines on the textual surface of these screen adaptations just as the glittering sardine can which Lacan saw floating on the surface of the waves seemed to gaze back at him as described in *Seminar XI.*

Similar to the gaze that the subject does not notice but which suddenly reveals itself, the glittering sardine can captures the subject’s feeling that he or she is being uncannily looked at from all sides. This gaze that disturbs the certitude of the subject’s being suggests another element beyond the super-egotistical

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220 Ibid., 29.

221 Lacan relates his own encounter with the gaze as the *objet petit a* in the scopic field by giving the audience an anecdote of the sardine can on the sea in the eleventh seminar. He says, “It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated – and I am not speaking metaphorically.” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1998), 95.
in Hitchcock’s obsessive circling around the practice of adaptation. In this sense, the thematic centrality of a lack or non-being in the two films – for instance, the complete lack of Rebecca in *Rebecca* or the lack of a cause for the birds’ attack on people in *The Birds* – can be read as *a little nothing* masking the lack of lack in order to keep “this double, perpetual nihilation” at bay.\(^{222}\)

**Hitchcock’s *Rebecca without Rebecca***

Alfred Hitchcock, after working in British film industry for nearly two decades, was seeking to further his career outside of the crumbling British market in late 1930s and his ambition pointed him straight towards Hollywood. His most recent British films – *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *The Thirty Nine Steps* – had aroused some attention amongst American press and critics. This encouraged the Hitchcocks to pay their first visit to America in 1937 with inflated expectations of receiving immediate offers from major Hollywood studios. Despite the welcome interest of the U.S. publicity machine, Hitchcock’s first trans-Atlantic trip turned out to be a disheartening failure and he returned with neither a contract nor a satisfiable offer. From 1937 David O. Selznick, one of the major Hollywood producers, kept Hitchcock in unbearable suspense by tantalising the English director with a prospective film project on ‘the Titanic’ yet never sending him a contract to sign. Eventually Selznick made a relatively benign offer in 1938 and gave him a screen adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* as his first assignment. Anxious not

to disappoint his new employer or American audiences, the young yet already established English master had to confront not being the centre of gravity and power. In Hollywood he found that directors under contract with major studios were a mere part of the Fordist production line of the studio system. What was even worse was that he had to work under the panoptical control of the notoriously dictating producer Selznick. Moreover, Hitchcock felt very uneasy about the fact that, once he finished shooting, his Hollywood debut would leave his hands and go through a re-edit, according to the contract that remarkably limited the director’s aesthetic control over the process of post-production. To add to his agony, Hitchcock was struck with the news of the outbreak of World War II at home five days before he commenced shooting Rebecca. From California he frantically called his dear mother in London, and when he at last got her on the telephone line, Emma Hitchcock proudly gave a flat refusal to her youngest son’s attempt to bring her to America. With a picture of his mother locked into the heart of the war in mind, Hitchcock began to film Rebecca in September 1939.223

As written by du Maurier, Rebecca is a story of an orphan girl who enters a new world represented by a great English mansion, Manderley, after she marries its owner – the middle-aged aristocrat and widower Maxim de Winter – by a stroke of luck. The title of both the original novel and Hitchcock’s film adaptation is, however, not the name of this young heroine but the given name of Maxim’s deceased first wife, while the protagonist

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herself remains literally nameless to the end of both texts. She begins her life as the new mistress of Manderley only to find that this Gothic mansion, as well as its inhabitants, including her husband, is haunted by the late Mrs. de Winter – the fabulously beautiful Rebecca, adored by everyone even after her mysterious death. Du Maurier’s novel, in the first-person voice, delineates the anxiety of the second Mrs. de Winter, who feels threatened by the invisible yet suffocating presence of Rebecca – the ‘undead’ lady. Adopting the conventions of the Victorian female Bildungsroman as developed from, in particular, Jane Eyre, the novel follows the heroine’s journey of self-discovery and depicts how she struggles to claim the name ‘Mrs. de Winter’ from her marginalised place as a heroine with no name.224 She anxiously strives to overcome her sense of the unbearable insignificance of her being and her inability to function as the mistress of Manderley in comparison with her confident and competent precursor Rebecca. She eventually, although imperfectly, outgrows her complex owing to her discovery that Maxim had killed his first wife, who turned out to be an evil woman under the beautiful skin of a perfect lady.225

No matter how controversial and subversive it was for its contemporary readers, du Maurier’s novel was a great commercial hit in the UK as well as the US, and Selznick International Pictures purchased the copyright of the novel for screen in the same year as

224 As for the influence of Victorian women’s novels and Gothic conventions on du Maurier’s works and particularly on her magnum opus Rebecca, see Nina Auerbach’s Daphne du Maurier, Haunted Heiress (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) and The Daphne du Maurier Companion, ed. Helen Taylor (London: Virago, 2007).

225 For more on Rebecca, especially stemming from feminist and queer studies, see Tania Modleski’s discussion of Hitchcock’s Rebecca as ‘a female oedipal drama’ in which she analyses the heroine’s experience and her relation to the fatherly husband and the dead lady in her book The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory (New York: Methuen, 1988). In expanding Modleski’s argument with an elaboration of discursive psychoanalytic theories, Karen Hollinger’s “The Female Oedipal Drama of Rebecca from Novel to Film” in Quarterly Review of Film & Video 14, no. 4 (1993) focuses on the “heterosexist, patriarchal” forces operating upon the process of transition from the original novel to Hitchcock’s adaptation.
Hitchcock signed the contract with the company. David O. Selznick, well-known for his respect for the literary originals he adapted to screen, made it very clear that Hitchcock ought to be faithful to the original so as not to disappoint many million readers. Behind the immediate pressure exerted by the extensive readership and over-respectful producer, there was one more source of the director’s discomfort, namely the quiet yet firm demands of the author Daphne du Maurier. She openly expressed her dismay at finding out that Hitchcock was to direct a screen adaptation of her best-seller because a year before the production of Rebecca Hitchcock had directed a film adaptation of her novel Jamaica Inn as his last English film and the author was very unhappy about the outcome: she sent a message to Selznick, telling him that “she was weeping bitter tears over [Hitchcock’s treatment of] Jamaica Inn.” In his soothing reply to this message, Selznick boasted that he just had thrown out Hitchcock’s first draft of Rebecca and told the director to rewrite it, and promised the author that it was his “intention to do the book and not some botched-up semi-original such as was done with Jamaica Inn.” This context for Hitchcock’s adaptation of du Maurier’s Rebecca suggests that, as a new settler in Hollywood, Hitchcock found himself surrounded by many demanding gazes, which left him susceptible to feeling threatened by the overflow of such unanticipated influences. As discussed above, such anxiety-provoking influence can lead the subject to an uncanny

226 Although he was given the project of adapting Rebecca by Selznick, Hitchcock himself had already read the novel and attempted to buy the copyright before Selznick but he could not afford it at the time. See Leonard J. Leff’s Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick in Hollywood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Patrick McGilligan’s Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light (New York: ReganBooks, 2003). Kyle Dawson Edwards’s article ‘Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures Rebecca (1940),’ which appeared in Cinema Journal 45, no. 3, (Spring 2006), deals with the producer’s strategies and desires behind the adaptation of Rebecca.


228 Ibid., 47.
encounter with the primordial gap at the centre of his or her subjectivity mapped onto the coordinates of the Symbolic.

From the very beginning of the adaptation, Hitchcock seems to have suffered from the lack of the story’s ‘real’ heroine Rebecca, since the novel circulates around a woman who is dead before the narrative begins. Indeed, despite there being no Rebecca to capture on camera and transfer to the screen, the director was pushed by the producer’s, author’s and presumably many readers’ demands to “try as far as possible to retain the original” – that is, Rebecca without Rebecca.229 This fatal absence of the central character, positioned as the origin of the novel’s captivating attraction, is the epitome of the little nothing as delineated in the previous speculation upon the philosophical conceptualisation of nothingness. In other words, the non-existent yet omnipresent Rebecca is the central and, more significantly, constitutive void around which the whole narrative is structured. The major characters of the story have their own memories and understandings of her. Yet, when the young heroine, the second Mrs. de Winter, tries to find out what the deceased first Mrs. de Winter was really like, she cannot access the truth of this dead woman through any of the other characters’ recollections. The nameless heroine feels haunted by the inability to grasp Rebecca as the ultimate object of her inquiry: in the novel, she confides in the first-person narration that “I was following a phantom in my mind, whose shadowy form had taken shape at last. Her features were blurred, her colouring indistinct, the setting of her eyes and the texture of her hair were still uncertain, still to be revealed.”230 For the young Mrs. de Winter as well as the reader and, most painfully, for Hitchcock, there is always something

about Rebecca which “is left unspoken, is not integrated into the symbolic universe” of the story even though she is talked about constantly and exhaustively throughout the novel.231

The structure of the original text as delineated above severely challenges and disorients the rational ground for the opposition between being and not-being. However, such ambiguity is neither unusual nor specific to this film adaptation. Rather, it is characteristic and even inevitable due to the innate impasse at the heart of every screen adaptation, which is the gulf between the linguistic signifiers on the page and the imaginary cinematic signifiers. To explain this from a Lacanian perspective, linguistic signifiers on the page belong to the Symbolic, which is organised by and functions through the constitutive gap splitting a signifier and a signified. On the contrary, imaginary cinematic signifiers belong to the domain of the Imaginary, which is based on the reciprocal and thus gap-less identification between an object and its image. Therefore, the process of transforming words into objects (or, more precisely, their images) on screen draws attention precisely to the intersection between the ego formed in the scopic dimension of the Imaginary and the subject positioned in the Symbolic universe. Indeed, adaptation brings a speaking being to “the juncture of the Symbolic and the Imaginary in the constitution of the Real” where the speaking subject glimpses the groundlessness of its being.232 From the side of the Imaginary, the subject emerges as the mysterious object ‘seen’ from the original literary text whose absence secures its function as an object, while from the side of the Symbolic it appears through a signifier that is cut from the significatory function and turns into an object on screen. In Rebecca, the traumatising dimension of the subject as such is epitomised by the ambivalent operation of Rebecca in the course of adaptation. The

eponymous woman functions as an unseen object whose invisibility consolidates her function as an object of the desire to see as well as an ‘empty’ name or a floating signifier, Rebecca, without its signified – the lady actually to be called by that name.

To grasp the profound ambivalence of the object – like Rebecca in Rebecca – which paradoxically both is and is not there, Lacan complicates the concept of lack. In doing so, he attempts to resist the oppositional configuration between absence (fort) and presence (da) as the fundamental ground for the psychoanalytic understanding of the subject and the objects of its desire. Lacan introduces the concept of a peculiar object which is characterised by the very indecisiveness of its presence and/or absence. It is clearly differentiated from an object of desire which presents itself as possessing its objectivity – that is, the positive ‘being’ which makes it seem tangible and, according to Lacan’s topology, which emerges in the domain of the Imaginary. Lacan emphasises that the peculiar object is the object-cause of desire, not the object of desire. He coined for it the term objet petit a and developed it conceptually throughout his tenth seminar on anxiety as the object which anxiety is not without. Interestingly, the objet petit a is the concept that Lacan claims as his unique and sole invention, linking this ‘little nothing’ to the notoriously unknowable object of psychoanalytic knowledge, anxiety, in the same seminar: the path to analysing anxiety veers through the concept of the objet petit a. Anxiety in this case, as Freud duly predicted, is a signal and Lacan’s creation of the objet petit a is a response to Freud’s idea, which begets one of the most subversive concepts to emerge in Lacan’s task of adapting Freud, who left a traumatic and terrifying void in theorising anxiety. Lacan points this out in the first meeting of the seminar on anxiety: “In the discourse, thank God, of Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, everything is spoken about
except anxiety.” 233 Therefore, a passage to anxiety is, for Lacan as well as for us, that which is in Freud and, at the same time, is not in Freud. As a result, Lacan cannot avoid relating the conceptualisation of the objet petit a to castration, which is the point where Freud puts a full stop. From there – that is, the point where Freud seems to have said “this will be final” – Lacan picks up “the little missing piece” to recapitulate his own path towards castration, this time not to finalise the symbolic account of the birth of the subject in its relation to the Other but to leave it open as “a lack for which the symbol does not supply.” 234

In the third meeting of the seminar on anxiety, he maintains that the objet petit a is the remainder or residue which falls away from the constitution of the subject in its relation to the Other. Here Lacan designates the Other as that which is determined by its negative operation; Lacan symbolises it as (−φ) and reads it as the minus-phi of castration. Above, we have discussed the reason why the Other in its relation to a speaking subject is necessarily a negative function by hypothesising the missing element at the start of the substitutive formation of the phallic Other as the Mother. As such, the Other is not a positive mandate but a gap which emerges with the condition of castration that never allows the subject to move beyond this final point. While the Other, as Lacan elaborates, is that which is put in the place of impossibility and characterised as lack or absence, the little remainder of the Other, the objet petit a, appears at a place that is situated with respect to an image which is characterised by a lack, by the fact that what is called for there cannot appear there, that there is profoundly orientated and polarised the function of this image itself, that desire is there, not simply veiled, but

234 Ibid., (X, pp. 5).
essentially placed in relation to an absence, to a possibility of appearing determined by a
presence which is elsewhere and determines it more closely, but, where it is, ungraspable by
the subject...in the function that it fulfils in the phantasy at the place that something can
appear.\footnote{235}{Ibid., (IV, pp. 2). [my emphasis]}

In short, the objet petit a is characterised by its “status [as that which] escapes from the
status of the object derived from the specular image...[and] is at stake everywhere Freud
speaks about object when anxiety is involved.”\footnote{236}{Ibid., (III, pp. 10).} Anxiety responds to the impasse of the
ciastrated subject: the subject is incapable of capturing this object, which is deprived of an
imaginary dimension, in any other way than “the specular register.”\footnote{237}{Ibid., (III, pp. 10).} Of course, this
incapability could not be more problematic than in the case of the film director Hitchcock,
who sought to render the invisible and ungraspable character of the object-cause of his
desire, whose lack shines on the surface of the photographic image on screen. In passing, I
would like to point out here that although Hitchcock dismisses the film Rebecca for “it is
not a Hitchcock picture,” this pursuit of non-being is far from being non-Hitchcockian;
indeed, it is precisely Hitchcockian to the extent that it recalls his signature narrative
device called the ‘MacGuffin’. This refers to Hitchcock’s characteristic dramaturgical
machine that he not only used frequently. But he also theorised as a way of constituting an
object of false significance which most characters seek to know or obtain, yet without
enhancing any aspect of the audience’s engagement with the narrative. In Hitchcock’s own
words, the MacGuffin is that which “has been boiled down to its purest expression:
nothing at all!”\footnote{238}{For Hitchcock’s own account of MacGuffin and its origin, see François Truffaut’s Hitchcock: The
Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1983), 137-139.}
However, as Lacan insists, this absence itself is not what provokes anxiety. On the contrary, the lack of Rebecca is the guard against anxiety because anxiety is a signal indicating that something has come into the place of lack and there approaches the lack of lack. Lacan considers anxiety as “appearing there about everything which manifests itself at this place, to confuse us, as I might say, as regards the structuring function of this void.” In this sense, du Maurier’s Rebecca epitomises Lacan’s elaboration of the concept of anxiety by pinpointing the origin of the young heroine’s anxiety as follows:

Rebecca, always Rebecca. Wherever I walked in Manderley, wherever I sat, even in my own thoughts and in my dreams, I met Rebecca. I knew her figure now, the long slim legs, the small and narrow feet. Her shoulders, broader than mine, the capable clever hands. Hands that could steer a boat, could hold a horse. Hands that arranged flowers, made the models of ships, and wrote “Max from Rebecca” on the fly-leaf of a book. I knew her face too, small and oval, the clear white skin, the cloud of dark hair. I knew the scent she wore, I could guess her laughter and her smile. If I heard it, even among a thousand others, I should recognize her voice. Rebecca, always Rebecca. I should never be rid of Rebecca.

Indeed, what is truly terrifying is too much of Rebecca: the multitude of reminiscences and residues – objects in short – endlessly flowing into the empty place of Rebecca, suffocating the heroine and threatening to engulf the entirety of her reality.

In a literary creation bearing a little ‘slip’ between signifier and signified – for instance, a gap between the sign Rebecca and what it evokes in the reader’s mind – it would not be too difficult to present Rebecca’s status as the objet petit a, a void named ‘Rebecca,’ as if it is “the little nothing that she holds in reserve.” Consequently, in a written text, it is not

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impossible to orchestrate the threat of objects intruding into this gap. However, unlike a literary fiction innately capable of presenting ‘the little nothing,’ a film text is based on the immediate association between signifier and signified and often operates on the condition of the concrete perceptibility and even illusionary materiality of those onscreen imaginary signifiers as objects – that is, images to be seen and sounds to be heard are perceived to be associated with that which is there. Moreover, it is far more complicated for a classic Hollywood film playing on the seamless, gap-less, surface of its diegetic world to contain such a constitutive gap or rupture that Rebecca in du Maurier’s *Rebecca* epitomises.

Despite the difficulties of envisioning the little nothing, especially at the cost of anxiety as a signal of the more terrifying lack of lack ‘on the brink,’ Hitchcock as an insightful reader was sensitive enough to appreciate that the readers’ experience of anxiety is the essence of the novel’s power. Therefore, he could restrain himself from ignorantly covering up the gap by replacing it with a photographic image which would make Rebecca an object of scopic desire rather than the cause of desire. In writing the script, Hitchcock rejected the easy option of creating a flashback representation of Rebecca yet strove to express his own cinematic calibre so as to differentiate the film from the original novel. This internal tension, I suggest, eventually allowed him to preserve the novel’s uncanny presentation of Rebecca qua the *objet petit a*. The most intriguing rendition of Rebecca as such is found in the scene where Maxim confides what happened on the night when Rebecca died. In the climax of the novel, Maxim confesses to the heroine that he shot Rebecca, who then deliberately provoked him to do so after finding out that she had cancer. Maxim put her body in the cabin of her boat and sailed out to the sea and sank her in order to conceal the accidental murder. A little later, an unidentified female body emerged in a nearby bay and Maxim, despite knowing it was not Rebecca, claimed that the body was hers and buried it
in the family crypt. However, the film, made under the Hays production code, could not let Maxim get away without being punished for his crime. Therefore, Hitchcock and Selznick had to twist the original story and changed the murder into an accident. At the climax of the film, as in the novel, the boat is found by a local diver and so is Rebecca’s body in the cabin. In the boat house where Maxim is hiding from all the commotion, he confesses to the heroine that Rebecca fell on a hard edge after Maxim struck her, so he put her body into the boat and sank her because he was afraid of that no one would believe it was an accident. When he recalls Rebecca’s dying moments, the camera literally shoots ‘the place or lack of Rebecca’ and follows this invisible character first sitting on the divan with the cigarette stubs and then slowly standing to walk towards Maxim, who stands, as he was standing at the time of her death, by the door. This treatment of Rebecca, once again, confirms Rebecca’s function as the objet petit a, which sets every action driven by desire in motion in the narrative, and marks an irreparable void. Herein, it is possible to realise that the psychical tension is aroused not by the lack itself but by the frame capturing Rebecca’s non-being that the lack represents. This lack itself does not provoke anxiety but refers to a truly traumatic possibility. As Lorenzo Chiesa accurately states, the empty screen enclosing the nothingness of Rebecca as the objet petit a is like a “window [that] frames an abyss” which signals that one “might easily fall out of the window” into the abyss, the lack of lack, that will engulf the whole of one’s being as a subject.242 In a sense, this unique vision of the objet petit a in Hitchcock’s adaptation may be conceived as touching on the kernel of his life-long obsession with adapting: the persistent force behind repetition he denied yet could not resist is the drive which blindly aims at the objet petit a and endlessly makes a circuit around this false trace of the originally lost object.

Hitchcock insightfully draws attention to the essence of the novel’s complex psychical dynamics between Rebecca and the female narrator in his film. Owing to his sensitivity as a reader, the film successfully manifests the meticulous play between the two characters under the same name or signifier of ‘Mrs. de Winter’: one dead and the other alive. Like the novel’s first-person narrator, the film’s young Mrs. de Winter, the nameless young heroine, is created as a vehicle for the audience’s encounter with the other Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca, who functions as a little nothing pacifying the truly intimidating lack of lack. Similarly, through the second Mrs. de Winter Hitchcock delivers the threat of Rebecca, whose ‘painful’ lack on the audio-visual surface of the film’s diegetic world is a sinister reminder of the marginalised place for the young heroine as a subject who is on the verge of being engulfed by the lack of lack. Rebecca qua the objet petit a is, therein, the death ‘writ large’ on the young heroine’s own name. In this sense, Hitchcock’s Rebecca stands out in his six decades’ practice of adaptation because of its extraordinary fidelity to the original text but more importantly for its lasting psychological impact, no matter how fiercely he denied and resisted the original’s influence.

What is interesting in the comparison between the original novel and Hitchcock’s adaptation is their similar and different modes of presenting the young Mrs. de Winter’s encounter with Rebecca. In the novel, the first instant of the young heroine’s encounter is through Rebecca’s writing. While the romantic relationship between Maxim and her is budding, Maxim presents her with a poetry book picked up rather carelessly from his car. Inside the book’s cover, the young heroine finds Rebecca’s dedication to Maxim in her handwriting: ‘Max from Rebecca’. This is the first moment that the heroine begins being haunted by the name Rebecca:
Max – from Rebecca. May 17th written in a curious, slanting hand. A little blob of ink marred the white page opposite, as though the writer, in impatience, had shaken her pen to make the ink flow freely. And then, as it bubbled through the nib, it came a little thick, so that the name Rebecca stood out black and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters.243

The heroine never recovers from this first encounter clearly mapped out in the domain of the Symbolic and keeps returning to the peculiar handwriting of Rebecca throughout the novel to the extent that she feels like the letters written by the dead Mrs. de Winter come alive and bring Rebecca too close to her. As she meditates, “‘Max from Rebecca.’ She was dead, and one must not have thoughts about the dead. They slept in peace with the grass blew over their graves. How alive was her writing of ink. Done yesterday. It was just as if it had been written yesterday.”244 Here we can see that the novel maps out the function of the objet petit a as operating precisely on the level of the gap or slip between signifier and signified, in relation to which Lacan elaborates the concept of the objet petit a appearing in “a sort of gap, of residue of the signifying function.”245 Du Maurier’s Rebecca shows how this ‘empty’ and ‘floating’ signifier without a signified designating its place in the signifying chain functions as a perturbing ‘blot,’ disconcerting the symbolic structure in which a signifier is taken as the effect of a signified and a signified as a cause of a signifier. As such, owing to this radically subversive signifier, Rebecca, fallen out from the chain of signification, Rebecca can work as the objet a not before but behind desire.

In Hitchcock’s film, Rebecca as a lack in the Imaginary appears in close relation to the unheimlich home, Manderley, which is haunted by the floating signifier ‘Rebecca’. In other words, the film’s young heroine confronts Rebecca only through Manderley. Unlike

244 Ibid., 58.
the novel, the second Mrs. de Winter never sees a trace of Rebecca before she comes to settle in Manderley. For this reason, the romance under the bright sun of Monte Carlo and the newly married couple’s extended honeymoon travelling around Europe form a contrast with the suffocating containment of their married life in Manderley. Through contrasting visual representation – the naturalistic light and exterior scenes for the first part of the film and the German expressionistic cinematography for the days in Manderley – Hitchcock captures the uncanniness of the Gothic mansion. Although Maxim believes that Manderley is a mere *heim* for him, this place, in effect, is ‘more than’ a house he possesses, controls and lives in. This grand mansion with a long history is overwhelming rather than cozy, especially to its newcomer. There the young Mrs. de Winter meets, in private, her faceless precursor whose name is written all over the place. Over a year after her death, the monogram of Rebecca’s name, “R de W” or simply “R” is still everywhere in Manderley, yet – strangely enough – Maxim, who hates to see or hear of any trace of his dead wife, never notices this initial of Rebecca de Winter inscribed in every corner of his grand manor. Therefore, the second Mrs. de Winter suffers privately from the repetitive emergence of Rebecca; on a table napkin, the stationery in the morning room, a blanket and her handkerchief, the young Mrs. de Winter is bombarded with the dead woman’s name in her peculiar style of handwriting. Hitchcock never fails to emphasize this private encounter of the two Mrs. de Winters by using a close-up shot of the initial accompanied with a mesmerizing tune. The music helps to construct a self-contained psychic space where only she, along with the spectators, secretly and painfully confronts the repetitive appearance of “R de W” or “R” to the extent that the recurrence of this visual motif begins to float free of the diegetic reality of the film.
Overall, the conjugation between the floating signifier “R de W” and Manderley reveals another facet of the objet petit a in its relation to anxiety. The Imaginary dimension of the signifier without its signified leads the subject, which is constructed on the Symbolic plane, to confront its own radical strangeness binding the subject forever to the uncanny ‘home’. This *heim*, Lacan says, is found “in a point situated in the Other beyond the image of which we are made and this place represents the absence where we are.”246 To put it another way, the Other in Lacan’s account is the Other that is beyond the Imaginary dimension of identification; it is the Other that points at the absence at the centre of the Symbolic domain. In Hitchcock’s film, this association of the uncanny with the objet petit a as represented by Rebecca suggests that this Other certainly does not refer to the forbidding father characterised by its own lack but rather to the omnipresence of the Mother which lacks such lack and, thus, can point to – or ‘represent’ in Lacan’s expression – the lack in the phallic Other, which is already barred. Owing to this lack of lack, which neither the Imaginary nor the Symbolic can contain, the Mother presents itself to a speaking subject as the original lost object, which the subject of desire cannot ever reach but around which it repeatedly circles. Therefore, Hitchcock’s adaptation *Rebecca* of du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, in a sense, epitomises how one can respond to anxiety in one’s compulsive obsession with framing the lack of lack in an attempt not to be engulfed by the abyss behind the picture frame. Thanks to this frame we can cover up the little nothing captured in it with our own fantasies. Hitchcock, by successfully resisting the temptation to conceal the little nothing, left his *Rebecca* without a Rebecca. In doing so, he rendered the being of the young heroine with whom the audience is led to identify as a pure nuisance awkwardly plunging into the place which should be left empty. This leads us to a glimpse of the subversion of subjectivity by making us realise that we are, like the young heroine

246 Ibid., (IX, pp.5).
of the film, the very detestable object trying to cover and fill the place of the *objet petit a*. In a way, the discovery of the beyond [*jenseits*] of the subject, as it is uncovered by and glimpsed in this traumatic fall from a subject to an object lying under the constant and menacing gaze of the Mother, may be that which anxiety warns against. In this sense, Hitchcock’s resistance to the influence of original texts and his paradoxical obsession with adaptation seem to originate from the anxiety signalling his fall from auteur to the written in confrontation with the lack of lack in the Mother and the drive binding him to this traumatic discovery on the brink. Therefore, despite his attempt to spit it out from his career, Hitchcock’s adaptation of du Maurier’s *Rebecca* as ‘*Rebecca* without *Rebecca* yet full of *Rebecca*’ is the very epitome of how he obsessively organised his career around the anxiety-evoking void which, in the course of adaptation, he framed into the little nothing so that he could cover it with his own images.

**Adaptation in Reverse: *The Birds***

Although Hitchcock often dismissed du Maurier’s *Rebecca* for being “novelettish” and “old-fashioned” with “the whole school of feminine literature at the period” on its back, his decision to film du Maurier’s novella *The Birds* for his third adaptation of her works convinced Truffaut as well as scholars such as Karen Hollinger and Richard Allen that

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there was an unusual level of relevance between his career and the author’s.\textsuperscript{248} This last section, by looking at *The Birds* (1963), will interrogate the drive behind the obsession with the never satisfying practice of adaptation as manifested in Hitchcock’s exceptional engagement with the author and her works deprived of the twisted sense of humour he loved. His third adaptation of du Maurier came out just after the pinnacle of his creative force, *Psycho* (1960), and before the alleged downward turn of his career with the controversial film *Marnie* (1964). In a thematic sense, *The Birds* is often treated as a continuation of the theme of ‘the domineering mother’ in its relation to the previous film *Psycho*, which features the undead mother whose murderous gaze and menacing voice continues to capture her son even after her death, and the next film *Marnie*, characterised by the suffering of a child from the agonising indifference and absence of the mother. If *Psycho* problematises the excessive presence of the mother and *Marnie* interrogates her traumatically thin presence, then *The Birds*, standing between the two, may be conceived as a film dealing with the subliminal locus between the mother’s terrifying omnipresence and the absence of the mother as the original lost object. Therefore, the following analysis of Hitchcock’s adaptation *The Birds* shall circulate around this theme – the mother – as a pivot with reference to Lacan’s conceptualisation of the drive in its relation to the already discussed *objet petit a*.

\textsuperscript{248} In the above quote from Truffaut’s interview Truffaut suggests that the experience of adapting du Maurier’s Rebecca appears to have had a permanent influence on Hitchcock’s later works. Karen Hollinger’s psychoanalytic investigation explores how Hitchcock (along with the encompassing influence of patriarchal forces embedded in the systems he worked in) tailored du Maurier’s female oedipal drama into the heroine’s successful entrance into the patriarchal order. Richard Allen also interrogates the influence of Daphne du Maurier’s subversive romance on Hitchcock’s undermining of conventional romantic narrative. See François Truffaut’s *Hitchcock: The Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1983); Karen Hollinger’s “The Female Oedipal Drama of Rebecca from Novel to Film,” in *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 14, no. 4 (1993); Richard Allen’s “Daphne du Maurier and Alfred Hitchcock,” in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
Hitchcock optioned du Maurier’s story for his television series a few years before making the film adaptation of it, and the story was included in an anthology of short stories which was published under his name – *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: My Favourites in Suspense* (1959).\(^{249}\) Therefore, it is obvious that the story must have had his attention for a while and been lingering in his mind, although he claimed that he embarked on the project of adapting du Maurier’s short story casually, as if it was something he could do in-between while he was waiting for his favourite actress Grace Kelly to come back for his next film *Marnie*. Unlike the director’s ‘light-heartedness’, the process of producing this film was a challenge in many senses. Hitchcock had to work under the financial pressure of a $3.3 million budget, the biggest budget in his career so far, as well as the unprecedented technological challenges of dealing with non-human actors, birds, as a prime antagonist. Apart from these difficulties in production, the crew who worked for him on this project agreed that he was suffering from a profound sense of uneasiness. At one point in the film’s troublesome shoot, one of the staff asked the director, in bewilderment, what they were making and, to his surprise, Hitchcock answered he did not know either.\(^{250}\) In a later interview with Truffaut, Hitchcock recalled that he was in an unusual state of distress and he could not stop meddling with the script which had been finalised in his collaboration with the script writer Evan Hunter. Quite unlike him, he remembered being tense and upset even after a day’s work during the shooting of the film, and being caught by “this emotional siege” and a definitive sense of being lost.\(^{251}\)

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altogether new in my experience… I began to improvise,” he told Truffaut.252

The characteristic ambivalence of the film in terms of the motivation of the central action is not unrelated to its original story, which depicts the inexplicable attacks of birds on a village in Cornwall. The male protagonist of the novella, Nat Hocken, is a farm worker who alone foresees the seriousness of the attack and strives to protect his wife and two young children by any means. In its apocalyptic mood, du Maurier’s novella sustains the inaccessibility to the motivation for the massive deadly attack of birds as a central enigma until its closure: the story concludes with a pessimistic scene in which the Hockens remain confined in their cottage, having discovered the avian attack is destroying the whole of civilisation (or, at least, all of Europe) without knowing what made those tame and benign creatures do it. Nevertheless, written after the Second World War and published in 1952, du Maurier’s story evokes the traumatic memory of the wars and implicitly criticises the ignorance some people can fall into after a short while. This thematic concern is disclosed in the characterisation of Nat as a disabled war veteran who constantly brings his wartime experience into the understanding of his current situation. For instance, after the birds first attack his household, Nat is reminded of the war: “It was, Nat thought, like air raids in the war. No one down this end of the country knew what the Plymouth folk had seen and suffered.”253 While du Maurier would not pin down any plausible reason for the birds’ attack, what makes the story provoke the reader’s anxiety is not the incomprehension itself, but rather the fact that the birds’ attack symbolises something instinctual – in other words, some uncanny malignant force which has hitherto been kept benign by Mother Nature. From the beginning, the birds are considered to be driven by a persistent force of nature:

252 Ibid., 290.
“In spring the birds flew inland, purposeful, intent: they knew where they were bound, the rhythm and ritual of their life brooked no delay.”\textsuperscript{254} Then, with sinister signs of nature’s disorientation emerging in the sudden climate changes, the birds become representative of the “driving urge” compelling them to be restless and destructive. At the end, the far-sighted protagonist contemplates “how many million years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines.”\textsuperscript{255} Therefore, the interest of the film lies in how Hitchcock re-presents the manifestation of the force of the drive through the birds’ attack and connects it with the figure of the possessive and jealous mother in his adaptation.

The actual adaptation, initially written by Evan Hunter under the close supervision of Hitchcock, appears quite different from the original, to the extent that Richard Allen calls it an ‘adaptation in reverse’. While du Maurier’s novella is characterised by minimal plot and characterisation with the intention of putting forward the author’s prophetic view of mankind, the film interweaves the plot of the coming of the birds with a psychologically complex family romance between a mother (Lydia Brenner played by Jessica Tandy), her son (Mitch Brenner played by Rod Talyor) and the film’s heroine Melanie Daniels (played by Tipi Hedren), which creates a completely new look for the story. As Nina Auerbach comments, the plot of the romantic couple troubled by the jealous and possessive mother may be “a comic tweaking of du Maurier’s grim earnestness.”\textsuperscript{256} However, from a psychoanalytic view, Hitchcock’s inserted familial plot, which is intertwined with the

\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 277.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 311.
original story of the birds, echoes something already in du Maurier’s text in a curiously faithful way. The original text puts forward a male hero, who represents patriarchal authority, trying to keep his simple and neat reality in order and striving to interpret this extricable and chaotic incident of nature according to his own symbolic coordinates. In this sense, the agony and anxiety of the story’s protagonist implies the doom of the subject in confrontation with the unfathomable enigma thwarting the subject’s desire to know. To put in another way, this is where the subject – that is, the speaking subject, the subject constructed on the progressive metonymic network of signifiers, and, in short, the subject of desire – meets “the limited function of desire” in its discovery of that which constantly returns to the same place. Hitchcock’s psychological insight seemed to catch the story’s power to affectively deliver to the readers such psychical tension and crisis in the face of the inexplicable and unstoppable urge embodied in the rhythmic and ritual attack of birds. The film aims to intensify the tension in its emotional engagement with the audience and thus to concretise the subtle implications of the original text with a private and psychical account of a familial triangle while still maintaining the tension between uncanny nature and humanity in agony, which du Maurier’s novella pursues in equal weight.

In analysing the film’s transference of the original *Birds* as a vehicle for the limit of desire, Slavoj Žižek’s account of the film lends a useful insight. In his book *Looking Awry*, Žižek warns against the misinterpretation of seeing Hitchcock’s use of birds merely as a symbol or a signifier: “Although Hitchcock’s birds do give body to the agency of the maternal superego, the essential thing is nevertheless not to seize upon the link between the two traits…as a sign relationship, as a correlative between a ‘symbol’ and its

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‘signification’. This pervasive misreading seems to offer a base for many readings, including Auerbach’s, which claim that Hitchcock’s film reduces du Maurier’s gloomy vision of humanity into a psychosexual drama by demeaning the birds as a kind of representative of the possessive and revengeful mother. What Žižek points out about the film’s rendition of birds is that they are not a symbol but “the objectivization-positivization of a failed symbolization,” which refers to the point where the lack of the signifier suddenly reveals itself in the signifier of the lack. In other words, this signifier cannot perform its significatory function—because it has no signified—but makes obvious the limitation of desire moving along the chain of signification. What the film really achieves in supplementing the additional diegetic contour of the original drama is to reinforce and make more affective for the audience the collapse of the meanings sought by “the psychosexual drama” of desire under the birds’ overshadowing and overpowering presence. Therefore, Hitchcock’s adaptation clarifies that the original ‘birds’ are the pure embodiment of nature’s uncanny force rather than diminishing them into a metaphor for a psychosexual conflict in the domestic plot.

To illustrate the above points, it is useful to compare a pair of lovebirds that Melanie brings for the birthday of Mitch’s sister with the birds which are the main threat in the film. The contrast between lovebirds and attacking birds becomes clear in that the lovebirds are a signifier which belongs to the chain of signifiers, organising a reality that can be understood, whereas the birds on attack fail every attempt to grasp them within the net of signifiers provided in the film. In the beginning of the film, as soon as Mitch recognises

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259 Ibid., 104.
Melanie in a pet shop, he asks for lovebirds while pretending to mistake Melanie as a staff member working in the shop. It is obvious why Mitch spells out the name ‘lovebirds’, which represents what he is attempting to pass over to Melanie. This ‘meaning’ of the signifier lovebirds is communicable amongst the film’s characters as well as between the film’s world and spectators. The scene where Melanie has a short conversation with Annie, Mitch’s ex-girl friend who settled in his hometown even after relinquishing her hope of marrying him, indicates that this name ‘lovebirds’ not only refers to the bird species but also implies a signified which allows this signifier to function between human subjects: Annie instantly nods in a knowing manner at Melanie’s answer when she says that she has a pair of lovebirds in the car. Annie’s ability to interpret the meaning of ‘lovebirds’ – “I see” – is echoed when Mitch’s mother Lydia meets Melanie for the first time in the Tide restaurant. She, too, immediately understands what is going on beneath the exchange of these lovebirds and responds in exactly the same way as Annie, saying, “Oh, I see.”

By contrast, the birds on attack are in the realm of the unknown for the film’s characters and create a gap in the symbolic reality sustained by the smooth exchange of signifiers like ‘lovebirds’. The cause of their attacks is enigmatic and unidentifiable, even to the eloquent ornithologist Mrs. Bundy whose knowledge of birds is displayed in a dazzling fashion after the first massive bird attack against school children. Unlike the lovebirds locked safely in a cage of signification, the birds out in the open air evoke anxiety due to the impossibility of locating them in the ‘logic’ of the Symbolic. To meditate on Hitchcock’s rendition of the birds as such through the concept of the counterthesis to the oedipal masterplot, the comparison between lovebirds and the birds on attack becomes more definite through analogy. The oedipal drama is a theatrical scene in which individual subjects play their parts; the role of the mother there is designated as the forbidden object
of incestuous desire in a similar way in which the place of the lovebirds is fixed by their name before the actual birds appear the drama. However, the attacking birds point at something that cannot be forced into this role play and hence refuses its designated place in the oedipal drama played out by human characters. The birds disrupt the psychosexual plot between the main characters of the film without indicating the meaning of their interruption. Further, the entire narrative of desire exchanged through the name ‘lovebirds’ is kept under the shadow of those birds overlooking it while they resist any significatory function; they remain outside of the drama constituted by the rules of the symbolic reality or that of the Name-of-the-Father.

As mentioned above, the limited function of desire in the subject’s relation to external reality originates from the fact that everyone is subject to the signifier constituted by the lack in the Other. In the face of such an unfathomable and overpowering urge or force as presented by the birds’ attack, this Other of negative operation, that is (- φ), fails to secure the certainty for its ‘objective and positive’ mode of existence as a subject of desire. At this uncanny moment of facing the limited function of desire the subject is led to the radical discovery of the demand of the Other which – unlike the Other operating upon the gap it introduces to the subject – would not allow any gap or distance between its omnipresent gaze and the subject. This subject of the demand is none other than the Mother, whose demand Lacan maps onto the organisation of the drive. It is possible to suggest that Hitchcock’s adaptation of The Birds captures and touches on the very core of what is concealed behind the poetic implication of du Maurier’s novella, that is, the link between the beyond of the nurturing and caring mother and the incessant, persistent and destructive force beyond the pleasure principle of desire. This is not manifested by the director’s conscious intention but probably was enabled with the help of the function of negation, as
Freud explains – in other words, by continuously saying, “I read the story only once and cannot remember anything in it.” Moreover, Lacan emphasises the importance of the role of *myth or fiction* in understanding the drive of the human being, since the drive should be differentiated from “some ultimate given, something archaic, primal.”

To put it in another way, the human drive is nothing but what the subject organises in its relation to the demand of the primal Other, the Mother, which is a mythical and uncanny locus lurking ‘beyond’ the oedipalised fiction of the domestic mother whose loss, Freud once believed, the subject seems to suffer. Hence, Hitchcock’s use of the birds not as a symbol but as an embodiment of the beyond of the subject of desire, which emerges from behind the mother or from benign Mother Nature, ultimately indicates excess, a profusion. There is no gap in the Mother, in other words, which would allow the subject to spell it. The only resolution left for us is to draw a frame around this engulfing void and cultivate the little nothing by covering it with our fantasy. This little nothing, as I have been arguing, is what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, that which the drive always aims at and incessantly circles around.

Similarly, in the presentation of the nothingness of Rebecca as the *objet petit a*, it is plausible to recognise a peculiar pattern in Hitchcock’s strategy in adapting du Maurier’s works *Rebecca* and *The Birds*. There is always a mother figure whose presence cannot be pinned down on screen in a symbolic way with images to be seen or voices to be heard or a rational explanation to make it understood in the diegetic space. Undead Rebecca, as an overwhelming precursor to the second Mrs. de Winter, and the birds, as the embodiment of the demand of the Mother, both remain silent, hence tantalising the protagonists and

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making them anxious about what they want. By leaving those two embodiments of the 
Mother unseen, unheard and unexplained, Hitchcock filled the screen ironically with the 
anxiety provoked by the omnipresence of the malignant Mother. In his seminar on anxiety, 

Lacan explains the play of presence-absence, drawing upon the figure of the mother in a 
way reminiscent of Hitchcock’s adaptations of du Maurier’s works:

Do you not know that it is not nostalgia for what is called the maternal womb which 
engenders anxiety, it is its immanence, it is everything that announces to us something which 
provokes anxiety? It is not, contrary to what is said, either the rhythm or the alternation of the 
presence-absence of the mother. And what proves it, is that the infant takes pleasure in 
repeating this game of presence and absence: this possibility of absence, is what gives 
presence its security. What is most anxiety-provoking for the child, is that precisely this 
relation of lack on which he establishes himself, which makes him desire, this relation is all 
the more disturbed when there is no possibility of lack, what the mother is always on his back, 
and especially by wiping his bottom, the model of the demand, of the demand which cannot 
fail.262

What this chapter has attempted to point out is that, just as his characters suffer from 
anxiety due to this lack of lack or gap between their symbolic reality and the 
overshadowing the Mother, so Hitchcock himself might have been mapping out his own 
anxiety on screen for six decades. In the constant process of adaptation he could well have 
suffered from the persistent presence of something non-cinematic and the limited function 
of his desire to create something purely cinematic. Indeed, throughout his career of making 
films, the master of horror and suspense seemed to firmly believe in the power of cinema, 
which is, in his own words, “the greatest known mass medium there is in the world and the 
most powerful.”263 Hitchcock consequently experimented with making the most of his

artistry in terms of its capacity to grab hold of the audience’s anxiety and to make them pay for the experience of un-pleasure. However, the director’s career also witnessed his struggle against the incursion of an anti-cinematic shadow coming into his world of images safely captured in tiny frames. The persistent urge to fill the little darkness was his fortifying act of resistance to the influence of the original texts he adapted on screen. Despite such vehement resistance hiding behind his masterful manipulation of the original texts, no one, not even himself, can offer an exact reason why he became obsessed with the practice of adaptation. However, psychoanalytic insight based on Freud and Lacan discovers in the function of repetition and resistance paradoxically the constant force of the drive which forever binds us to the residue, called the objet petit a, reminding us of our absolute subjection to the pre-symbolic power of the merciless Mother. If we are to take Hitchcock’s career as an illustrative case uncovering the other side of screen adaptation, in opposition to the oedipal relationship between a fatherly original and its screen descendants, then it is possible for this chapter to conclude that the resistant relation of cinema to the discursive domain of literature overlaps with the subject’s problematic relation to the Mother, about which, from the very beginning of civilisation, myths tell us that there is something uncanny and unpleasant in the ‘home or origin’ of our being. In this uncanny domain of ‘beyond or the other side,’ the desire for film adaptation may recognise its own annihilation written at the heart of its origin or birthplace, in the same way that, in the Mother, we see our death writ large.
Chapter 5. The Thing (Das Ding) that speaks of itself in Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Stephen King’s The Shining

And it is around das Ding that the whole adaptive development revolves, a development that is so specific to man insofar as the symbolic process reveals itself to be inextricably woven into it.

--- Jacques Lacan, Seminar VII

“Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak. […] Now that you are already lost, I belie myself, I defy you, I slip away: you say that I am being defensive.”


The purpose of the chapter, in brief, is to grasp the unnameable ‘thing’ at work in any practice of adaptation. In the two chapters prior to this, I have sought to provide a name to encapsulate the psychological force driving the subject to the constant act of adaptation. The previous chapters were structured and ordered according to the historical and theoretical movement of the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the human psyche – that is, from oedipalisation in the domain of the Symbolic to the more primordial dimension involved in the notion of anxiety. In other words, at first the thing seems to lurk behind the command of the terrifying Father and then to find its echo in the call of the devouring Mother. Following this somewhat dialectical path laid by the previous chapters, the current chapter aims finally to confront the elusive nature of the thing that resides and plays between a literary text and its film adaptation(s). That is, I would like to move closer to capture it as nameless and unrepresentable. To do this, the first part of the chapter will draw out the rationale behind the psychoanalytic concept of das Ding, whose presence, in Lacan’s teaching, reveals itself only through its absence.

For our purpose, the approach to ‘the thing’ has to do with the meaning an adaptor tries to grasp and transfer. On various occasions in his ‘return to Freud,’ Lacan emphasised the
centrality of what Freud ‘really’ meant in his research. Eventually, Lacan named this fundamental object of his search in the 1955 lecture entitled ‘The Freudian Thing or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis’. As the title hints, Lacan here introduces a concept, *das Ding* – or the Thing with a capital ‘T’ in English – as the nodal point of his attempt to interrogate “the original meaning Freud preserved in” psychoanalysis.264 However, with his usual dose of irony, he warns us that the Thing he is searching for is not to be read from the surface of any Freud’s text: that is, Lacan rules out the possibility of pinning down ‘the Freudian thing’ by saying that it is “the enigma of she who slips away as she appears.”265 If we construe this idiosyncratic logic through which Lacan weaves his theory into the Freudian field as an act of adaptation, it is possible to discover an intriguing resemblance between Lacan’s adaptation of Freud and the film director Stanley Kubrick’s principle in adapting published literary texts for the screen. With regard to his incessant practice of adaptation Kubrick explained that his search for “the most truthful” dimension of a literary original drove him to illuminate in his films “something [one] can’t see in any other way.”266 These two comments made by Lacan and Kubrick seem to share a rhetorical characteristic that divests the nucleus of their adaptive movements of its name. This suggests an unnameable kernel, *das Ding*, as that which initiates the symbolic process yet paradoxically is deprived of its own symbolic coordinates. The meaning or message an adaptor strives to re-present and transmit always remains at the margins of the symbolic process, as shown by the fact that the life-long

265 Ibid., 340.
endeavour of Lacan and Kubrick to articulate it ended up conferring on it the most ambiguous name – a thing.

Here, I would like to use the word ‘re-present’ with a hyphen inserted in an attempt to more closely associate Lacan’s *das Ding* with the current aim to interrogate screen adaptation as a cultural act in pursuit of *something* not only ‘from’ but more significantly ‘beyond’ a text. What makes *das Ding* significant in a study on the nature of adaptation is that *das Ding* reveals the most elementary dimension of human discourse, which is always saturated with a tone of loss. To put it more clearly, for Lacan Freud assumes that every representation is subject to the incessant psychic force in the human subject to present again what has been lost on the subject’s entrance to the symbolic domain. Borrowing Bruce Fink’s expression, the subject in/of language re-presents that which “is represented [by signifiers] but never presented.” This assumption of a fundamental loss is none other than the central enigma in the Freudian field to which Lacan continuously returns. In his elaboration of *das Ding* Lacan tries to assert the constitutive role of the fatal loss which initiates the subject’s search for meaning. Further, the primordial loss is the premise on which the transcendental leap of sublimation, which comes later in Lacan’s teaching, is based. Therefore, the following discussion will draw on this nature of re-presentation as an attempt to retrieve a certain meaning which is lost and inaccessible, yet remains constructive in its absence. Seen in this way, it turns out that re-presentation as a general practice of signification is none other than adaptation at its most fundamental level. Thus, the following speculations will focus on how the act of adaptation reaches out for the

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unrepresentable Thing. To do this, Kubrick’s adaptation of Stephen King’s popular horror fiction *The Shining* will function as an illuminating case study.

### The Play of the Thing

Kubrick’s filmography indicates that he was an ardent adaptor. The majority of his thirteen films are adaptations, with only two early exceptions: *Fear and Desire* (1953) and *Killer’s Kiss* (1955). He never steered away from adapting originals of canonical status, such as William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* or a highly controversial modern text such as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. He also chose popular contemporary texts such as Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* and Stephen King’s *The Shining*. Nevertheless, the poignantly self-exposing nature of Kubrick’s audio-visual style puts forward his films’ cinematic aesthetics as the foremost object of consideration for diverse critical reviews and scholarly studies. In addition, owing to his extreme reluctance to articulate his intentions, ideas or methodologies, Kubrick is often portrayed as a solitary artist who remained decidedly indifferent to the nature of film as a collaborative,

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communicative and most of all adaptable medium.\textsuperscript{269} Perhaps because of his pre-filmic career as a professional photographer, Kubrick has been acknowledged as a perfectionist and craftsman whose almost pathological obsession with technical and stylistic flawlessness overtakes and even suffocates any message or meaning implied by the originals – as if his film adaptations were the engulfing maze of the Overlook hotel itself in the film \textit{The Shining} (1980).

However, despite Kubrick’s masterful status as a film auteur and his bold ‘correction’ of the originals, his attitude and strategy should be distinguished from those of Hitchcock, who deliberately chose ‘cheap and forgettable’ contemporary fictions or short stories to avoid unnecessary intervention from or influence of the literary works on his films. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hitchcock’s intentional ignorance of and resistance to his literary sources, based on the psychoanalytic logic of negation, signals the filmmaker’s anxiety about the irresistible grip of those letters on the page. Contrary to such a reactionary attempt to separate the director’s chair from the writer’s desk, Kubrick assimilated his task as a film director with the job of a writer. Directing a film adaptation to him was, he said, “nothing more or less than a continuation of the writing.”\textsuperscript{270} Moreover, Kubrick did not mind cooperating with the authors of the literary originals if necessary or possible and, in fact, was willing to share the credit for the screenplay. For instance, when producing \textit{Lolita} (1962), Kubrick asked Nabokov to write a screenplay for his film and take the screenwriting credit, although Nabokov famously complained in the


1973 foreword to his published screenplay for *Lolita* that “only logged odds and ends of [his] script had been used” in Kubrick’s film.\(^{271}\) In adapting *Dr. Strangelove, or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Kubrick literally wrote a screenplay in very close collaboration with the authors of the source texts. No matter how successfully Kubrick’s intention may be conveyed in actual production, he expounds that, for him, the process of adaptation starts with the novel which is mainly concerned with the inner life of its characters. It will give the adaptor an absolute compass bearing...on what a character is thinking or feeling at any given moment of the story. And from this he can invent action which will be an objective correlative of the book’s psychological content...without resorting to having the actors deliver literal statements of meaning.\(^{272}\)

This implies that what concerns him most is not to depart from the literary texts through his medium of image and sound. Rather, he indicates that he wishes to give form to something that has not been ‘acted out’ on the page but which looms behind the literary signifiers and acts as a *lure*. Interestingly, based on a conversation with Kubrick, Alexander Walker suggests that to Kubrick the process of finding a story to adapt on screen is similar to falling in love; as Kubrick told him, “I have always found it to be an accidental process, and never one which can be attacked head-on.”\(^{273}\) In such a contingent encounter with an original that triggered his interest, what Kubrick sought in the practice of adaptation was to unearth its buried elements and to transmit them to spectators, just as Lacan wanted to lead his followers to the Freudian Thing that Lacan glimpsed or experienced as a lure within, or *das Ding*.


However, the way both Lacan and Kubrick approach the thing at the centre of their own practices of adaptation is not clearly annotated. The two adaptors definitely want to retain ‘the thing’ as an enigma. In Kubrick’s case, it remains hard to pin down the truth of the original, to which Kubrick has tried to confer an image and a voice. The perplexity of critics in search of what Kubrick intended to transfer to screen is disclosed in the lexicon employed to describe his enshrined message. His works are often praised for their variations of tone, ranging across acute socio-historical critique, acid political satire, sadistic depiction of violence, psychological investigation of human desire, and self-reflexive, radical and, to some, nihilistic comments on modern techno-culture. 274 In the end, many critics and viewers falls back on descriptive comments, invariably pointing to “the sense of distance” created “between characters and between character and viewer.”275

The general consent of critics that Kubrick’s films involve a sense of distance – and consequent emotional ‘coldness’ in Todd McGowan’s expression – also reflects the difficulty of forging any convincing connection between Kubrick’s images and his message, despite the fact that his “cold gaze” on the world and humanity is shamelessly revealing and never attempts to filter human reality through the fantasising machinery of cinema. 276 One thing that these critical reactions indicate, however, is Kubrick’s attempt to lead the audience beyond any conventional association between images/objects and meanings. In other words, his aim is the cinematic re-presentation of ‘the almost unrepresentable yet fundamental Meaning’ encountered in the original text.

274 Thomas Allen Nelson’s book Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist’s Maze deals with “the difficulty of defining with precision the thematic unity” of Kubrick’s works and lists numerous heterogeneous interpretations of his ‘message’ in its first chapter. [Quoted from pp. 4]
276 Ibid, 43.
The above sketch of Kubrick’s approach to the practice of adaptation is most manifest in his adaptation of Stephen King’s supernatural ghost story *The Shining*. First of all, the film is exemplary of the way in which Kubrick’s adaptations weave a web around the *something* as a way to keep its secret rather than expose it to the spectators’ grasp. The central enigma of the story that is assumed to have triggered Kubrick is, as Stephen King himself puts it, “[w]hat, exactly, is compelling Jack Torrance toward murdering [his family] in the winter-isolated rooms and hallways of the Overlook Hotel?” The author attributes the disorienting quality of his novel to this impasse as well as to the horror that one experiences in the encounter with this insoluble question lurking in the story. In the introduction to the novel’s new edition, King confirms Kubrick’s fascination with this enigma: “My single conversation with the late Stanley Kubrick, about six months before he commenced filming on his version of *The Shining*, suggested that it was this [genuinely disturbing] *quality* about the story that appealed to him.”

Despite the analogous understanding of both King and Kubrick about the enigmatic nucleus of the story and its obviously psychological orientation, Kubrick’s film seems to approach the riddle from the opposite side of Stephen King’s narrative and characterisation. In terms of presenting the question at its core, the methodology of King’s novel epitomises the conventional reaction of a human subject making fervent efforts of rationalisation to formulate an answer. In other words, in confrontation with the enigma posed by Jack Torrance’s psychotic breakdown the novel’s solution is to fill the void which points to the unrepresentable and uncanny dimension of the human psyche. King’s text thus offers illustrative and detailed explanations at every twist and turn of the drama. Using a generic

277 Stephen King, introduction to *The Shining* (London: Hodder, 2007), xii.
278 Ibid., xii.
mixture of horror, suspense and melodrama, Stephen King transforms the enigma into a question or puzzle to be meticulously addressed by the narrative. The novel’s episodic structure with fifty eight little chapters is full of ‘meaningful’ incidents and emotional struggles among the main characters, which are clearly and incessantly verbalised through first-person narration. Consequently, there is hardly room for the Torrances to suffer from ennui in their five months’ solitude in a snowbound hotel at the top of the Rockies.

Kubrick’s approach seems to blatantly reverse King’s rationalising strategy: that is, Kubrick’s film deprives the story of every plausible answer one by one. Moreover, Kubrick’s film refuses to offer a cinematic substitution for those explanatory elements in the original, while leading spectators to the very same question. There is no flashback that would pinpoint Jack’s childhood trauma as a justification for his chronic alcoholism. There is no family secret of domestic violence that foreshadows the story’s climax. Kubrick’s film completely silences the numerous colloquial intrusions which erupt everywhere in the novel, verbalise the inner state of the characters, and direct readers’ emotional reaction to those minute situations. Most of all, while keeping the original title for his adaptation, Kubrick seems to be indifferent to the novel’s exhaustive elaboration of its central subject matter – a supernatural telepathic power called ‘shining’ – which eventually functions as the story’s deus ex machina.

Instead, Kubrick invites spectators into a maze. The huge hedge maze which serves as a locus for the film’s uncanny ending is an expressive materialisation of the film’s disruptive and disorienting nature. The maze works as a point of differentiation between Kubrick’s
The Shining and King’s novel. However, ironically this maze, which is absent in King’s novel, links the film to the original text or, more precisely, to what triggered Kubrick. The snow-covered maze where Jack Torrance meets his death is a visual creation of Stanley Kubrick that presents the ‘genuinely disturbing’ character of King’s novel better than any element concocted by the novelist. Without a rational explanation, the camera at the end of the film floats from the image of Jack frozen to death in the maze to the sinister return of smiling Jack captured in the freeze frame of a half century-old photo. Kubrick’s deliberate lack of resolution confuses and defies every causality and linearity carefully laid out by the original text. By imprisoning the hero as well as our desire for a feasible answer first in the maze and then in the photo-frame, the resolution of the film invalidates all the plausible answers elaborated by King’s novel, yet at the same time reopens the possibility of filling the enigma or the void with an interpretation. I will argue that Kubrick’s maze in this film is the epitome of how das Ding operates in the course of adaptation. That is, Kubrick’s adaptation of The Shining indicates that adaptation is a means neither to discover a way of faithfully envisioning a message sketched out by the words of an original text, nor to find a way out of the grip of words on the page. In its

279 The original novel uses the huge boiler of the hotel as a time bomb evoking a sense of threat and suspense throughout its narrative. In the end the boiler explodes and blows up the Overlook Hotel as well as Jack Torrance (who by then has turned into a monster possessed by the hotel’s evil spirit), whereas the film’s ending leaves him frozen in the maze with the hotel unscathed.

280 Here, it is significant that Kubrick with his co-writer Diane Johnson studied Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” while they were collaborating on the script of The Shining. This indicates that his intention was not just to represent the images implied by the original text but to revive or re-present that which was buried and repressed by the signifiers of the original. [See Dennis Bingham’s “The Displaced Auteur: A Reception History of The Shining,” in Perspectives on Stanley Kubrick, ed. Mario Falsetto (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 290.]

281 A reference giving a useful insight to the film’s use of still images is Brigitte Peucker’s article “Kubrick and Kafka: The Corporeal Uncanny,” Modernism/Modernity 8, no. 4 (Nov., 2001): 663-674. The article explores the haunting quality of the film in relation to Freud’s text The Uncanny and regards the film’s emphatic use of photographs to effectively evoke a sense of the uncanny by envisioning a site of “a return of the dead.”
search for *das Ding* as the lost meaning that seeks to be re-presented, an adaptation can reach out to the level of the ‘beyond’ where a meaning or a signified works itself free from the repression of signifiers. In this sense, Kubrick’s field of adaptation points toward the Lacanian locus of *das Ding*, which is “the-beyond-signified.”

To call up the maze where Lacan places the concept *das Ding*, the chapter began with Lacan’s lecture on the Freudian Thing. The lecture was not chosen simply as a gateway to his more elaborate conceptualisation of *das Ding* in the 1959-60 seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, held four years after the Vienna lecture. The choice was also made so as to return the discussion to the starting point where Lacan sutures the beginning and the end of his theorisation of *das Ding*. In doing so, he enshrines it by confessing that the only thing that Truth as *das Ding* speaks about itself is that “I belie myself, I defy you, I slip away.”

By taking a similar detour, the chapter seeks to map the maze as the fundamental structure for configuring any attempt at adaptation, as Lacan and Kubrick have tried to disclose it.

**The objet petit a in the Shadow of Das Ding**

Lacan’s 1955 lecture on the Freudian Thing foreshadows the rhetorical characteristic that will be key to Lacan’s conceptualisation of the Thing in the seminar on the ethics of

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psychoanalysis in 1959-60. In the beginning of the lecture he claims that the true meaning of his return to Freud is “situated elsewhere.” This expression, which draws our attention to the territory of the ‘beyond’, is not only meant to criticise the ‘stupidity’ of some analysts who understood the Freudian message too literally, but also to reveal the fundamental impasse of the subject in its relation to the things the subject’s speech circles around. In his lecture, Lacan elusively yet repeatedly demonstrates that it is not the subject who speaks about things but the Thing that speaks itself through things, entrapping the subject in the fantasy that s/he can capture and possess the Thing by means of speech. The fundamental problem is that all human discourse is condemned to a traumatic misfit which never allows the subject to reach the meaning of its own speech. Lacan explains this as follows:

While it is to him that you must speak, it is literally about some-thing else – that is, about some-thing other than what is at stake when he speaks of himself – which is the thing that speaks to you. Regardless of what he says, this thing will remain forever inaccessible to him if, being speech addressed to you, it cannot elicit its response in you, and if, having heard its message in this inverted form, you cannot, in re-turning it to him, give him the twofold satisfaction of having recognized it and of making him recognize its truth.

In an attempt to expand the scope of the above meditation on ‘some-thing’, in his Seminar VII entitled The Ethics of Psychoanalysis Lacan carefully detaches the notion of das Ding from what is recognisable and representable as meaning. Das Ding, for him, is not a solid meaning that is subject to the symbolic procedure of coupling a signifier and a signified. Despite the density and complexity of the later seminar, the way in which Lacan lays his path to the concept remains remarkably consistent with that of the 1955 lecture. At first,

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284 Ibid., 334.
285 Ibid., 349. [my emphasis]
his approach seems to rely on the binary logic of symbolic discourse, yet shows that *das Ding* leads us into the very trap such a logical progress seeks to avoid. To do so, he begins his meditation by placing *das Ding* as an ‘object’ of representation, in order then to compare it with the two most self-evident elements in the field of representation – or adaptation, as a universal mode of re-presentation. He says: “[t]he *Sache* is clearly the thing, a product of industry and of human action as governed by language,” and “[t]he word is there in a reciprocal position to the extent that it articulates itself.”286 He goes on, “*Sache* and *Wort* are, therefore, closely linked: they form a couple. *Das Ding* is found somewhere else.”287 Over and again, *das Ding* is referred to as a paradoxical object that is placed outside the locus of the imaginary and that of the symbolic. For this reason, Lacan’s conceptualisation of *das Ding* offers a key to investigating the adaptor’s search for something faithful to a literary original which nonetheless ends up as “something entirely different” from it.288

However, after a painstaking delay in specifying the definition, locus or function of *das Ding*, Lacan suddenly claims that it is lost at the very moment when it is supposed to be captured. Dramatically, Lacan changes direction by admitting that ‘being lost’ is the fundamental ontological status of *das Ding*: he says that “[i]t is in its nature that the object as such is lost” and condemns any attempt to reach it by saying that “it will never be found again.”289 The frustrating process of searching for the Thing and discovering it as an already lost object even before one starts recalls Lacan’s conceptualisation of the *objet petit a* as a lost object in the 1962-3 seminar on anxiety. Therefore, various exegetical texts

287 Ibid., 45.
288 Ibid., 52.
289 Ibid., 52.
treat the notion of das Ding as it appears in Seminar VII as a concept which was on its way to developing into the objet petit a. The disappearance of das Ding in his later teaching also supports the assumption, since it is tempting to see, his elaboration of das Ding as a prefiguration of the more refined and complicated concept of the objet petit a. Dylan Evans’s outline of the concept in An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis recapitulates this interpretation:

After the seminar of 1959-60, the term das Ding disappears almost entirely from Lacan’s work. However, the ideas associated with it provide the essential features of the new development in the concept of the objet petit a as Lacan develops it from 1963 onwards. For example the objet petit a is circled by the drive (S11, 168), and seen as the cause of desire just as das Ding is seen as ‘the cause of the most fundamental human passion’ (S7, 97). Also, the fact that the Thing is not the imaginary object but firmly in the register of the real (S7, 112), and yet is ‘that which in the real suffers from the signifier’ (S7, 125), anticipates the transition in Lacan’s thought towards locating objet petit a increasingly in the register of the real from 1963 on.290

Despite the general consensus that the theoretical development of the Thing shades into the later concept objet petit a, the significance of das Ding, for me, needs to be held separate from such a historicising perspective. Of course, it is not possible to make a clear-cut demarcation between the two terms owing to the fact that the two concepts always appear at the margins of a signifier’s articulation. However, it is nonetheless valuable to note that Lacan’s intention behind the theoretical movement from das Ding to objet petit a is not only to elaborate the former and develop the latter. Lacan clearly specifies that the Thing indicates a hole or a primary negativity in the primordial Real that is not tackled by repression, whereas the objet petit a is a leftover, a residue, and a little remainder of the Real. Moreover, Lacan’s conceptualisation of the Thing is marked by the connotation of a system, locus or structure in a very primitive state; the objet petit a, by contrast, is more of

an object with regard to its interrelation with the imaginary domain of the ego. In Seminar VII Lacan remarks that the function of *das Ding* is to be “the dumb reality…the reality that commands and regulates.” Thus, it would be too hasty to superimpose the features and functions of the one concept onto the other. Lacan’s sophisticated terminology separating *das Ding* from the *objet petit a* confirms his subtle discrimination of *das Ding* from the later concept.

Measuring the slight yet significant ill fit between *das Ding* and the *objet petit a* may be useful for illuminating the adaptive movement from King’s novel to Kubrick’s film, the peculiar character of which is impossible to capture with either the dichotomy of a fidelity test or the dialectical tension between the Father’s law and the Mother’s entrapment. The transcendental nature of Kubrick’s adaptation in comparison with the original novel is coextensive with that of *das Ding* in its relation to the *objet petit a*. As Lorenzo Chiesa identifies in *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, “the object a is the hole from the standpoint of the symbolic order, it is the hole of the Symbolic, whereas the Thing *qua* transcendent hole is somehow independent of the Symbolic.” If I may add to this explanation, the *objet petit a* is the hole seen from the perspective of the subject whose desire is set in motion owing to this immanent and constitutive lack in the Symbolic. However, *das Ding* is the primordial lack prior to the unconscious, whose formation is mysterious and inaccessible to the subject and which can only be as that which has been there from the beginning. To put it differently, it is possible to say that the *objet petit a* stands in for “the pound of flesh” that the subject had to sacrifice on its

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entrance into the Symbolic. Its loss has to be subjectified in order to be constitutive in relation to an individual’s desire. Yet, *das Ding* refers to “a pure signifying system” into which the unconscious is written and from which the subject emerges as an effect of the signifier. It is felt as a kind of a universe standing between being and non-being. From there, the constant force or command emerges to bend the linear progress of desire into a circular path of return. Similarly, the transcendental quality of Kubrick’s adaptation can be linked to the magnitude of the Thing which may reveal itself in the form of adaptation – that is, adaptation insofar as an adaptor recognises its essence as re-presentation.

Keeping these points of differentiation in mind, I would like to interrogate the movement from King’s original to Kubrick’s film, whose eeriness – not horror, if we recall the review pointing out that Kubrick’s film is not at all scary – appears to come from ‘somewhere else.’ In the novel, the objects operate within the generic conventions of horror and are strongly connected to the imaginary projection of the psyche of the major characters – that is, the three members of the Torrance family, namely Jack, Wendy and their five-year-old son Danny – with whom readers are drawn to identify. The author expounds on the psychological dynamics created by the novel’s use of supernatural beings and phenomena in the foreword: “I believe these stories exist because we sometimes need to create unreal monsters and bodies to *stand in for* all the things we fear in our real lives.” His intention is made clear in every incident which the characters confront in the Overlook

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296 Stephen King, introduction to *The Shining* (London: Hodder, 2007), xii and xiii.
Hotel, to the extent that King’s writing constructs an immediate link between various supernatural or superstitious phenomena and the memories, wishes and fears of the characters. In other words, although the disorienting dimension of King’s novel explicitly originates from the ‘things’ that draw a reader’s attention to the ‘irrational’, ‘unpredictable’ and ‘supernatural’ side of reality, these ‘things’ – such as the unseasonal appearance of wasps, enormous topiary animals chasing Danny, various apparitions haunting the hotel, the elevator moving by itself and so forth – nonetheless belong to the territory of Sache and Wort, where “the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all.”297 In short, they function as a psychological screen insofar as they sustain their relation to and, more fundamentally, distance from ‘meaning’ that is assumed to be under the symbolic law and hence to be representable.

Interestingly, behind a multitude of horrifying objects that fill Stephen King’s Overlook Hotel there is a trace of a lack which operates in the same way as the little object, the objet petit a, whose obscurity or absence triggers the entire system of the subject’s desire. In King’s narrative, the central psychological axis threading the numerous encounters with those objects is brought to the surface by a mysterious old scrapbook Jack discovers in the basement of the hotel. The scrapbook contains old photos and news clippings chronicling the Overlook’s buried history, in which Jack Torrance glimpses a great story and exclaims: “God, what a story! And they had all been here, right above him, in those empty rooms…There was a story, all right. One hell of a story.”298 The basement subsequently becomes the site of his manic pursuit of the tantalising lack embodied by this ‘story’ as if it

could provide him with the meaning lost in his life due to his habitual drinking and sporadic violent explosions. While scavenging through piles of old papers in the basement, Jack is anxious about the chance that “he might miss exactly the piece of Overlookiana he needed to make the mystic connection that he was sure must be here somewhere.” The way in which the story of the hotel lurks behind these sinister and monstrous things evokes the origin and the operation of the objet petit a. As Lacan teaches, “The objet a is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack.” Specifically, the story of the Overlook hotel works as the missing piece around which King’s novel seems to be constituted. The compelling yet elusive nature of the missing part at the centre explains the novel’s narcissistic appeal to a reader as well as the book’s commercial success. In other words, the story Jack wishes to write a book about stands for the lost object – not only for the main character Jack Torrance but also for readers whose desire to re-discover it is set in motion. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the hidden story may have initiated Kubrick’s reading into the central void of the story, although the director eventually traversed its imaginary function as the lost object. King’s novel, however, remains at the level of Sache and Wort and tries to cover up this enigma with the aforementioned promise of meaning. King’s rationalising tactic encourages readers to assume the convergence of meanings in that lost object. On the basis of this assumption readers are drawn to accept the novel’s formulaic associations between the supernatural happenings and their

299 Ibid., 243.
seemingly rational meanings. Ironically enhanced by the lack of the story at the novel’s heart, the promise of meaning enables words to integrate and domesticate things and, hence, to create the predicted and intended responses in readers under the reign of a symbolic causal relation, false and illusionary though it may be.

The film manifests the evocation of a transcendental movement from the *objet petit a* to *das Ding* through the repetitive act of ‘emptying out’ meanings given by the original. To put it differently, the trajectory of Kubrick’s adaptation moves along the exactly opposite route to the way in which a subject normally makes sense of his or her reality. The movement of the subject’s consciousness is a process of materialising what is unrepresentable to it, resulting in *Sache*. *Wort* is an outcome of signification, which attaches a ‘meaning’ to this ‘thing,’ on the basis of which the reciprocal relationship between *Sache* and *Wort* forms a basic unit of re-presentation. However, every ‘thing’ must stumble and *das Ding* reveals itself at the moment when one starts questioning the given meaning of things and wades back to the initial point and even attempts to traverse the veil of the *objet petit a* like Kubrick does in his practice of adaptation. In doing so, one encounters a reality beyond the pleasure principle – that is, *das Ding* as an empty point of reference as well as a reality that is dumb but commands and regulates. Herein, we can read the significance of the concept *das Ding* for Lacan’s adaptation of Freud, since it occupies the nodal point where Lacan sought to formulate his own way to reconcile the pleasure principle and its beyond – that is, the death drive. Lacan confirms this reading by saying that “If I introduce this term [*das Ding*], it is because there are certain ambiguities, certain insufficiencies, in relation to the true meaning in Freud of the opposition between
reality principle and pleasure principle.” At the end of the film, as mentioned above, the maze provides the uncanny locus or, more precisely, hollow for the impossible encounter between the desire for life, which follows objects as they substitute for the objet petit a, and the death drive, which is doomed to circle around das Ding.

Kubrick’s The Shining explains how an original text works as an empty point of reference to an adaptor, like Lacan and Kubrick, who reads or glimpses the primordial void beyond the promise of meaning. The film is an epitome of the director’s efforts to pursue to the furthest end the centripetal quest to grasp the Thing, even by betraying the superficial meanings imposed by the original texts. At first glance, the final cut of Kubrick’s The Shining maintains a substantial distance from King’s horror story, which encircles the hidden history of the Overlook Hotel as its unobtainable and forbidden centre of gravity. Yet it is surprising to realise that, during the film’s exceptionally extended production schedule, the changes rather gradually came to the surface. The making-of documentary, directed by Vivian Kubrick, indicates that Kubrick did not have a completed version of the shooting script; he wrote and revised numerous pieces of the script for a day’s shooting on the set, often in collaboration with the film’s star Jack Nicholson and other staff. On top of his painstakingly revised script Kubrick rather obsessively demanded a retake of every shot, until the actors became desperate “to reach the last take.” Despite the fact that he spent a prolonged period on the film’s post-production, Kubrick took out a substantial amount of the film’s finished version after the New York premier and its U.S. opening. Among the parts taken out at the very last moment Kubrick cut the whole of the film’s coda, “showing a hospitalized Wendy being congratulated by the Overlook’s manager on

301 Ibid., 43.
surviving her horrendous ordeal.” The restored ternary relationship between Ullman, Wendy and Danny appears to have contained a considerable semblance to King’s original epilogue. The novel’s end depicts a restoration of a nuclear family in a rather loose shape formed by Wendy, Danny and Dick Hallorann, who assumes the benign paternal role of protecting the two in the process of physical and mental recovery. Such a slow yet studious process of finding and refinding something that could tell more about the original than it does itself reveals the fact that what Kubrick sought cannot easily be separated from the objects represented by King’s words in the original text. That is, the movement towards what Kubrick sees as the Thing looming behind the things and words on the surface of the original text follows not a straightforward but a labyrinthine path. The journey through such a maze demands considerable time and resources as well as patience and devotion, all of which Kubrick was lucky enough to possess to an unusual degree. His case clarifies what Lacan designates as the path toward das Ding, epitomised by Lacan himself in his incessant quest of the Freudian Thing. Lacan teaches that the encounter with das Ding can be glimpsed by a speaking subject only through numerous detours in an attempt to transcend the pleasure principle aiming at satisfaction facilitated by the coupling of Sache and Wort. Kubrick’s detours certainly transcend the level of objects and words and finally reach the maze. Here the face of the Truth is to be found in the field of adaptation: that is, the maze realises the most manifest form of adaptation as re-presentation, which points toward das Ding.

303 Ibid., 312.
In approaching the problem of adaptation in the case of Lacan or Kubrick, *das Ding* enables us to question the prevailing structuralist understanding of textual transformation by locating the focus in the concept of representation itself. In the discussion of textual analyses that compare adapted works with their source texts, there is no room to look into the definition of *Vorstellung* [representation] while employing the term in the exclusive sense of its function. In other words, a philosophical speculation of *Vorstellung* is often disregarded in favour of its operational dimension in textual analyses of adaptation to limit its scope in treating adaptation as an outcome or a work rather than a cultural, or fundamentally psychical, phenomenon. However, by exposing this rather unexplored aspect of adaptation, Kubrick’s efforts point toward the abyss between representation and its assumed meaning, where, according to Lacan, *das Ding* resides. In this pursuit, the site of adaptation becomes the locus for its own dead end since the film attempts to transcend its own ontological status as a representational medium by operating upon the symbolic movement ‘from *Vorstellung* to *Vorstellung*’. More interestingly, this dead end is enigmatically sutured together with the most primordial and initiating point of reference, that which is empty and lost. The void created by this encircling trajectory of re-discovering and re-presenting something that is lost in the course of adaptation is what Lacan found Freud had understood in his notion of *Vorstellung*. Lacan elevates Freud’s insight beyond what the history of philosophy could have construed, although there is not much reference to actual Freudian texts he can offer to support the following argument. Nevertheless, Lacan claims:

*Vorstellung* is understood by Freud in a radical sense, in the form in which it appears in a philosophy that is essentially marked by the theory of knowledge. And that is the remarkable thing about it. He assigned to it in an extreme form the character philosophers themselves have been unable to reduce it to, namely, that of an empty body, a ghost, a pale incubus of the relation to the world, an enfeebled jouissance, which through the age-old interrogations of the
philosophers makes it the essential feature. And by isolating it in this function, Freud removes it from its tradition.305

Indeed, to push the conceptualisation of things or words beyond their operational mode of Vorstellung, as Lacan argues Freud did, is the only possible way to corner the concept of das Ding which, in the end, tears every representation away from its ‘proper’ meaning and transforms it into a ghost. For me, the abyss glimpsed just beyond the empty body of representation is what Lacan names das Ding qua ‘the beyond-of-signified’.

The dimension of representation as a ghost is what Kubrick’s The Shining ultimately seeks to encapsulate by testing the limit of Vorstellung used, for instance, to make Jack Torrance’s sanity as well as insanity understood according to the generic conventions such as melodrama and horror in the original text. In other words, in adapting Stephen King’s novel Kubrick gradually removes the meaning of the work and writing at the centre of Jack Torrance’s world and invites his protagonist as well as spectators to look into the abyss between one’s speech and its meaning. At first, the film’s Jack never labours although he protests that he puts his job as a caretaker of the Overlook before his family. Unlike the novel’s handy Jack, who shows enthusiasm and excellence in coping with the physical aspect of his job, Jack in Kubrick’s film seems idle and indifferent to his job as a winter caretaker. Ironically, Wendy is seen to be the one who busily walks through the hotel and sees to necessary tasks while the husband oversleeps in bed, idly plays catch against the wall of the central lounge and taps at a typewriter for a dubious writing project. Hence, when he explodes at Wendy’s proposal to go down the mountain to get medical help for Danny, Jack’s furious bark asserting his “responsibilities” to stay and look after the hotel

305 Ibid., 60-1.
echoes as empty and meaningless. The film hints at an irreparable gap between his symbolic coordinates and what he really is.

At its climax, the film exposes Jack’s insanity by finally showing the ‘new writing project’ he has been occupied with in a scene which is, like the maze in the hotel’s front yard, Kubrick’s own creation. Wendy approaches the enormous work table in the Colorado lounge while he is away and discovers that what he has been writing is the infinite repetition of the same phrase, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” With an eerie soundtrack accompanying the camera’s zoom in to the stack of yellow paper by the typewriter, we witness exactly what Lacan means by the nothingness or empty body or ghost of Vorstellung. The emphatically lengthy close-up stays on the pile of pages, where the same sentence is typed in various formats such as a play, a poem, a novel, a dialogue and so forth as Wendy’s hand turns leaf after leaf. The lack of sense in the ‘work’ Jack has produced not only confirms the irreparably manic status of his mind, as already hinted by his hallucinations and eccentric physical and verbal behaviours in the scenes before this discovery. But the extended close-up of the typed pages also allows time for spectators to recall the previous scenes where Jack has been typing with the most sane and serious face of a writer. It is a unique psychoanalytic insight acted out in the course of adaptation to unfold a different facet of Jack’s insanity other than the conventional and representable side of madness which has already been performed by Jack Nicholson’s hyperbolic acting in the prior scenes of delirium and violent reaction to his worrying wife. Whereas Jack’s increasingly unhinged manner and his psychotic breakdown are ‘safely’ individualised by means of the physical performance of Nicholson, there is a tenor of universality that causes more shock in the retrospective discovery of Jack’s having lost symbolic mastery over the communicative connections of things and words almost from the beginning of the story,
when no one suspects his insanity. Those pages Jack has been working on are filled with floating signifiers that form a labyrinth rather than a discourse of human speech. The most disturbing nature of such a labyrinth of words detached from meaning of any kind is that it exposes a vacuum or a hole at the centre of our Symbolic, which is shared by every “completely normal individual.” In other words, the fear and horror of the scene echo a fundamental fear of realising that the most humane desire to create representations through objects and words and to weave sense out of them might be a desperate gesture to maintain distance from the primordial abyss that condemns every movement of human speech. The horror of the Real now comes to the surface of the film’s re-presentation of what lurks behind the novel’s rendition of Jack’s mental breakdown, the cause of which is meticulously rationalised, historicised and conventionalised as possession by the evil embodied in the Overlook’s past.

Therefore, despite the chronological progression from King’s novel to Kubrick’s film, the terminal point in Kubrick’s adaptation deals with a more profound and primordial dimension of the human subject than what Stephen King’s novel encircles: that is, while King’s novel structures its plot and characters on the basis of the gravitating power of the objet petit a – a ‘little lost object’ domesticating the Thing and keeping it in contact with the subject’s desire – Kubrick’s film tries to access the darkest abyss called das Ding by transcending the repression of the meanings forged by the original in his search for ‘the most truthful’ adaptation. In this sense, Kubrick’s adaptation retrospectively indicates that it is in the shadow of das Ding that the objet petit a as such can sustain its elusive position

306 In the initial job interview in Kubrick’s The Shining (1980), the hotel manager Ullman tells Jack Torrance the story of Grady, a former caretaker who murdered his family with an axe, and refers to Grady as a man who looked “a completely normal individual” when he was interviewed for the job. This foreshadows the lunacy hidden behind Jack as a writer and as a subject.
at the margin of the Symbolic. Only when traversing the hole inscribed as a personal loss, is it possible to encounter das Ding that speaks the Truth of the subject through the death of subjectivity.

**The Maze that is a Monster**

The previous discussion in regard to Lacan’s call for the reconsideration of the notion of the ‘object’ and its relation to representation made three salient points about the demarcation of das Ding from the objet petit a. Firstly, although it cannot be grasped other than as an object or thing, das Ding is not subordinate to the subject’s faculty of desire; secondly, the function of this object is concurrent with the inability of the subject to represent it; and thirdly, das Ding remains as a locus or a structure rather than a remainder of the Real, which must be objectified in order to initiate desire’s path. With an eye on these points, Lacan indicates that the discourse of psychoanalysis should take a different approach in order to investigate this intricate concept – that is, the Thing that speaks of itself rather than is spoken about – and how its ‘meaning’ or ‘message’ is delivered to the subject. In this regard, the current study needs to ask a different set of questions in order to understand what Kubrick’s adaptation – the object of the chapter’s interrogation – ‘speaks’ about itself and its unrepresentable means of delivering the message to the spectator. The disoriented relation between das Ding and Vorstellung results in the inversion of this peculiar object and the subject ‘under its spell’. Indeed, the Thing – or, more exactly, the void inscribed in the notion of the object – is not only alluring but also demanding: in the case of Kubrick, he seems to have been driven by the persistent urge to seek the encounter
with the Thing through his repetitive and even agonising process of transcending the repression of the signifiers and the signifieds in the original texts he adapted. As for the inextricable force of das Ding, Alenka Zupancic offers a precise question to start with: “How is it possible for something that cannot be an object of representation [Vorstellung] to determine our will and become the drive behind our actions?”

At first sight, the association between the drive and das Ding may appear to contradict the differentiation of das Ding from the objet petit a, which I tried to draw out in the previous section. It is because Lacan acknowledges that the drive should be understood in terms of a trajectory toward not das Ding but the objet petit a and designates the objet petit a in the place of “the satisfaction of the drive.” However, a closer speculation on this connection will serve as an essential point of departure for answering the question about the driving force of das Ding and the subject’s response to it. The subject’s relation to das Ding, Lacan discovers, is always involved with a certain level of “[p]ressure, urgency” for it is “[s]omething that wishes” rather than something that is wished for by the subject. Lacan emphasises that this pressure is not just the command of the Name-of-the-Father and, thus, of language. It is the primal force that “intervenes at the level of the secondary process [such as repression], but in a deeper way than through that corrective activity.”

What we realise here is that the pressure from das Ding is a secret which constantly brings the psychoanalytic understanding of human subjectivity “beyond the exercise of the

310 Ibid., 46.
unconscious,” in Lacan’s words.\textsuperscript{311} It pushes the boundary of psychoanalysis to the watershed between humanity and animality, whose absolute fundamentality renders the notion of the drive merely its reference. Therefore, the mysterious field of \textit{das Ding} functions as a starting point as well as a terminal point of psychoanalysis and as the gate which permanently keeps the discourse of psychoanalysis at bay from “something ultimate given, something archaic, primal.”\textsuperscript{312} As a reference or a secondary function to this completely inaccessible region of \textit{das Ding}, Lacan notes in \textit{Seminar XI} that Freud named the drive the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis and recognised it as the irreducible point around which the discourse of psychoanalysis forever circles. Indeed, \textit{das Ding} is “the point where the \textit{Trieb} [the drive] is unmasked.”\textsuperscript{313} Therefore, the imperative at its purest in the subject’s encounter with \textit{das Ding} is neither comprehensible nor representable whereas the function and the trajectory of the \textit{Trieb} are explicable by means of four terms – namely thrust, the source, the object and the aim, through which we can grasp the concept of the drive.

However, if we carefully strip those terms from the drive, what is left could tell us something about \textit{das Ding} and its force, no matter how vague it may be. By its nature, the pressure in the field of \textit{das Ding} tends to drift since it is not yet localised or fixated to a part of the body. Also, the path of this drifting force is not yet determined, whereas the drive’s circuit is structured around the lost object – that is, the \textit{objet petit a}. If we read the first scene of Kubrick’s film with the above speculation in mind, it is not difficult to realise

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\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., 90.
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that the camera movement in the opening shots embodies the free flight of *das Ding*. Cued by the sinister orchestration of Bartok’s symphony, the camera on a helicopter rapidly glides over the serene surface of a glacier lake surrounded by snow-covered mountain peaks. In the next shot, from the sky the camera spots and follows a tiny yellow Volkswagen Beetle driving through a vast coniferous forest as if it is probing its prey. Through sublime landscape, the opening shots introduce the power and autonomy of the free-flying gaze that overwhelms the weak and vulnerable presence of human beings on mountain slopes. While the camera passes over, swoops down and sometimes indifferently flies away from Jack Torrance’s car in the opening sequence, the editing overlaps these shots with the extremely wide and deep-focused shots that frame the yellow VW at the centre or, more precisely, keep it at the vanishing point of the frame. The swift and liberated flight of the camera exaggerates the speed of the moving landscape, almost engulfing Jack’s car, which appears to be fixated on a given course. What is interesting to note here is that, contrary to the floating camera which often arrives at scenes before the human characters, the film’s major characters are shown to move along structured paths such as mountain roads, labyrinthine corridors in the Overlook hotel and, finally, the narrow path between two hedge walls in the enormous maze outside the hotel.

If I may turn the discussion back to the matter of the primal and archaic force in the field of *das Ding*, the purely physical and cinematic movement of the gaze in the opening scene is felt as an inextricable pressure by spectators who are not aware of or even wonder whose perspective it could be. Moreover, the use of cinemascope and extremely wide lens inflates the sense of distance and depth, and consequently magnifies the force of the camera’s flight. The camerawork in the first scene is visceral and affective rather than effective or economical in forwarding the narrative and introducing characters. Kubrick
carefully conveys a powerful mixture of fear and attraction by almost exclusively
depending on the ongoing and trackless movement of the gaze. By contrast, the barely
visible yellow VW appears to be driven by a more regulated and civilised force which at
least keeps it ‘on the track’. Along the inscribed and localised trajectory of the drive, the
car runs around mountain corners without knowing what it will confront next. Indeed, with
the menacing gaze chasing it up the mountain side, Jack’s car almost appears to be pushed
and prodded into the territory governed by this unregistered and unregulated power. In
other words, the drive’s move is symbolised by the diminished figure of the car. This
unconscious demand seems to be secondary to the more compelling magnetic field of the
Thing, into which this unfortunate character as well as spectators is thrust. Further, the
contrast between the two movements signals the inverted role of the subject and the object
and reveals the primal urge from the Thing that speaks and wishes, that which Lacan
recognises as “a radical structure – in which the subject is not yet placed.”314 It is worth
noting that this first sequence of the film is a prologue created by Kubrick before the
beginning of the original story, which starts with the scene of Jack’s job interview at the
hotel manager’s office. In spite of the fact that the film leaves out almost all the
supernatural episodes from the novel, the film nevertheless expands the novel’s
psychological dimension, which is confined to the scope of desire. As sketched above, the
film’s first sequence invites a more uncontrollable force to come into play and this allows
Kubrick’s film to unveil the fantasy of love and the family bond, which is heavily invested
in by the original text. Although the level of physical violence is diminished in the film’s
climax, the film nonetheless proves itself capable of revealing the most destructive facet of
human relationships. I shall come back to this point a little later.

What is or has been calling the Torrances to the top of the mountains? The most salient feature of the Overlook hotel – in reality an enormous set built for the film of unprecedented size and with lavish details – is its endless corridors. Like blood vessels, they link various heterogeneous spaces of the hotel: from a practically decorated lobby to the manager’s efficient yet somewhat claustrophobic office, to the majestic Colorado lounge, to the sumptuous Gold Ballroom, to the huge functional kitchen under the harsh fluorescent lights, and on to the homey yet shabby apartment in the staff wing. Whereas the original novel dissects this colossal place into numerous small stages for supernatural incidents, the film delivers a sense of getting lost in the organic structure of its own life. Most of the time, the film’s characters are shot in the hotel’s tangled passages, whether they walk purposefully, wander aimlessly, or struggle to escape from them. The ceaseless movement of the Torrance family is chased by the steadicam, as if it embodies the constant force which makes them restless and turns every space into a maze for them. In an example of the film’s characteristic use of the compound structure of the set, the sequence entitled ‘A Month Later’ introduces the mundane reality of the Torrance family as they settle into the hotel. The sequence starts with Wendy pushing the breakfast trolley through the lobby. While the camera frames and follows Wendy walking into the dark passage in the background, the first shot dissolves into the next shot in which the camera again follows Danny, who rides on his tricycle fast down a corridor. The direction and position of the two characters and their distance from the camera remain almost the same in the two shots, and they almost look like they are going into the vanishing point of the frame. With the help of the wide lens and the steadicam used in a relatively narrow space the cinematography here produces an eerie effect: it appears that it is not the characters but the hotel that moves. Moreover, the editing connects their movement in order to emphasise the constant ‘push,’ even though Wendy’s functional action of bringing breakfast to her
husband and the child’s aimless joy ride appear to have different meanings on the level of narrative.

Eventually the Torrances are led into the real maze outside the hotel which is a maze itself. As I mentioned before, this is a completely new element added by Kubrick and the most elaborate visual and narrative device in the film. However, in a practical sense, one might want to ask what this maze is for. When he shows Jack and Wendy around, the hotel manager Ullman, in the place of Kubrick, responds to this question in a very casual manner: “It’s a lot of fun.” Yet walking in the massive hedge maze in order to let oneself get lost for hours does not seem to operate under the economy of the pleasure principle. The fun and attraction of the maze, if there is any pleasure involved, is almost perverse and even sadistic when scrutinising how it produces its ‘fun’ effects on people who agonise themselves in such a meaningless itinerary. Lacan suggests a more feasible explanation to this question in *Seminar VII*:

> that first demand is the demand of *das Ding* – it seeks whatever is repeated, whatever returns, and guarantees that it will always return, to the same place – and it has driven us to the extreme position in which we find ourselves, a position where we can cast doubt on all places and where nothing in that reality which we have learned to disrupt so admirably responds to that call for the security of a return.315

In this light, the maze is a purely geometric structure drawing out the field of the drive, yet paradoxically it turns into this “extreme position” where we eventually begin to suspect “the security of a return” and where, indeed, “the drive is unmasked.”316

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316 Ibid., 90.
Now it is plausible to see that the maze invented by Kubrick touches on the most profound level of King’s novel, in which the whole troop of the hotel’s ghosts continuously chant “Unmask! Unmask!” Despite this purgatorial call from the locus of das Ding, King’s novel takes a safe return route and resorts to the subject’s most common reactionary strategy – that is, the fantasy. Fantasy is what supports the subject’s faculty of desire and, as mentioned above, the novel is led by the fantasy of obtaining the objet petit a – for example, a great story to be written, a happy nuclear family, etc. Kubrick’s film seems to penetrate the fantasy by unmasking the superficial ‘values’ in which it is invested. Most of all, the film’s ‘truthful’ response to the call from das Ding persistently debunks the fundamental level of the subject’s fantasy, which is that the subject has agency in its relation to objects or things that are wished for. When Wendy and Danny step into the maze for the first time, Wendy keeps asking the boy “Isn’t it beautiful?” as if she is compelled to impose some value onto this object – either aesthetic or entertaining – of the maze. However, through the effects of the claustrophobic mise-en-scène and the ominous music, both her question and Danny’s inexpressive response echo as unconvincing and vacant. The more they wander about, the more mechanical their acting becomes. They walk in the maze rather like a pair of puppets and Kubrick maximises the impression in a very intriguing manner. The image of Wendy and Danny is intercut with the image of Jack in the interior, where he idly hangs around alone in the hotel and finds the miniature of the maze in the lobby. He approaches and overlooks it with an irrepressible sneer on his face. From Jack’s point of view, which uncannily turns into a God’s-eye view, the next shot zooms into the centre of the miniature maze, in which Wendy and Danny move like two dots or tiny toys imprisoned in the model. Cued by their voices echoing unrealistically loudly in a stark contrast with their almost invisible appearance on screen, the sequence

shifts back into the maze again. By means of this uncanny editing enabled by the creative use of special effects, Wendy and Danny at the maze’s centre now appear more imprisoned and lost even though Wendy tries to cheer them up by exclaiming, “Woo, we made it.” The only thing that the ‘fun’ tour into this empty space ensures for the light-hearted tourists is their detour, which is already destined. Moreover, the nothingness manifested by the image of the maze’s centre insinuates that there is no safe return after achieving satisfaction. The detour is a mere mechanical repetition determined by the imperative command from the field of the Thing – or, in this case, the Maze – in which there is neither a progress from beginning to end nor a demarcation between inside and outside.

I would like to link the directionlessness of the maze to the evaporation of moral standards experienced by Jack, which has been foreshadowed by the story of his predecessor Grady, who slaughtered his wife and two daughters with an axe. This will serve to interrogate the eruption of hostility expressed by Jack toward his family from a different light and ultimately to question the correlation between the transgression of the moral law and the encounter with das Ding. Of course, King’s novel carefully elaborates the reasons for the conflict between the husband and the wife even before they get involved with the Overlook hotel. The original text provides the psychological depth and complexity to its main characters in accordance with melodramatic conventions – that is, the internal conflict between individual desires and their social, familial responsibilities and the consequent emotional frustration. The evil residing in the Overlook hotel only magnifies the already existing problem and enables their disparity eventually to explode. They are internally divided by different desires and suffer from regret and dissatisfaction. Therefore, there is neither a room for a reader to question how the ‘ordinary’ couple are led to such a violent climax, nor a chance to penetrate the purest form of hostility at play.
On the contrary, Stanley Kubrick deliberately flattens out these main characters and makes them, as discussed above, puppets with no psychological complexity. The conversation sounds functional and dry, and except when they become hysterical the characters remain generally inexpressive. The couple show no sign of desire toward each other and their affection toward Danny appears somewhat programmed. Their relationship manages to survive as long as they can keep a certain distance from one another. That is why the few tender moments between the Torrance family in the film only happen when they are apart or have other people between them. The point is made salient when comparing the earlier scene where Jack calls Wendy from the hotel to inform her, in a relatively loving mode, that he got a job and the scene where the family drive up to the hotel on its closing day. The medium close-up in the latter captures the three characters in the same frame, but this is the only moment in the movie when they remain in proximity without other people standing between them. The tension from the shot begins even before Wendy suddenly asks Jack about the Donner Party – a party of early settlers who were known to have been snowbound and resorted to cannibalism to survive. It is a perfect example of a Freudian slip that not only signals their anxiety about the future but also foreshadows the fate waiting for them. Here Kubrick not only uses a static camera framing the Torrances in a tight space, but also makes the scene one long take in order to deliver a sense of discomfort through numerous dissonant eyeline matches amongst the three. In so doing, he seems to ask a viewer to pay more attention to how problematic the proximity between the ‘I’ and its fellow human beings can become and to look into the horror of being too ‘close’ even to one’s own family, whom, under the guide of moral laws, we ought to love without the need for complex ethical challenges.
The theme of cabin fever, which is superficially what Jack Torrance suffers from, illuminates the moment when the distance between the ‘I’ and the fellow human being – *Nebenmensch* in Lacan’s use of Freud’s German expression – is disturbed and makes the subject’s relation to other human beings scandalous. It is noteworthy that it is in relation to this term *Nebenmensch* that Lacan locates the origin of the concept *das Ding*. At the end of the same chapter of *Seminar VII*, he adds a supplementary comment – indeed, a very abrupt and enigmatic one – on “You!” (Toi!) and “Me!” (Moi!). He asks, “What does the emission, the articulation, the sudden emergence from out of our voice of that “You!”(Toi!) mean?” To him, the word ‘You’ reflects the subject’s attempt to tame the Other with no split, or *das Ding* as the absolute Other – that is, “that prehistoric, that unforgettable Other, which suddenly threatens to surprise us and to cast us down from the height of its appearance.” When this word of intimate relation is uttered, one is hit by the full force of *das Ding* and “Me!”(Moi!) is a feeble reaction. In other words, “Me” does not announce the presence of “I” but merely serves as a defense of the subject in the encounter with the purest form of threat and hostility coming from the place of “You” when it is spoken by the Thing to “Me”. In this sense, the *Nebenmensch* – fellow human beings and, even more, one’s own family in unbearable vicinity – contains the ultimate threat to the subject. Perhaps for that reason, the command of the Law must tame the antagonism between “You” and “Me” by setting “You” as the object of desire and love in the saying, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Thus, cabin fever in Kubrick’s film is not a metaphor about the explicable conflicts between a family and its bloody finale, as King’s novel facilitates

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319 Ibid., 56.
320 In *Seminar VII*, Lacan brings into his discussion of ethics the ambivalent and affective character of ‘neighbour or a fellow human being’ which Freud briefly mentions in *Entwurf* as the complex of the fellow human being [*der Komplex des Nebenmenschen*].
the term. Rather, the film discloses the fact that cabin fever names the subject’s fundamental reality in which *das Ding* reigns. To put it differently, the film depicts how one can sense the pure hostility in proximity to ‘You’ and how recklessly one can react to it: without doubt or hesitation the subject can transgress a basic moral law, such as the love of one’s *Nebenmensch*, which was concocted out of the necessity for sustaining civilisation in confrontation with *das Ding* as the first demand prior to the repression of the signifier.

As mentioned above, *Nebenmensch* is key to Lacan’s ‘adaptation’ of the Freudian Thing to his theory about *das Ding* in *Seminar VII*. In fact, it is the only link between Freud’s brief mention of the word ‘Ding’ in his very early text *Project for a Scientific Psychology* [Entwurf] (1895) and Lacan’s extended and even excursive conceptualisation of *das Ding*.

In the following, I insert the lengthy but worthwhile quotation from Freud’s original text:

> Let us suppose that the object which furnishes the perception resembles the subject – a fellow human-being. If so, the theoretical interest [taken in it] is also explained by the fact that an object like this was simultaneously the [subject’s] first satisfying object and further his first hostile object, as well as his sole helping power. For this reason it is in relation to a fellow human-being that a human-being learns to cognize. Then the perceptual complexes proceeding from this fellow human-being will in part be new and non-comparable – his features, for instance, in the visual sphere; but other visual perceptions – e.g. those of the movements of his hands – will coincide in the subject with memories of quite similar visual impressions of his own, of his own body, [memories] which are associated with memories of movements experienced by himself. Other perceptions of the object too – if, for instance, he screams – will awaken the memory of his [the subject’s] own screaming and at the same time of his own experiences of pain. Thus the complex of the fellow human-being falls apart into two components, of which one makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a thing, while the other can be understood by the activity of memory – that is, can be traced back to information from [the subject’s] own body. This dissection of a perceptual
complex is described as cognizing it; it involves a judgement and when this last aim has been attained it comes to an end.\textsuperscript{321}

To our surprise, Freud’s concept of \textit{Nebenmensch} – or a fellow human-being in Strachey’s translation – is not posed as an archetype of intersubjective relationships, but refers rather to a controversial amalgam of the relation of the subject to itself and to external reality at its birth. Therefore, the complex of fellow human beings explains that “You” as an object evokes the memory of the first satisfaction yet at the same time the memory of the subject’s own screaming and pain. In particular, the one part of this undifferentiated archaic object, in Lacan’s re-wording, “remains together as a thing, \textit{als Ding},” the persisting impression or affect which is inscribed in the subject as a structure prior to the subject’s own existence.\textsuperscript{322} In the above quotation, Freud’s conceptualisation of \textit{Nebenmensch} captures the most deprived face of human inter-relationships, where one may “confront that moment when a man or a group of men can act in such a way that the question of existence is posed for the whole of the human species.”\textsuperscript{323} At such a moment, Lacan says, “you will then see inside yourself that \textit{das Ding} is next to the subject.”\textsuperscript{324} Lacan uses the nuclear weapon with immeasurable destructive power as an example of the act that enables the Thing to re-emerge on the surface of consciousness by posing a threat to the entire human race. Kubrick’s film also flickers with the presence of the Thing by drawing out the most self-destructive crime of mankind – that is, the killing of one’s own children. For me, that unforgettable, empty yet diabolical gaze of Jack Torrance – when he looks out the window while Wendy and Danny gleefully play in the snow – is what


\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 105.

\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., 105.
indicates that he has gone through the moment of encounter with *das Ding* next to his being. The lengthy close-up of Jack’s pale face with those strangely beaming eyes seems to deliver in silent voice-over Lacan’s own words:

But when the commandment [of ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’] appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death.325

The point I would like to emphasise with this transference from Freud to Lacan via the mediation of *Nebenmensch* is not only a new analytic perspective for investigating the hostile relations of the Torrance family. A more significant point is that the discovery of the *Nebenmensch*’s true face clarifies how *das Ding* works in the practice of adaptation. If one considers an original text as a neighbour or an ‘other’, what lures an adaptor to it and demands the agonising process of re-presenting the ‘truth’ of the original is none other than what we see in *Nebenmensch* as *das Ding*. An adaptor is seduced by the death of his or her own art as representation; behind this death is the Thing or, in Freud’s term, the ghost of *Vorstellung*. Indeed, it is a terribly self-destructive acknowledgement for an artist whose identity is determined by his or her act of creating a meaning through the practice of representation. However, for this very reason, I would suggest that Kubrick’s adaptation is the act of creation which aims to be transcendental rather than representational. In other words, Kubrick’s adaptation shows the potential of an artistic creation in its sublime efforts to ‘re-present’ the most truthful to an original, to brings the presence of *das Ding* to the surface. If we recall the over-head shot of the miniature maze from the rather perverse God’s-eye view in the previous discussion, this image makes it clear that the massive geometric structure has demanded immeasurable human labour to grow the hedge into this

325 Ibid., 83.
shape, only to enshrine nothing but a narrow rectangular hollow at its centre. This image is nothing but the metaphor that demonstrates what Kubrick has done with the original novel in the name of adaptation. The hollow captured by the meticulous elaboration of the craftsman is the essence of all human creation *ex nihilo*: as Lacan says, “this Thing will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else – or, more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else.” He concludes, “[a]ll art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness.”326

Like the vase which the skilled potter creates in order to contain nothing, so Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation or maze encapsulates nothing with extreme care and excessive artistry. We read the monstrosity of Kubrick’s maze in the film’s end when Jack Torrance meets his death, which then delivers him to the site of eternal life framed in the half-century-old photo. In this closing dissolve, Kubrick’s maze confuses the linear temporality from life to death as well as the ontological division of life from death. The maze challenges every attempt of human desire ultimately to demarcate the seat of life from that of death. It thus re-presents the mythical point where the need for life is completely bound up with the drive to death. In this light, Kubrick’s adaptation reincarnates the myth of the Minotaur in a radical form, since it reveals that there is no monster lurking in a corner of the maze. That is, the mythical monster Minotaur, which resided in the Cretan labyrinth and lived on human flesh, is nothing but the creation of our desire for life – or a detour on the route to death – so that young Theseus could maintain his desire for slaying it. However, the monster cannot deceive everyone and some can confront the Truth which belies itself and defies us and slips away. Kubrick, like Lacan who penetrates the void at

326 Ibid., 129-130.
the centre of ‘the Freudian Thing’, seems to understand that “there seems to be no other monster than the labyrinth itself.”327

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Chapter 6. Traversing the Phantasy in Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation*

What the phantasy wears has two names which concern one and the same substance, if you do not mind reducing this term to this function of *surface* … This surface which I call *bubble* has, properly speaking, two names: *desire* and *reality.*

--- Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XIV*

**An Allegory of Adaptation**

With the title explicitly designating the film’s generic as well as ontological status, *Adaptation* (dir. Spike Jonze, 2002) draws our immediate attention to ‘adaptation’ as a key concept to be probed. Although the term ‘adaptation’ lies at the centre of the current study, the adaptations discussed in the previous chapters do not self-consciously reflect on the reality and the conditions of their *being* at the level of diegesis. In other words, the contents of those films do not embrace the question which is deeply set in the context of their production. In *Adaptation* this repressed question comes to the surface and asks us, “What is adaptation?” Without openly addressing this question, no analysis of ‘adaptation’ can justify an attempt to advance beyond the term’s limited denotation as a particular mode of textual construction. Thus, this chapter intends to transcend the analytic arena to question the very definition of the term ‘adaptation’. The intention operates in concomitance with a psychoanalytic perspective which is organised around Freud. Characteristically, his clinical study of individual patients manifests the dimension of *meta*-psychology, whereby an analysis of an individual or a text becomes integrated into more conceptual speculation about the subject of the unconscious. To integrate this psychoanalytic discourse into discussion, it is profitable to employ a text like *Adaptation*, which radically complicates and disconcerts the meaning of ‘adaptation’ as textual
transformation. An analysis of this film will further the discussion by inviting a different set of questions about the concept of adaptation that refers to the primordial mode of the subject’s existence. In reading the film as an epitome of the fundamentality of adaptation, the chapter aims to understand the subject who, as the film depicts, is not only the agent but also the object of adaptation.

In a unique manner, the film *Adaptation* foregrounds the concept of adaptation as its existential subject matter and also the main action set for the protagonist Charlie Kaufman, who personifies the real writer of the film on screen. The film’s narrative is constructed around the practical task of ‘adaptation’ that the protagonist confronts, and illuminates his discovery of the meaning of his existence in his struggle to complete the task. Interesting is that the narrative goal is none other than the film’s own birth. In other words, adaptation is experienced as an urgent task which one needs to complete in order for this film to exist. Herein spectators are immersed in the role of an adaptor who is striving to write the scenario of the film they are watching. The sense of empathetic urgency contained in the film’s psychological configuration invites spectators to participate in completing the protagonist’s task as if his desire, agony and anxiety were acting out their own unconscious impulses. In this manner, the film seems to transpose the personal ordeal of the protagonist into the realm of the universal condition of every subject in confrontation with adaptation as a task. The film *Adaptation* thus functions as an allegory of adaptation which provides a psychic theatre for what underlies every adaptation. That is, what the film allegorises is the driving force behind the incessant practice of self-adaptation which, in fact, implies that the task of adaptation is a mode of human existence. In an attempt to engage with the allegory of adaptation encapsulated by the film, the following discussion will take a different path from the previous chapters and be less interested in the transaction between
the original text – Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief* – and the film *Adaptation* based on the book. Instead, the chapter will put more emphasis on how the subject of the unconscious responds to this task of adaptation through various modes of re-presentation such as transition, transformation and traversal. This will allow the last case study to hark back to the fundamental quest set out at the beginning of the thesis – namely, a quest to explore ‘adaptation’ as a task which, I suggest, manifests the ontological order to which a human subject is bound.

**The Original Phantasy and Its Adaptations**

The film, in brief, illustrates the process of its creation as an adaptation: the content of the film’s narrative self-consciously consumes the process of writing its own script based on Susan Orlean’s 1998 bestseller *The Orchid Thief*. The film’s actual screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman, creates a screen persona of himself (played by Nicolas Cage) as the film’s protagonist, who struggles to carry out an intimidating task of adaptation commissioned by a Hollywood studio. Upon this major story line, the film superimposes the context of writing the original text, in which Susan Orlean (played by Meryl Streep) attempts to adapt the true story of a Florida orchid thief, John Laroche (played by Chris Cooper), who narrates his life to her along a whimsical path of fascination and obsession. Regarding the dazzling effects that result from jumbling several layers of adaptation, Kirk Boyle points out that “[t]he mise en abyme effect of textuality leads to a seemingly infinite regress of
adaptation – the film is an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation, *ad infinitum*.328

The film draws as many strata as possible into the boundary of adaptation and maps them together on the level of its narrative. Further, the notion of adaptation as textual transition overlaps with the question of ontological adaptation encoded in the life of a little but complex organism like an orchid. The diversification of ‘adaptation’ as such suggests the intention of the film to undo, deconstruct and transcend the simply textual meaning of adaptation. However, it does so only to re-configure the realm of adaptation as an all-encompassing process that “unites each and every one of us” in the end.329

Here I propose that the reconsidering of ‘adaptation’ in properly psychoanalytic terms requires positioning the term with close reference to the notion of phantasy. First of all, it is necessary to recognise the remarkable similarity between the two concepts, ‘adaptation’ and ‘phantasy’, inasmuch as both terms contain a level of analogous ambivalence. In the discourse of psychoanalysis phantasy denotes both the psychic activity of imagination and its results: in short, the product of phantasy is a phantasy. Laplanche and Pontalis define phantasy as that which designates “imagination…its content and the creative activity which animates it.”330 The same can be said for the term ‘adaptation’, which embraces both the process of textual transition and its outcomes; thus, the result of adaptation is likewise an adaptation. The epistemological ambivalence embedded in the use of the two terms points to the intersection between a textual or psychic process and its outcomes. Further, as long as there is no clear distinction between such transitory processes and their products, it is also impossible to distinguish one phantasy or adaptation from the next one,

329 Adaptation, directed by Spike Jonze (2002), DVD.
which is ‘processed’ from the previous one. For me, this suggests that adaptation and phantasy should be understood as an incessant journey or ongoing action on an axis which has no clean cut between any two adjacent points. By linking the two terms in this sense, phantasy will offer a key to understanding the film’s representation of adaptation as “a journey we all take.”

In addition, Freud’s conceptualisation of phantasy provides a good reason for borrowing this psychoanalytic concept as a tool for interrogating adaptation qua concept. From a very early stage of his thinking, phantasy is associated with the psychic faculty of modifying, elaborating and altogether ‘adapting’ materials from childhood experience. For example, in Screen Memory, written in 1899, he states that the work of phantasy adapts selected events from childhood to fulfil suppressed wishes, while the processed phantasy can transform itself into unconscious and conscious childhood memories in turn. Indeed, this idea forms the core of the entire Freudian field, suggesting that psychoanalysis is to be understood as an attempt to explore the human psyche is the facility for adaptation of every kind. That is, the psyche from a psychoanalytic view is the mediator or adaptor that allows transitions between external and internal, the representable and the unrepresentable, the conscious and the unconscious, the social or cultural and the sexual, etc. Phantasy as a psychoanalytic term encompasses all these transformations occurring in the human psyche. Therefore, the interrogation of adaptation with reference to phantasy will open up speculation about the transactions between fiction and reality, representation and repression, desire and defence, images and signifiers. Most of all, the link between adaptation and phantasy will offer a site for exploring the function and significance of the origin or the starting point of this transitional journey. To start, I will dwell on Freud’s discovery of the adaptive nature of the human psyche and how this can be detected through the interpretation of phantasy.
In general, phantasy occupies a central position in the field of psychoanalysis due to its function as a primary point of access to the unconscious. For instance, the first decade of Freud’s theorisation of the unconscious heavily depended on the interpretation of his patients’ phantasies as a key text. From a clinical point of view phantasy works as a vehicle for completing the aim of psychoanalytic treatment, which is to “unearth the fantasies which lie behind such products of the unconscious as dreams, symptoms, acting out, repetitive behavior, etc.” 331 But, despite its significance, the term ‘phantasy’ is rarely an object of conceptualisation in the vast opus of Freud, except on a few occasions. Rather, it remains a secondary notion which facilitates theoretical speculations on other concepts such as dream-work, the pleasure principle, desire and sexuality. The term is used discursively in his texts in the sense that Freud acknowledges the ambiguity and flexibility in its use. He writes that “I am in the habit of describing the element in the dream-thoughts which I have in mind as a ‘phantasy’” but he remains silent about what is this ‘element’ in his mind. 332 As a result, phantasy accrues a wide range of connotations, from the conscious operation of imagination and its contents to the most hidden faculty of imagining in the realm of the unconscious. In particular, Freud hesitates to designate the topological locus of this psychical activity and its outcomes. Sometimes, he treats phantasy as something that belongs to the realm of the unconscious and thus underlies pathological symptoms. However, he occasionally comments that phantasy is closely linked to the conscious activities such as day-dream and artistic creation. Eventually Freud admits the haunting and forever adaptive nature of phantasy by saying that “these phantasies...find no

331 Ibid., 315.
proper place in [the subject’s psychic] structure.”333 That is, phantasy is a notion that resists localisation in any topological structure he draws; instead, it offers a dynamic point of contact with the unconscious which also frustrates any attempt to localise it.

In response to the nature of phantasy as an ongoing process of adaptation, Freud’s approach is to search for the starting point which initiates a chain of pathological phantasies. While interpreting his patients’ phantasies as they emerge through free-association, Freud carefully moves towards the origin of such phantasy-work from which these phantasmatic scenes are endlessly woven. In this regard, the concept of the primal scene or the original phantasy indicates the direction of Freud’s investigation:

Among the store of unconscious phantasies of all neurotics, and probably of all human beings, there is one which is seldom absent and which can be disclosed by analysis: this is the phantasy of watching sexual intercourse between the parents. I call such phantasies…’primal phantasies’.334

One thing to be noticed here is that the psychoanalytic approach to the process of phantasy reveals traces of the Darwinian concept of adaptation, which assumes that there is “some one primordial form” from which all organic beings descended.335 This innate modernist belief propels two significant questions which Freud raises in his later work From the History of an Infantile Neurosis and on which the film Adaptation sheds a deconstructive light. One question asks whether this initial point or origin belongs to the realm of

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objective reality and refers back to the patients’ lived experiences. The other is the question about the analytic function of the primal scene – that is, whether or not this origin of phantasy named ‘the primal scene’ offers an effective resolution of the pathological neurotic symptoms which, in the film, are epitomised by writer’s block.

In the beginning, Freud seeks to detect an original point that anchors the adaptive movement of phantasy to the domain of reality, detached from the subject’s distorting perception of it. He believes that the existence of such a reference point in reality would provide the clinic of psychoanalysis with the power to undo the cause underlying various pathological symptoms. However, contrary to his suppositions following in the footsteps of Darwinian discourse, Freud’s search for the primal scene unwittingly performs its own deconstruction. Freud’s attempt to identify the origin of phantasmatic fabrication in his patients’ narratives never turns out to be successful enough to detect a specific moment from the patients’ lived experiences that could confirm the analyst’s interpretation of the patients’ dreams and phantasies. Therefore, the validity of his analysis in many cases is left in suspension. Instead, the patients’ phantasies lead Freud to a quite unexpected insight, namely, that there is no clear demarcation between reality and the fictional narratives patients confide to an analyst. Moreover, the work of phantasy is precisely to link and confound these two realms by diligently filtering the elements from reality and then adapting them to phantasmatic stories or scenes which the patients, in turn, believe to be their lived experiences. In the equivocal conclusion to his case study *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, Freud admits that what he is left with at the very last stage of investigation is nothing but the question whose answer is foreclosed to an analyst. He writes:
I should myself be glad to know whether the primal scene in my present patient’s case was a phantasy or a real experience. These scenes of observing parental intercourse, of being seduced in childhood, and of being threatened with castration are unquestionably an inherited endowment, a phylogenetic heritage, but they may just as easily be acquired by personal experience.\(^{336}\)

Overall, it is clear that his clinical experiences leave Freud indecisive about whether phantasy originates in the domain of reality or the domain of phantasy is an adaptive construction.

With its appreciation of the complexity and ambivalence imposed on the concept of adaptation, the film similarly challenges the distinction between phantasy and ‘reality’. First, the conceptual analogy of adaptation and phantasy entails the assumption that the function of an original text in the process of adaptation is comparable to that of the original phantasy in the course of phantasy-work. The simile aligns the implied separation between the two terms – that is, an adaptation and an original text – in parallel with the distinction between phantasy and its origin belonging to ‘reality’. On this condition, the film’s confusion of the division between phantasy and originary ‘reality’ is linked to its underlying intention to examine the definition of adaptation as construction in its relation to the origin which connotes meaning, truth and authority. Moreover, the film’s complication of the division between phantasy and reality ultimately transgresses the configuration which limits ‘adaptation’ to a reciprocal relationship between an original text and its adaptation. With these aims, the film directs its meditation about the meaning of adaptation toward the threshold between the two allegedly opposite terms, phantasy and reality.

In fact, the original text *The Orchid Thief* already contains the potential for such ambivalence and transgression. Susan Orlean’s book uses its “sprawling New Yorker style” to interweave the two heterogeneous components: one is a ‘narrative’ which renders John Laroche and the writer herself as characters and the other is an objective account of the history of orchid poaching, Seminole Indians and Florida. Thus, it is hard for an adaptor to decide to what extent, for instance, Laroche should be treated as a “fun character” who is a product of the writer’s phantasy and, hence, is an object for adaptation. Kaufman himself is not unfamiliar with the overlapping between phantasy and reality and with subverting the distinction between a real person and a character. His film debut, *Being John Malkovich*, is characterised by its peculiar use of a real Hollywood movie star, John Malkovich, as a fictional character. In this, *Being John Malkovich* foreshadows *Adaptation*’s polysemous use of a historical figure as a character in order to highlight the inseparable permutation between the two realms. On a broader scale than the previous film, *Adaptation* fuses the characters based on real-life people with a few ‘purely fictional’ characters. The film completely erases the disparity between the film’s non-fictional figures and the invented characters such as Donald Kaufman (played by Nicolas Cage), who is a twin brother of onscreen Charlie Kaufman, and Amelia, who is the onscreen writer’s love object. To increase the degree of disorientation, the opening credit shows the name of this fictional twin brother Donald Kaufman as the film’s screen writer(s) along with the real writer Charlie Kaufman. This shuffle clearly indicates the film’s attempt to examine the conceptual division between phantasy and ‘reality’ as two poles in the process of adaptation. The eruption of the fictional character into the context of production also discloses the potential of a phantasmatic creation to overflow into the realm of reality and to adapt itself as a part of the ‘real world’.
Interestingly, however, although Freud appears to give up his search for the original ‘event’ in objective reality and, thus, the demarcation of phantasy from material reality, the opening quote from the Wolf Man still maintains the dominance of the original phantasy, which is captured in the mould of the primal scene. In other words, while Freud may admit the impossibility of a psychoanalytic investigation ensuring the authenticity of the patient’s bearing witness to the primal scene, he nevertheless considers the original phantasy to hold a key to accessing the unconscious due to the fact that it occupies the place of the origin of phantasy. In the same text, Freud emphasises “an uncontradicted premise that a primal scene of this kind…is indispensable to a comprehensive solution of all the conundrums that are set us by the symptoms of the infantile disorder, that all the consequences radiate out from it, just as all the threads of the analysis have led up to it.” From this determinant principle, we can detect the strength of the desire for a chronological order, which would secure the linear and causal relations between the past and the present. Freud’s case study of the Wolf Man is characterised by the utmost effort to straighten out the adaptive movement of phantasy-work and to put the primal scene at the beginning of subjectivity. As before, Freud strives to detect a real incident behind the primal phantasy from which the transitory phantasies are endlessly adapted. After interpreting the dazzling array of the Wolf Man’s pathological phantasies, Freud terminates his investigation, to our surprise, by fictionalising the patient’s witness to his parents’ “coitus a tergo” at the age of one and a half. Apart from the failure in Freud’s search for a level of ‘truth’ in the content of the primal scene, this lengthy case study of the Wolf Man is noteworthy in terms of Freud’s insistence on making a linear plot which would thread all phantasies in a straight time-line. To do so, Freud posts numerous time-indicators upon the patient’s

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337 Ibid., 54. [my emphasis]
338 Ibid., 38.
experiences throughout the text. Further, in 1923 Freud added a footnote, which minutely
draws out “the chronology of the events mentioned in this case history” in a detailed
timetable from the date of the patient’s birth to the outbreaks of the obsessional neurosis in
his 20’s.339

In the film *Adaptation*, it is possible to discover the same desire manifested in the film’s
repeated use of time-tags in an attempt to establish a coherent chronological progress or
adaptation out of the chaotic shuffle of scenes from various temporal frames. For example,
the film begins with Kaufman’s story when he is commissioned to write an adaptation of
Orlean’s book. The scene in which Kaufman advocates his view of the book to film
executive Valerie cuts directly to a different time-line in which Susan is writing the book
based on a local newspaper story about John Laroche’s orchid poaching. The temporal
order is determined by the subtitle saying “New Yorker Magazine, Three Years Earlier.”
The image of her tranquil and uninterrupted writing suddenly cuts to a steamy day in
Florida and Laroche’s white van loudly skids in front of the camera with another time
signal saying “State Road 29, Florida, Two Years Earlier.” At one point, Kaufman’s
thought drifts from the scene of his writing in the present tense to the scene of Charles
Darwin’s writing, labelled as “England, One Hundred Thirty Nine Years Earlier.” In
addition to these subtitles that cling to a chronology, the desire for temporal and causal
consistency is also discovered in the protagonist’s belief in the power of the ‘origin’ to
break him free from all of his neurotic symptoms, which have culminated in the form of a
severe writer’s block. Out of his tangled thoughts unable to concoct a right ‘start’ for his
script, Kaufman hits upon the idea that adaptation is a journey of evolution to resolve his
problem. The adaptor contemplates the meaning of adaptation and his voice-over narration

339 Ibid., 120 [Footnote 1]
confides, “The journey we all take. A journey that unites each and every one of us...That’s it! That’s what I need to do. Tie all of history together!”

Nevertheless, adherence to the origin of adaptation does not give him a solution and the next scene sees him deflated and disillusioned with it, just as Freud’s desire for chronology and the designation of the primal scene as a starting point of the time-line could not resolve the patient’s neurotic symptoms. This reveals the paradox of the primal scene, which, contradictory to its place and function as hypothesised by Freud, eventually disturbs the supposedly linear movement of phantasies. Owing to its tendency to return nature and its persistent presence behind every phantasy adapted from the original one, the primal scene is an element that resists the analyst’s efforts at historicising the adaptive path of the patient’s phantasies from the original phantasy to the present symptoms. Instead of occupying the place of the commencement of subjectivity and the prime cause of the subject’s symptoms, the primal scene is shown to stand at the dead end of the subject’s most urgent pursuit for an answer to the question ‘Who am I or where did I come from?’. This *fundamental* phantasy returns in innumerable variations, or adaptations, by means of adaptive phantasy-work. This recurring tendency of the primal scene as such indicates that it neither provides an answer to the ontological question nor does it represent the original moment when the question arises. Rather, it operates as a terminal point for the quest for an answer, which signals the very impossibility of the subject finding such an answer. As a result, Freud’s case study has a unique structure in which, at first, his investigation attempts to dig out this primal scene at the beginning of phantasmatic

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340 It is significant to recognise the shift from the original phantasy to the fundamental phantasy, which has more emphasis on the force of gravity than a connotation of a temporal origin. I shall come back to this point in the next part with reference to Lacan’s elaboration of the fundamental phantasy evoking the trajectory of repetition.
reproductions. His search for the origin ends up fictionalising the primal scene which marks the dead end of his detective investigation. Then, the analysis revisits those secondary phantasies from a different perspective, which now regards each of them as adapted from the omnipresent fundamental phantasy. After inferring the content of the primal scene, Freud writes that “[w]e will first proceed with the study of the relations between this ‘primal scene’ and the patient’s dreams, his symptoms, and the history of his life; and we will trace separately the effects that followed from the essential content of the scene and from one of its visual impression.”

Herein, the case study follows a circular trajectory, moving toward and then away from the primal scene, which has now become a point of gravity characterised by its magnificent centripetal power, like a black hole.

Insightfully, the film captures this logic of adaptation embedded in the movement of pathological phantasies Freud detected. Analogously to Freud’s path, the protagonist’s journey follows a seemingly retroactive direction to access the ‘original’ meaning promised by the text he adapts. From the beginning of the film, the adaptor’s journey to the original meaning, which may be implicit but is by no means articulated by Orlean’s prose, is interrupted by various phantasies adapting the fundamental phantasy that is repressed. Without making any progress, many sleepless nights are consumed by the writer’s masturbatory phantasies while he remains impotent in the relationship with his real love object, Amelia. However, the web of phantasies capturing the sexually and professionally frustrated writer has an immanent logic behind all the haphazard digressions. There is, significantly, a gradual progression - or regression more precisely - from the question “who am I and how did I get here?” posed in the very first scene to the terminal point where he witnesses coitus between John Laroche and Susan Orlean. In other words,

341 Ibid., 38.
the gravity is found in the film’s climax where Kaufman, as a baby who does not know where it comes from, bears witness to the scene of his birth in the most banal setting of a drug-fuelled voluptuous love affair. The climactic scene of the film reveals what is not written in Orlean’s book. In this story unfolded beyond what is on the page, the ghost orchid which Laroche seeks, and which symbolises passion in its purest sense, turns out to be the source of a psychotropic drug. Orlean’s search for some kind of experience with infatuation ends up with her drug-induced passion for Laroche after interviewing him for her book is over. Charlie Kaufman, with the help of his twin brother Donald, finally witnesses the primal scene of Orlean and Laroche’s coitus at the climax, which functions as a turning point after which he rids himself of writer’s block as well as sexual impotence and begins to ‘act’. I shall return to this point shortly with reference to what Lacan calls as the end of analysis – that is, the traversal of the original phantasy. In order to magnify the psychical impact of this scene as a re-enacted primal scene to Kaufman, the film clearly designates the function of Laroche and Orlean as parents in the process of completing the task of adaptation. At first, the film overlaps Charlie Kaufman’s personal and ontological question with a more functional one, which he has to confront when he is put in the position of a writer commissioned to adapt. The agonising task of adaptation in his professional life effectively overlaps with Kaufman’s personal life in which he is suffering from impotence. In this psychological setting Laroche and Orlean occupy the place of the parents giving birth to the world of The Orchid Thief, which is unfathomable to Kaufman yet demands that he make sense out of it. By means of the superimposition of the two different levels of Kaufman’s ordeal, the coitus between Laroche and Orlean becomes a doubly loaded scene.

The way in which the film presents the primal scene is noteworthy with reference to the
adaptive nature of phantasy. In effect, the film’s presentation acknowledges that the primal scene or the original phantasy does not possess the truth value which might be able to return every piece of the jigsaw puzzle to the ‘right’ place for good and to put an end to every symptom. Rather, it is a re-presentation and adaptation which reacts to the impossibility of knowing the origin of being; as such, it reflects the subject’s desire as evoked by such impossibility. Therefore, the original phantasy itself returns over and again to the same place, which I designate as a never localised seat of phantasy. The film’s narrative does not move in a straight line toward the final discovery, but takes a circular path revolving around the unrepresentable origin of phantasy, which Freud tries to capture in such terms as ‘the original phantasy’ and ‘the primal scene’. Before arriving at the intensely dramatic moment of Kaufman’s act of witnessing, the film prefigures the recurring and lingering nature of the original phantasy in a farcical manner. In the midpoint of the film, Kaufman calls a meeting with his agent Marty with the intention of making the agent release him from this task of adaptation. Despite Kaufman’s desperation, Marty is constantly distracted by female colleagues passing behind the glass wall of his office. In the disguise of parapraxis, Marty verbalises the sexual phantasy provoked in him by his colleagues. The phantasy which Marty lets slip is remarkably similar to what Freud describes as the primal scene in his case of infantile neurosis, even to the finer details of it. Freud’s patient as a child witnessed – or imagined he had witnessed – “a coitus a tergo [from behind]” and this image, whose meaning the child could not have comprehended at the time of witnessing it, compulsively repeated itself in various other sexual and pathological phantasies.342 In the film, as soon as the agent spots a woman walking past, he is distracted from the conversation with a distressed Kaufman as he barks, “See her? I fucked her up the ass. [Then, he mitigates his comment immediately] No, I’m kidding.”

342 Ibid., 36.
Before long, Marty abruptly comments on another female staff member passing by and says, “Man, I’d fuck her up the ass.” This comical ‘adaptation’ of the primal scene foreshadows Kaufman’s more immediate engagement with the primal scene in the film’s climax while highlighting the recurring nature of the original phantasy without offering a resolution of any kind.

Obviously, the protagonist does not seem to welcome the film’s climax because his desire and phantasies need to go through an irreversible change. Hence, the climax of the film appears to be forced by the necessity of change, which is inevitable for the completion of his task as well as the story itself. Thus, Donald must join in on Charlie Kaufman’s assignment in order to pilot the dragging and cyclical story line and, most significantly, the reluctant protagonist towards the climax. Firstly, Donald raises a question about the metaphor ‘Japanese paper balls’ from Orlean’s book:

Donald

“Sometimes this kind of story turns out to be something more...some glimpse of life that expands like those Japanese paper balls you drop in water and they bloom into flowers, and the flower is so marvellous you can't believe there was a time all you saw in front of you was a paper ball and a glass of water.” Well, first of all, that's inconsistent. She, she said that she didn't care about flowers.

Kaufman

For God's sake, it's just a metaphor.

Donald
But for what? What turned that paper ball into a flower? It’s not in the book, Charles.\textsuperscript{343}

At Donald’s attempt to reveal the secret allegedly captured in the metaphor, the haunting mystery suggested by the ‘original meaning’ collapses. The detective investigation Donald launches gradually pushes Charlie Kaufman into the moment of revelation and eventually he finds Orlean’s pornographic image on Laroche’s porn site. In spite of the irreducible evidence indicating their erotic relationship, Kaufman struggles to sustain the elevated place of Orlean, since her intentions and desire must remain unknown and unknowable in order for her to be so attractive and powerful. The final encounter with the undisguised face of the primal scene is delayed once more by Kaufman’s fabrication of a more romanticised adaptation. The scene of Kaufman’s gaze at Orlean’s porn image cuts to the scene of Orlean’s confession. While her voice-over delivers the truth that she cannot write in the book, the flashback sequence unpacks the romantic narrative between Orlean and Laroche, which is precisely what Kaufman condemns as “a Hollywood thing” in the previous scene. In response to Kaufman’s unbearable discovery of the indecent image of Orlean, the film’s narrative, which is not distinguishable from Kaufman’s phantasy, takes a turn into a romance plot foregrounding the love affair between Susan Orlean and John Laroche with the sinister back story of “changing the orchids into poppies”. What is most interesting here is that the following scenes, which dramatise their drug-induced love-making, appear to be constructed by Kaufman for the satisfaction of his Oedipal desire for the forbidden object – the mother. The subject, Kaufman, projects his Oedipal desire, itself evoked by his fascination with the author or mother of the original text, onto his phantasy about the romance between Orlean and Laroche. Kaufman completely displaces himself onto Laroche and through Laroche’s mouth Kaufman confesses his incestuous desire. Over

\textsuperscript{343} Adaptation, directed by Spike Jonze (2002), DVD.
the phone, Laroche confides to the stoned Orlean how isolated he was as a weird kid and how long he has been waiting for a woman who would love him just like his mother: Laroche’s voice-over softly echoes in the early morning, “I had this idea if I waited long enough, someone would come around and just, y’know, understand me. Like my mom, except someone else.” To mitigate this Oedipal configuration, the imagery and the sound used to represent their coitus inside Laroche’s van are saturated with a less erotic tone. However, what Orlean’s maternal caress of Laroche foregrounds is that Laroche in the scene is a substitution for Kaufman who phantasises the most forbidden desire – that is, the desire for the mother. Here, it is possible to suggest that this phantasmatic composition of the primal scene is an adaptation that romanticises the love affair between Orlean and Laroche while channelling the repressed desire into a more legitimate narrative. Although it is relatively more legitimate than incestuous intercourse between Kaufman and his mom, the scene now shows a greater resemblance to the libidinal dimension of the primal scene when compared with the previous phantasies, which are concocted around Kaufman’s Oedipal desire, but which concealed it.

The climax comes soon after the tender maternal love phantasised by Kaufman fades out at the sight of Orlean rushing into Laroche’s van like a giggling teenage girl. Donald and Charlie Kaufman follow the van to Laroche’s house, into which the couple disappear. A brief moment of contemplation makes the adaptor decide to confront having to change and adapt himself by means of action. The decision reminds spectators of the imperative which the onscreen Robert McKee (a screen persona of the real life screenwriting guru, played by Brian Cox) gives the desperate Kaufman: he commands, “Your characters must change and the change must come from them.” The fortitude, encouraged and demanded by the fatherly McKee, leads Kaufman to the dead end of his phantasy, which will offer a turning point in the story.
point on his path of adaptation in both professional and ontological senses. The significance of this act will be revisited at the end of this chapter. What he eventually discovers is a more realistic and less phantasmatic scene of sexual intercourse. The rendition of the coitus between Susan Orlean and John Laroche now turns into a sexual relationship smudged with drug addiction, with no depth or glamour. The low key light, deprived of any flattering filter or back light, represents Susan as a voluptuous femme fatale delivering indecent lines while she shamelessly snorts the drug extracted from the ghost orchid, which has been at the centre of the mysterious infatuation and passion her book tries to capture. Laroche, who had surprised Susan and Kaufman with words of wisdom, turns into a small-time criminal who is vulgar and clumsy. There is no mythical secret cladding the Truth which, Kaufman believes, is contained within Orlean’s original text. Kaufmann here witnesses the book, or the original meaning that Kaufman has striven to convey onto screen, being deflated into a product of pathetic phantasy begotten by Orlean’s bourgeois desire and Laroche’s narcissistic solipsism. Here, it is necessary to point out that it is not the content of the original phantasy that makes it possible for the subject to overcome the pathological neurosis symptomised in his writer’s block. Rather, it happens because at the very end of the adaptive move of the original phantasy the subject encounters the impossibility or the absolute lack of an answer, unmasked. In other words, there is no more Truth which the subject needs to phantasise and adapt into more benign ones because the Truth has taken off its mask and revealed the void behind the mask. In this sense, the discovery of the primal scene cannot provide an answer to the adaptor’s search for the original meaning. Further, at the moment of his bearing witness, the spell of the original phantasy, which has kept him and his script in suspension, is broken owing to the very banality of the representation of the unfathomable original scene. In retrospect, it is possible to realise that the centrifugal force of the original scene can be sustained only
by its lack of representation on the conscious level.

To recapitulate, phantasies can be conceived as the by-products that an individual subject continuously weaves in a desperate response to the lack of access to the origin of its own existence. The subject, therefore, embarks on the endless process of adaptation of the primal scene. At one crucial moment, which I will later link to the moment of traversing the fundamental phantasy, the (re-)encounter with the primal scene is given to the subject, or, in other words, the subject is pushed into this scene, just as Kaufman is drawn to the scene of parental coitus almost by accident. For me, this is a valid insight into the fundamental logic of screen adaptation: this logic is paradoxical since the subject intends to move forward on the path of adaptation by creating a new phantasy, while this forward movement of adaptation brings the subject back to the starting point, encapsulated in the form of the primal scene which remains invisible underneath every phantasy. In the film, the adaptor Kaufmann strives to re-discover this origin in the original text he tries to adapt. In the disguise of the original meaning to be transferred, the original phantasy lures and tantalises the adaptor, who is seeking an answer to the fundamental ontological question – that is, “How did I come here?” To put it differently, the original phantasy stands in for this unknowable origin of being at the point of Truth; the repeated re-presentations of the primal scene offer an opaque screen for the traumatic ‘beyond’ of castration. The following discussion will begin with the function of castration in embarking upon ‘this journey of adaption’.
With fantasy we are in the presence of something that fixes and reduces to the status of a snapshot the course of memory, stopping it at a point called screen memory. Think of a cinematographic movement that takes place rapidly and then suddenly stops at one point, freezing all the characters. This snapshot is distinctive of a reduction of the full scene ... to what is immobilized in fantasy which remains loaded with all the erotic functions included in what [the full scene] expressed and of which [fantasy] is the witness and the support, the last support that remains.344

Based on the Freudian insight of conceiving phantasy in the form of ‘a scene’, Lacan recognizes the importance of the visual quality of phantasy. Yet, he notes the predominance of ‘something’ that orients the meanings and functions of those snapshots, as he indicates above. Lacan, hence, draws a parallel between phantasy and cinema, both of which involve a succession of images that operate according to a symbolic logic; he often compares “the phantasy scenes to the frozen image on a cinema screen.”345 Yet, the comparison is not to be interpreted as a view which considers cinema as a phantasy to satisfy otherwise unrealisable wishes by producing and consuming those imagined scenes. The symbolic logic behind phantasmatic images cannot entirely be reduced to the pleasure principle of seeking satisfaction through forging the imaginary scenes on which the subject projects repressed wishes. In recalling the points made by Freud about the beyond of the pleasure principle, Lacan insists that phantasy also engages in a reactionary mental activity that defends the subject against the recurring trauma that otherwise resists symbolisation. According to Lacan, phantasy is a reduction of ‘the full screen’ and a reaction to something that would be too traumatic if not reduced to the still frame of phantasy. At the

344 Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2007), 149. [the original quotation from Jacque Lacan’s *Le séminaire livre IV* (pp. 119-120), translated by Lorenzo Chiesa]

same time, through its mitigating function phantasy maintains the unknowability and unrepresentability of that which is barred and excluded by the frame. In terms of Lacan’s three psychic registers, the Real and its affect are sustained only by means of the fabrication of phantasy in the realm of the Imaginary under the guidance of the Symbolic. Further, by regarding the defensive function as a more dominant mode of phantasy-work, Lacan stresses the role of this frozen image to veil the mysterious desire of the Other, whose interruption leaves a scar of castration that is traumatic but eventually constitutive of the subject. In reference to the previous discussion of the primal scene, as the terminal point of phantasy-work the primal scene is fundamentally a kind of patchwork that masks the irreducible trauma that constantly attempts to return to the surface.

As a parallel with the psychoanalytic concept of phantasy, it is possible to read any film adaptation as a phantasy covering the traumatic lack glimpsed in the Other in response to whose silent demand the subject as adaptor asks, “Che vuoi?” This Other often takes the form of an original text or author who would resist imparting the ‘true’ meaning of the original to the screen. The film Adaptation minutely analyses how the task of adaptation returns the protagonist to the point of castration and provokes various masturbatory phantasies in his desperate attempt to escape from it. In this allegorical story about the subject’s destiny to search for the meaning of his being, what confronts Kaufman is the most primordial and significant function of castration, which is “the cut that constitutes a bar between the signifier and the signified.” To him, there is an intimidating abyss between the original text and its meaning which he is driven to transfer to the screen. Whenever he closes Susan Orlean’s book and returns to the seat of writing, from the blank

page in the typewriter the suffocating ‘unwritten’ message reaches the adaptor, in an inverted form, and makes him finally cry out, “What do you want from me?” The unanswerable question activates the faculty of phantasy as a defence against the trauma attributed to castration, whose revival arouses anxiety and, consequently, makes the writer ‘impotent.’ The primary function of phantasies is to facilitate such a defensive reaction and to transfer onto screen these images which pacify the ungraspable ‘full screen.’ More importantly, phantasy offers “a unique focal point where it is possible to observe the process of transition between the different psychical systems in vitro – to observe the mechanism of repression or of the return of the repressed in action.” 347 The following discussion will elaborate the relation between castration and phantasy by considering that the work of phantasy is an attempt to re-present what is castrated ‘on screen’ by means of adaptation. In articulating this relationship I will attempt to explain how castration fixates the subject on the axis of adaptation, which reduces the unfathomable full screen to a seemingly coherent series of ‘snapshots’ in order to prevent the subject from getting lost in “this sea (mer) of variations,” to borrow Lacan’s expression. 348

To start, I would like to go back to what Freud suggests about phantasy-work in relation to the primal scene and the details of the subject’s defensive reaction, which Freud conceives as a veil for the unbearable ‘Truth’ of his being. As soon as Freud moves away from his initial belief in the distinction between reality and fiction as well as the real of the original scene, he begins to bind the concept of phantasy to castration as psychic function. Interestingly, he himself appears to have experienced the re-enacted castration: that is, he

felt that he had already been cut away from the ‘Truth’ of the primal scene his own patients narrated. In response to the castration revived in him, Freud had to comply with the need to adapt his theory by means of forging an image which screened the lack at the terminus of his quest for the Truth. Therefore, I would like to propose, in passing, that ‘the primal scene’ at the root of the knowledge of psychoanalysis was born as a result of adaptation, which was itself an inescapable choice for Freud under the verdict of castration. To link this back to the current point, adaptation offers a locus of defensive phantasy-work in the subject’s confrontation with castration as in the case of Freud’s necessary adaptation of his own theory.

Freud finally admits that the primal scene may operate as a point of orientation even though it lacks a basis in a real event of witnessing the parents’ coitus - or other experience equivalent to it. The primal scene now puts a stop to the subject’s ontological question. Such a conclusion enables him to explore and integrate another field of adaptation into his speculation of the psychological adaptation performed by the subject. At various instances, Freud states the possibility of “the existence of unconscious schemata transcending individual lived experience and supposedly transmitted by heredity.”349 Near the end of the case study of the Wolf Man, he tries to find a balance between the two seemingly contradictory approaches:

All that we found in the prehistory of neuroses is that a child catches hold of this phylogenetic experience where his own experience fails him. He fills in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth; he replaces occurrences in his own life by occurrences in the life of his ancestors. I fully agree with Jung in recognizing the existence of this phylogenetic heritage; but I regard it as a methodological error to seize on a phylogenetic explanation before the

ontogenetic possibilities have been exhausted. I cannot see any reason for obstinately disputing the importance of infantile prehistory while at the same time freely acknowledging the importance of ancestral prehistory.\footnote{Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 96.}

Freud’s elaboration here opens a subversive possibility for reconsidering the process of adaptation, especially in its relation to the construction of the subject. His conceptualisation, as quoted above, suggests the correlative – and not at all contradictory – formulation of embracing both the reality of the external world and the phylogenetic narratives inherited from the past. Therefore, the adaptive process of generating phantasies is both ontogenetic and phylogenetic according to what Freud discovered in his pursuit of the origin of all phantasy work. The significance of this argument lies in the fact that the father of psychoanalysis, who had striven to keep his theory scientific, witnessed his thought becoming gradually dissociated from the discourse of science. The construction of the subject of the unconscious is based not only on a factual and biological framework but on a mythical and allegorical ground which is constructed, maintained and transmitted through the constantly adaptive work of phantasy. Such a shift in focus is ultimately manifested in Freud’s elaboration of the Oedipus complex, inseparably intertwining the biological and biographical factors with the mythical narrative adapted to individual life. However, it should not be confused with the Jungian ‘archetype’ since the subject in the Freudian and Lacanian field is not a fixed term as the concept of archetype implies. In order to access the crux of the subject of the unconscious, the dynamic between the two constitutive forces must be maintained. The locus into which the subject is born as well as bound is the field of adaptation, in which, as Lacan states, “this word ‘man’ [remains] a
transitional term.”

The Oedipal myth is none other than a ‘shared’ psychic drama that phantasises forbidden desire and its repression. The myth invites Lacan to contemplate the correlation between desire and reality, reflecting on how these two melt into the “most fundamental and truest shape” – namely, phantasy. However, on the way to the Lacanian field, I would like to speculate on one more point from Freud’s text, where he describes the perplexity of a child in relation to a certain emergent lack. He writes, “[a] child catches hold of this phylogenetic experience where his own experience fails him. He fills in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth; he replaces occurrences in his own life by occurrences in the life of his ancestors.” As Freud describes it, desperate efforts are made by the child: he catches hold of what is not even his own experience in order to fill in the gaps, and becomes audacious enough to give up and replace a part of his own life experience with that of his ancestors. My question is: what puts the child in this desperate situation? While Freud never articulates what he means by the observation “his own experience fails him,” Lacan takes up this very point and identifies what makes the child’s experience fail him and what makes him so desperate to fill in the gaps. It is here that Lacan discovers the arrival of desire. The first stroke of castration exposes a child to the question of who ‘I’ am and desire emerges at the moment when the child’s own experience fails to find an answer. In Lacan’s words, what this fundamental dimension of desire seeks

is an answer to the question “how I comes on the scene.”\(^{354}\) The answer is not available because the birth of ‘I’ comes only as a result of castration. The paradox that the constitution of the subject is based on its own renunciation is captured in the dictum of Lacan saying, “I can [peut] come into being by disappearing from my statement [dit].”\(^{355}\) Insofar as the subject comes to be by giving up the answer which has been cut off yet which remains tantalising, the primal scene is a response to the fatal dead end encountered in the very moment of the subject’s birth. The primal scene as the original phantasy thus does not provide a palpable answer; rather, it embraces the origin of phantasy in the sense that, as Laplanche and Pontalis remark, “the origin of the fantasy is integrated in the very structure of the original fantasy.”\(^{356}\) Most importantly, this origin of phantasy at the core of the original phantasy is unfolded in the drama of castration, which marks the impossibility of satisfying the desire to know “the origin of the subject itself.”\(^{357}\)

In his seminar on the logic of phantasy, Lacan rephrases the above point, which is repeated variously in both Freudian and Lacanian fields as follows: “At the origin, one does not know where it comes from. It is nothing…but this stroke which is also a cut, starting from which the truth can be born.”\(^{358}\) Here, he continues that the role of phantasy can be explained as “a first symbolisation” which is required to define “the possible” out of the primordial impossible into which the subject is born. In other words, the fundamental

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\(^{355}\) Ibid., 678.


\(^{357}\) Ibid., 18.

impossibility imposed by castration necessitates “multiple objectifications of the same thing.”

Herein, the subject gets on the metonymic chain that will lead a speaking being to engage with life by fixating one’s desire to an endless chain of objects as signifiers. From this point of view, we see that the primal scene is the outcome of this first symbolisation, whose task is to reduce and, at the same time, to keep intact the void behind it. Therefore, the endless adaptation of the primal scene allows a speaking subject a way to maintain its being in order to protect itself from non-being as the ‘other’ side of the subject’s split existence. In fact, adaptation to a subject is more than the transformation of signifiers in one’s hands. This process comes to the subject as a fate, which demands that the subject adapt itself incessantly and transmit the original and ‘full’ meaning of its being as that which is ‘given’. This task is not an easy and satisfiable task in that the original meaning to be adapted is paradoxically created as a flipside of the absolute lack of such meaning. To respond to this painstaking task, the subject needs to transform its own experience, memory, and finally itself into a signifier. The writer Charlie Kaufman who writes himself into his film *Adaptation* as a protagonist epitomises this point in the most acute and palpable manner.

As soon as the film begins, spectators encounter the same question which Lacan designates as the mark of the emergence of the subject of the unconscious — that is, “Who is speaking?”

If Freud’s methodology takes phantasy “as the privileged point where one may catch in the raw the process of transition from one system to another,” it surely is an appropriate choice for a film about adaptation to begin with a speaking voice searching for

360 Ibid., 677.
to place the ‘I’ at the launch of a journey of its adaptation. More to the point, the film penetrates the subversive nature of the Lacanian subject in its construction: namely, contrary to an allegedly chronological relationship from the Imaginary to the Symbolic or from the ego to the subject, the film’s opening manifests that there is no image for a subject before the invasion of the signifier. Even the plethora of images surrounding an infant, without a cue from the Symbolic, form an abyss undifferentiated from the complete darkness with which the film chooses to open. While the voice never identifies – or, more precisely, cannot identify – ‘who is speaking,’ the opening voice-over invites spectators, who are paradoxically forbidden any spectacle in the dark auditorium, to the baffling moment of encountering the ‘I’ that suddenly starts speaking to itself. The spectators thus desperately anticipate the beginning of “[t]his imaginary process…[which] goes from the specular image to the constitution of the ego along the path of subjectification by the signifier” in order to fixate this problematic ‘I’. Indeed, the opening narration suspends the arrival of the imaginary process which is fundamental to cinema as phantasy. By prolonging the nascent moment of the ‘I’ to an extreme, the first scene of the movie emphasises the subject’s desperate need for the metonymic chain of signification, which provides the link between any object or image qua signifier and the speaking ‘I’. Image, whether it is on a mirror or on screen, is now desired by the ‘I’. The film throws itself into being when a male voice abruptly breaks into the darkness and asks, “Do I have an original thought in my head? My bald head?” It is important to note, however, that even before there is a name or image to anchor the meaning of this ‘I’, the word ‘bald’ brings a whole

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set of subjectified meanings to his unseen image already. Only with the instance of this
signifier, is the image (of a bald man in this case) anticipated and phantasised. The
phantasised image begins its existence as an object of desire (to see) in the register of the
Imaginary. In addition, this image, even before it appears on screen, begins to function as
“the outlet for [the subject’s] most intimate aggressiveness,” which is explicit in the case of
the film’s self-loathing protagonist. The last line of the opening voice-over confirms the
narcissistic constitution of this ‘I’ on the side of the ego and makes it clear that the
imaginary locus of the ‘I’ is overly determined by the signification of the ‘I’ through the
signifier ‘bald and fat’: Kaufman’s narration concludes, “But I’ll still be ugly, though.
Nothing’s gonna change that.”

Here, if we take the notion of adaptation as “the process of transition from one system to
another,” the demand for such adaptation arrives on the scene as a demand for images to
come and fill the gap created by the question ‘who is speaking.’ This is the demand
from within, a search for a way to transit from the lack of the signified toward the presence
of an image. What one should recall here is that the demand comes not only from the
spectators, who anticipate that onscreen images will save them from a confrontation with
the lack itself. More importantly, the demand for adaptation emerges within the invisible
subject whose voice is looking for a semblance to fix the ‘I’ as ‘bald and fat’ in response to
the phantasy the signifier as such already has began to weave around this abyss. Therein,
Lacan explains that the overpowering and almost mindless demand of I want to see is at
the root of the logic of phantasy. As he points out, this most primal desire stresses that it is

363 Ibid., 685.
364 Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” in Formation of
Fantasy, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen,
1986), 15.
only in this logic that the demand for adaptation from an inarticulate place of the ‘I’ to the realm of the Imaginary “takes on its dominant function leaving it open to know from where and why I am looked at.” Lacan teaches us that this demand manifests itself as a void or a black hole and makes the subject designate, therein, the place of the Other, about which nothing can be said “except what we in fact hear, namely, the subject in his complaint.” By the force of the demand I want to see, the subject adapts itself to the world of images and objects behind which the logic of phantasy operates in order to screen the void that this un-localisable speaking ‘I’ points to. The process of textual adaptation from a literary original to a screen adaptation, as allegorised by this film, resembles and represents this first transitional moment the subject experiences, and it reminds us of the fact that the arrival of the signifier always accompanies the urgent and irreducible demand of I want to see.

The urgency of such a demand is hardly bearable to the subject and necessitates its displacement from the locus of a subject to that of an object, which Freud observes in the childhood phantasy of being beaten. As in a dream, the subject often feels itself thrown into a scene of its own phantasy, where it must take a seat as an object than proactively claim its place as an agent and beholder. The film acutely captures this moment of displacement in the mock-documentary scene following the opening credits. After the jittery voice-over of the unidentifiable ‘I’ over the black screen, the film starts with mock-documentary footage of the studio set filming Kaufman-Jonze’s previous movie Being John Malkovich and introduces the protagonist in a very peculiar manner. The scene accentuates the lack of agency characteristic of the film’s protagonist and emphasises the

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366 Ibid., 63.
insignificance of his presence on screen. After the medium close-ups with indicative subtitles introducing the authoritative figures present on the set – that is, from Malkovich to the first assistant director to the cinematographer – the camera stops at Charlie Kaufman, who looks quite intimidated and out of place. As soon as he is captured by the camera’s gaze, one of the camera crew yells at him to get out of the camera’s eyeline without noticing that he is the creator of the movie they are shooting. Indeed, he appears surprised by the fact that despite his function as the ‘I’ he has become an object of the merciless camera’s gaze, which reduces him to something that must be ejected. In other words, Charles Kaufman finds himself in the place of an object captured by the Other’s gaze, whose force of command is in fact generated by the subject’s demand of I want to see.

With this insightful cue, the film designates the writer Kaufman not as an origin or creator of phantasy, but rather as an unnecessary piece in the mise-en-scène of any phantasy, or snapshot in Lacan’s terms. Indeed, Lacan once recognised that writer’s block precisely illuminates the subject’s psychical state of ‘being out of place,’ as follows: “Ask someone with writer’s block about the anxiety he experiences and he will tell you who the turd is in his fantasy.”\textsuperscript{367} This displacement is critical in conceiving the function of phantasy, which fixates the subject’s relation to the objet petit a as shown in the Lacan’s matheme: $\diamond a$. Herein, phantasy ties demand to a trace of the primal object a, which is now lost, and by doing so opens up a way for the path of desire in search of an object as signifier to fill the place of this lost object. In order for phantasy to comply with one’s desire and to carry the subject on the allegedly forward movement of adaptation, the unlocalised speaking ‘I’, which will soon become a residue after creating the imperative scopic demand, eventually

needs to be spit out. It is, as Lacan proposes, because this speaking I is a constant reminder of the traumatic lack or impossibility inherent to the demand I want to see. The neurotic symptoms Kaufman suffers throughout the film – such as impotence, lack of action, self-doubt – arises from this sense of being out of place.

So far, I have speculated on how the invasion of the speaking I entails the constitution of the subject on top of the lack or hole which will function as an enigmatic central force of desire left behind as the remainder of castration. In this regard, the film’s beginning succeeds in re-enacting or adapting the emergence of the subject in relation to lack. In particular, the opening of the film illustrates in vitro how this lack is initiated and sustained: that is, the emergence of the speaking I creates the demand ‘I want to see’ and the object of this urgent demand is none other than the I itself. A morsel of I – or “a pound of flesh” in Lacan’s expression – must be spit out and sacrificed to initiate the chain of objects ‘desired’ by the subject of the unconscious. Herein, this split inscribed in the subject due to castration brings about the compulsory repetition because this object, which is lost as the price for the Symbolic or linguistic orientation of a speaking subject, can never be replaced by another object. Hence, repetition is not a symptom or an effect of the signifier, but rather operates at the base of the constitution of the subject, whose unconscious is structured, like language, by it. Therein, every object of desire is a signifier linked to the lack or hole, which confirms the fact that every signifier is destined to fail yet to repeat the process of inscription over and again in an attempt to capture what has already been lost. Therefore, adaptation is the journey of seeking this lost ‘origin’ of the signifier through phantasies which accommodate the subject to the fundamentality as well as fatality of compulsory repetition. By its nature, this journey is a detour forever taking the subject back to the same place where the original loss is marked and masked by the primal scene.
Gradually, the film’s protagonist similarly approaches this truth of adaptation which presents itself with the irresistible force of repetition at the end of the film. It is significant to note that what enables this encounter in the film is none other than the fake script written by Kaufman’s twin brother, who is a repetition of the writer himself.

The first time that Charlie Kaufman listens to his twin brother Donald ‘pitching’ his first script _The Three_, Charlie attempts to point out the implausibility of the three main characters in his brother’s thriller, who are in fact all facets of one person with multipersonality disorder. He interrogates the premise:

Kaufman

The other thing is, there’s no way to write this. Did you consider that? I mean, how could you have somebody held prisoner in a basement and working in a police station at the same time?

Donald

Trick photography?

Kaufman

Okay, that’s not what I’m asking. Listen closely. What I’m asking is, in the reality of this movie, where there’s only one character, right? Okay? How could you ... What, what exactly would ...

(Kaufman gives up)

Yet it is impossible for him to articulate the fault he sees in his brother’s tail-chasing script with only one character who is refracted in every other character. With this formulaic thriller, though, Charlie comes to glimpse his own reality, in which the task of adaptation has him caught in a repetitive and circular trajectory. Kaufman’s adaptation, in its deferred and repeated birth, is nothing but the reflection of his solipsistic world, where a message is sent out only to return to him. Therein, every other character is another image or signifier.
which repeats the unrepresentable lack which the adaptor avoids confronting. Now, Charlie Kaufman understands that his phantasy “always avoids – if only to find itself [this inextricable ‘I’] again later in everything – the same thing.”368 In other words, insomuch as the agonising writer’s block returns Kaufman to the same place – that is, to the very beginning of writing – the film’s narrative arc successfully simulates the fatality of repetition in vitro. Moreover, repetition as such does not simply inflict a painful obligation. Surely, there is also a dimension of satisfaction, which Lacan terms “the satisfaction of repetition,” and this secretive satisfaction fuels the phantasy- which fixates the subject further in the incessant move of adaptation.369 Eventually Charlie Kaufman breaks free from his symptomatic attachment to writer’s block and confronts what those masturbatory phantasies have been keeping from him: with fortitude, he announces, “I’m Ourobouros.” This is a significant step toward the traversal of the fundamental phantasy, whose repetition exerts a centripetal power and binds the subject in a loop. The recognition of this repetitive pattern of phantasy eventually pushes Kaufman out of the pathological pleasure attaching him to writer’s block.

To understand repetition at work in the process of adapting the fundamental phantasy, we first need to recall that phantasy does not pursue an object but seeks satisfaction in fabricating the setting or the mise-en-scène for desire. Nonetheless, human desire cannot be satisfied, which makes ambivalent the subject’s position in relation to phantasy. In one sense, one has to believe in his or her active position of creating imaginative settings for the sake of desire. This imaginary position which grants the subject autonomy in relation

to phantasy may allow one to avoid a fatal confrontation with the fact that desire is essentially a passive mechanism with no hope for final satisfaction. Interestingly, this imaginary position of command is undermined by the recurrence of the primal scene despite the subject’s struggle to evolve and move on from it. From the repetition that undergirds every phantasy staging the same impossible desire, we can infer that the subject of desire is restrained by the task of adaptation which is, in this sense, a retroactive and even regressive act contrary to the common belief that sees adaptation of every kind – biological, psychological, theoretical, textual – as a forward creative move in our attempts to thrive in the world. I do not mean that adaptation is a narcissistic regression, but rather that it should be read as a desperate effort to grasp the origin of one’s being in an attempt to confirm one’s position in the unfathomable ‘reality’ into which the subject is born. This internal struggle predestined for a subject is epitomised by Charlie Kaufman’s conflicting position as a creator and an adaptor. The protagonist repeatedly circles around the fundamental gap embedded in his position as a subject. The gap, in this case, manifests itself between Kaufman as a writer who is to take “a journey into the unknown” and Kaufman as an adaptor who needs to “remain true” to someone else’s creation, to borrow Kaufman’s own line. However, I do not regard this as a pessimistic or deterministic view of the fate assigned to our journey of adaptation. Rather, I propose to keep the concept of adaptation ambivalent in a state of paradox which accounts for the possibility of traversing the innate and compulsory repetition by means of adaptation. I shall come back to this point in the last section of this chapter.

The core of any work of adaptation reveals itself in the uncanny encounter in which the subject discovers the lost ‘I’ “in a de-subjectivized form” within his or her own creation of
phantasy.\textsuperscript{370} The film embodies this logic by showing how the writer Kaufman confronts the onscreen Kaufman as a de-subjectivized form of the ‘I’, which has broken into existence and was hurriedly spat out, but constantly returns in phantasy. Out of this split and unstable condition of the subject, one thing that the subject can rely on is satisfaction or, more precisely, the recollection of an original satisfaction which acquires a privileged place in the realm of the Real. By definition, the Real is the locus where active and passive, presence and absence, subject and object can remain undifferentiated. As such, it is the locus which can still contain the reminiscence of unscathed satisfaction. It is in this sense that Lacan links the theorisation of the Real to the concept of phantasy with reference to the function of repetition. He describes it as “[t]he place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy – in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition.”\textsuperscript{371} To sum up, the trauma of the lack or impossibility imposes an unquenchable yearning for satisfaction, which the work of phantasy supports by setting the subject on a search for that which is lost. The subject manifests itself in the attempt to find the lost object by forging phantasy after phantasy – or, in other words, adaptation after adaptation. This drive to find something again is at the heart of the mechanism of repetition which is innate in any phantasy or adaptation. Consequently, the subject living at the juncture between reality and phantasy becomes fixated on the axis of adaptation, which is not linear but resembles a Mobius strip that has neither inside nor outside, neither a beginning nor an end.


In which mode, then, does repetition arrive in the realm of representation and in a text like *Adaptation*? Lacan teaches us that the fundamental logic of the phantasy is expressed through “the insistence of the signifier.”\(^{372}\) To identify this persistent signifier that resurfaces from within is the purpose of analysis because it will lead the subject to the re-encounter with and hopefully traversal of the primal scene, which, as mentioned above, functions as the point of gravity at the centre of phantasy’s adaptive loop. In the case of the film *Adaptation*, it is possible to identify one recurring signifier which affects the film’s climactic revelation of the primal scene repeated in Kaufman’s various phantasies. In the same manner, I would suggest, every screen adaptation, inasmuch as it is compelled by an imperative to make a transition from text to media, is the effect of this signifier whose unconscious operation the film discloses *in vitro* on screen. The insistent signifier at stake here, I would suggest, is *writing*. The conscious dimension of the film’s narrative is set up to grasp the central metaphor ‘orchid’ on screen. However, the orchid operates as a signified rather than a signifier. Over this signified ‘orchid’, the desire and passion of Laroche, Orlean and Kaufman overlap with one another. Here, *writing* functions as the signifier which is to capture this elusive ‘ghost orchid,’ it is *writing* that is positioned at the nexus of the verbal narration of Laroche, the writing of Orlean and the script of Kaufman. However, the ghost orchid recalls the lack at the final point of reference or meaning, a lack which haunts and binds the signifier *writing* to the circular chain of signifiers. At the back of this movement of signifiers, in the shape of Ourobouros, there is no meaning but the insistent signifier *writing*.

The film proffers ‘writing’ as a recurring signifier without which it would be impossible to

grapple with the film’s haphazard narrative arc across a variety of heterogeneous writings. In fact, the majority of the film dwells on the scene of writing; the three major characters – Charlie Kaufman, Susan Orlean and Donald Kaufman – are all writers and their desire is uniformly to complete their writing. In addition, the images of Charles Darwin writing *The Origin of Species* are occasionally inserted. Above all, these onscreen writers exist as avatars of the real writer Charlie Kaufman, who seems omnipresent in the film through the multiplication of characters at a writing table. The painful recurrence of the signifier *writing* implies that writing can never be a self-evident process of signification, which can immediately and seamlessly link a signifier to its signified. As in its relation to many writers in the film, the signifier ‘writing’ is instead an urgent imperative. In particular, the film’s protagonist is fixated by the command of this signifier to the extent that he is traumatised by it. The film manifests the force of the insistent signifier ‘writing’ in its minute description of the psychology of this characters, who, to the end of the film, feel urged to return to the seat of writing while Kaufman seeks relief in reading the original text obsessively in order to escape from the suffocating command of this signifier ‘writing’. Also, it is at the insistence of this signifier as urgent mandate that Kaufman is eventually led to encounter the primal scene which has been lurking at the back of his pathological symptoms. In addition, the film’s unique contemplation of ‘writing’ is found in its insightful equation of screen adaptation to ‘writing’. The film reveals the secret of screen adaptation in which the fundamental repetition of the signifier ‘writing’ is completely masked by the phantasy of ‘making a film.’ The film stresses that the ontological site of a screen adaptor is the locus of the insistent signifier ‘writing’, no matter how hard one tries to escape it, to move on and *to make a film*.

To further the fundamentality of this signifier, let us go back to the absolutely elementary
premise of ‘writing’. Writing is nothing but the discursive structure of signifiers which are
given to the subject. Lacan captures how the subject of the unconscious is bound to the
pool of signifiers in his dictum, ‘the unconscious is structured like language.’ Yet ‘writing’
is also a demand for creativity and the subject seeks pleasure in creating something new.
The locus of adaptation where the film’s protagonist is stuck not only epitomises but also
magnifies the incompatibility housed in the formidable signifier ‘writing’. As an adaptor,
Kaufman feels the weight of obligation to “remain true to someone else’s writing” because
the original text stands in for that which is already written or, in Lacan’s expression, what
is inscribed and given to the subject as the unconscious. Yet, by the force of the same
signifier ‘writing’, the subject is bound to the metonymic progression of signifiers and its
desire is fixated by the incessant search for something new and unknown. Therefore,
between the two extreme commands residing in the signifier writing, there is no exit for
Charlie Kaufman, who falls into the rabbit hole in which all things seem to return to the
same place – that is, for him, the intimidating blank page ‘gazing back at him’ from the
typewriter.

Yet the repetition, manifested through the insistence of the signifier ‘writing’, is not only
an inescapable curse for the subject. By the paradoxical logic of phantasy resembling the
Mobius strip, repetition coincides with subversive resistance to it. These two seemingly
contradictory forces, Lacan expounds, “share the same DNA” – that is, it is repetition that
requires a variation. As Lacan teaches us in his seminar Four Fundamental Concepts of
Psychoanalysis,

Repetition demands the new. It is turned towards the ludic, which finds its dimension in this
new...Whatever, in repetition, is varied, modulated is merely alienation of its meaning. The
adult, and even the more advanced child, demands something new in his activities, in his
games. But this ‘sliding-away (glissement) conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself.  

Lacan realises that the playfulness of phantasy-work allows the inevitably traumatic dimension of repetition to be channelled into the pleasure of variation and adaptation. He continues, “[t]his variation makes one forget the aim of the significance [that is, to return to the same place] by transforming its act into a game, and giving it certain outlets that go some way to satisfying the pleasure principle.” Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the tantalising effect of the pleasure principle bewitches the subject into believing in the ‘forward’ movement of the wishful and playful phantasy of creation. With the full scale of its magic, phantasy strives to cover up the void constituted by the loop of repetition with a plethora of images. In this sense, the film Adaptation seems, to me, to successfully explore the primordial level of adaptation as a profound process that balances repetition and diversity, and thus operates between trauma and pleasure. In particular, the insisting signifier writing uncovers the truth of the subject, who is the embodiment of repetition oscillating between creation and adaptation. Indeed, in confrontation with the task of adaptation the subject is nothing other than the amalgam of repetition and variation in vitro.

The Traversal of the Phantasy

Because of its fascination with the travails of the signifier ‘writing’ in the field of screen

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374 Ibid., 62.
adaptation, *Adaptation* offers an allegory of the dimension of screen adaptation, where an adaptor is compelled to write ‘what cannot be written’. In Lacan’s idiosyncratic logic, this signifier is repeated because it is attached to the first *Bedeutung* [meaning or referent], which signifies nothing but lack and, hence, cannot be written. He explains this idea in a dense passage:

the thing being sufficiently indicated to us by the stimulus that logic received, by submitting itself to the simple operation of writing, except for the fact that it still fails to remember that this only reposes on the function of a *lack*, in the very thing that is written and which constitutes the status, as such, of the function of writing.375

Let us ask, then, what does ‘writing’ mean to Kaufman? What does it mean to a screen adaptor who transposes someone’s writing into his own writing only to erase what is written – both the original text and his own script – from the locus of writing in the end? There is no palpable answer in that it is not a signifier which can be referred back to another signifier. Writing here is ‘the Signifier,’ or master signifier, which propels the forward movement of the signifying chain as such by making itself an origin as well as the terminal point of the chain. In this regard, the signifier ‘writing’ to an adaptor stands in for the fundamental and irreducible phantasy which cannot be replaced with any other phantasy.

This, however, need not be the end-point for the work of adaptation never ceases. At various places, Lacan confirms that the aim of psychoanalytic treatment of the subject is to help an analysand to recall and re-write the path to the fundamental phantasy. In other words, psychoanalysis aims at the traversal of the fundamental phantasy, which adapts

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itself into various other phantasies and pathological symptoms.\footnote{Jacques Lacan, \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton, 1981), 273.} Before laying out the parallel between adaptation and the traversal of the fundamental phantasy, it is helpful to recapitulate the conceptual path from the original phantasy to the fundamental phantasy of the Real. So far the analysis of the film and its protagonist has drawn attention to the way in which the command of writing provokes the search for the primal scene or the original phantasy in which the subject invests the origin of his being, in Freudian terms. Turning in a more Lacanian direction, the discussion recognised that there is a fundamental phantasy which would put an end to the subject’s search for the origin. In general, this terminal point lies in the realm of the Real. It can nonetheless be glimpsed by identifying the repetition of a certain signifier at the moment “when the mask which is that of the phantasy vacillates.”\footnote{Jacques Lacan, \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The Logic of Phantasy}, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Gallagher Press, 2002), 7.}

This moment of vacillation contains the potential for traversing the fundamental phantasy that is inscribed as the path to satisfaction, and which fixes the neurotic subject to both pathological and non-pathological symptoms. For the film’s writer and protagonist, the task of adaptation makes him realise that his relation to the masterful signifier ‘writing’ is painful and does not offer much pleasure. In particular, his (fictional) twin brother’s effortless and ‘playful’ approach to writing effectively provides a measure of how excessively consuming, unpleasant and unsatisfactory it is to Charlie Kaufman. Towards the end of the film, Kaufman can no longer deny this fundamental problem underlying his writer’s block and invites Donald to help him with the writing project. Metaphorically, Kaufman’s action signals the end of resistance and the beginning of a profound change in
his relation to the signifier ‘writing’. Prior to this, Kaufman had mystified ‘writing’ as a sacred journey to the unknown and resisted materialising it in actual writing, not to mention adapting this holy task to the formulaic machinery of a Hollywood film. With Kaufman’s decision for a change, the film’s narrative rapidly moves to the final revelation, where the primal scene turns its most prosaic face to the camera. In Lacan’s terms, the mask which has concealed the fundamental phantasy now vacillates with transparency. Through it, Kaufman sees that Orlean’s original text is simply a trivial and commonplace signifier mediating her sexual desire and solipsistic phantasy onto the page. In other words, Kaufman faces the truth of Orlean’s writing, which he has believed depicts her sacred search for the unknown centre of human desire as re-presented in the ghost orchid. Eventually, it turns out to be nothing but an adaptation of her fundamental phantasy and its circular move or repetition is exactly same as his own repetitive masturbatory phantasy, whose purpose is to enhance the ‘pathetic’ satisfaction. The witness to the unflattering sexual intercourse between Orlean and Laroche – the parents begetting the unfathomable world of *The Orchid Thief* – reduces the signifier ‘writing’ to a common role in the signifying chain as displaceable and adaptable to something else. Kaufman finally encounters “a lonely, old, desperate, pathetic drug addict” in Orlean, who up until then had been the Lady embodying the fundamental signifier ‘writing’ and strangled Kaufman with the question “Che Vuoi?” A low-angle shot of Kaufman looking down on Orlean, who sits on the ground and sobs over Laroche’s dead body like a baby, punctuates the end of the journey of adaptation at the point of traversing the fundamental phantasy.

Just before this moment of punctuation, the shift of perspective as a sign of traversal is clearly verbalised in a banal dialogue between the twin brothers in which Donald advises Charlie. Hiding from murderous Orlean and Laroche, who wish to conceal their affair and
drug addiction by killing the two witnesses, the twin brothers find a nook behind a huge log in the swamp. In the pitch darkness, the Kaufman brothers, for the first time in the movie, start a conversation on friendly terms and recall their high school days. Donald recalls being madly in love with a classmate and Charlie is surprised to learn that his brother already knew that the girl despised him. To Charlie, Donald confesses: “I loved Sarah, Charles. It was mine, that love. I owned it. Even Sarah didn’t have the right to take it away. I can love whoever I want…You are what you love, not what loves you.” In this speech, Donald proves that the subject is able to take the place of the cause of his desire. This new position offers Kaufman an escape from his writer’s block because his relation to the signifier ‘writing’ can be rewritten to remove the subject from his dependence on the object under the spell of ‘Che vuoi?’ Kaufman recaptures the agency in his relation to the command of the signifier. With regard to this new configuration of the subject’s fundamental phantasy, Bruce Fink illustrates the path of the traversal of the phantasy as follows:

The traversing of fantasy involves the subject’s assumption of a new position with respect to the Other as language and the Other as desire. A move is made to invest or inhabit that which brought him or her into existence as split subject, to become that which caused him or her. There where it – the Other’s discourse, ridden with the Other’s desire – was, the subject is able to say “I”. Not “It happened to me,” or “They did this to me,” or “Fate had it in store for me,” but “I was,” “I did,” “I saw,” “I cried out.”

However, elsewhere Fink rightly points out the role of analysis in the discovery of the fundamental phantasy and its traversal. He claims that “[i]t should be noted that the fundamental fantasy is not so much something that exists per se prior to analysis, as

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something constructed and reconstructed in the course of analysis."379 This adds a further twist to our understanding of adaptation. Like the task of analysis reluctantly undertaken by a patient, the task of adaptation provides the locus of re-writing the fundamental phantasy of the screen adaptor in his relation to the formidable master signifier ‘writing’, whose controlling power would otherwise remain invisible and unfathomable. Therefore, Adaptation is an adaptation which proves how idiosyncratic yet necessary the task of adaptation is to the subject. The film is an allegory that unveils the intimidating abyss a subject has to leap across in order to achieve ‘adaptation’ in every sense of the term. The abyss lies between the original text and its re-imagination or, in the Lacanian sense, a ‘new repetition’ of the original in its ever present moment of re-birth. Insofar as the subject exists only as that which a signifier or text adapts into another signifier to be followed, every subject has to prove him or herself by traversing the fundamental phantasy, by engaging fully in the process of adaptation.

379 Bruce Finks, A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis : Theory and Technique (Cambridge, MA.: HUP, 1999), 70.
Conclusion: Adaptation, the Metaphor for Subjectivity

Looking back at the path this thesis has taken, I must confess that it has been a very personal journey searching for a more adequate place for an ‘I’ which seems utterly misplaced. Under the fate of being an immigrant from the East, everything the ‘I’ listens and speaks to needs to be adapted to a foreign tongue of the West, which remains formidably strange to the ‘I’ whose unconscious – if applying Lacan’s dictum – was written at the instance of another linguistic structure. Immediate access to ‘meaning’ seems to be forbidden, so the process of translation and adaptation goes on diligently, although it is a task that can never bring any sense of completion or satisfaction. Yet the harder the task appears, the more desperate the desire becomes. In addition, how could one explain – unless it were not unconscious resistance to a more fundamental anxiety about being a speaking subject – the reason why the ‘I’ decided to read Freud and Lacan, both in translation, in order to divine a map for venturing into the inherently nebulous territory of screen adaptation? Surrounded by a plethora of incompatible signifiers, the dislocated ‘I’ has been multiplied and the sense of being lost has been intensified in relation to ‘meaning’ for the ‘I’ who is an immigrant assigned to the task of an adaptor. However, the repressed always returns. Underneath the resistance, there must be inextricable necessity, which involved the ‘I’ with the trans-mediation of the elusive and inaccessible meaning between Freud and Lacan, an original and a film adaptation, subjectivity and text etc. Indeed, it was a deliberately chosen detour, which paradoxically returns me to an encounter with the fundamental impasse at the nexus of this project to adapt the ‘I’ to the order of the Other no matter which language this order is written in. Therefore, without maintaining that the function of adaptation is not to modify but to manifest the ontology of the ‘I’ which is fundamentally on the move, this thesis could not offer more than a palimpsest that is
indecipherably overwritten by the multitude of misunderstood discourses of the masters and maladapted speech of an émigré.

As a personal journey, the study has sought to return to or rediscover how adaptation works at the seat of the unconscious. In other words, the current study is the trajectory of the ‘I’ in its attempt to map out a deconstructive yet creative dimension of adaptation where the separation between text and subjectivity is no longer possible. To put it differently, it is worth recapitulating that what has been discussed so far has aimed at gaining an insight into adaptation as a way of organising a connection between texts inasmuch as this connection responds to the ontological demand of the ‘I’ in its transitional and adaptive mode of being. Thus, exemplary films were analysed in terms of how the textual level of adaptation communicates the primordial and universal level of the unconscious functions of a speaking subject in its relation to reality. As pointed out previously, this reality is none other than the prime text to be read; it is written in the form of a ‘matrix’, scripted in letters under the regulation of the Symbolic, yet materialised through images in the domain of the Imaginary. Screen adaptation is interesting precisely because it re-enacts the essence of the human psyche by re-presenting or adapting the unconscious ‘reality’ of the subject, split between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, onto the screen of consciousness. Indeed, reality as such is an outcome of incessant adaptation and, in return, adaptation qua function sustains the exclusively human reality, which is the site of ongoing negotiation between text and the subject of the unconscious.

What I termed the Real of the text opens a door to this seat of continual adaptation by transgressing textual boundaries. To me, the Real of text, as long as ‘text’ here is conceived to be the effect of the discourse of the unconscious, emerges as that which undercuts,
subverts and sticks out from the normative logic of screen adaptation to the extent that
adaptation is treated as a commercially and aesthetically calculated media practice. At the
beginning of this thesis I designated the centripetal power of the Real of text as a symptom
of culture whose insistence is recognised from the ubiquity of adaptation in our time. From
a psychoanalytic perspective the four case studies observed the symptomatic
representations of the Real of text by utilising Freudian and Lacanian concepts such as the
Oedipus complex, anxiety, *das Ding*, and phantasy. Therein, the Real of text may take the
form of what is lost in adaptation; or the father’s ghost whose commanding words reign
over the screen; or the Mother’s devouring omnipresence that provokes profound anxiety
in cinematic sons; or the monstrous maze where the subject witnesses its own death drive
beyond the desire for adaptation; or the fundamental phantasy which one needs to traverse
in the course of adaptation. Although it is beyond the capacity of both letter and image to
capture what the Real of text *is*, the symptomatology of the Real appears bound between
two ends of the spectrum which adaptation can offer to the subject in transitional terms.
One end is a metonymic move from one text to another in seeking a refuge from the
confrontation with the Real as lack in meaning. The other end is a metaphoric revolution to
create meaning by substituting an anterior text which presents itself as a place holder of
meaning. The journey of adaptation continues while alternating between the two ends of
this spectrum.

In this light, I would like to punctuate the journey by speculating on this symptom called
adaptation with regard to the Lacanian concept of ‘metaphor’, where the fundamentality of
adaptation will find, I hope, its origin as well as its terminal point. In brief, *metaphor* and
*metonymy* are what Lacan identifies as “the two fundamental facets of the play of the
unconscious.” Borrowing the linguistic concepts elaborated by Roman Jakobson, Lacan utilises the two concepts in explaining the adaptive modes by which the unconscious speaks. According to Lacan, metonymy describes the path of desire, which is always “the desire for something else.” However, it is not a chain of objects that are wished for one after the other, but rather a chain of signifiers that are waiting for ‘meaning’ to come and make sense of their existence retrospectively. Therefore, metonymy is ultimately a search for meaning, the having of which is forever deferred. If we recall that the subject is what a signifier represents for another signifier, then this endless deferral is unbearable to a speaking subject, whose being, or more precisely becoming, depends on the passage from one signifier to another. In this light, the deferral as such is threatening and itself becomes the cause of the subject’s subscription to the task of adapting unfathomable meaning into another signifier. The double play between the pleasure principle and the death drive is concealed in the desperate act of adaptation: that is, the subject is continuously sliding through the complementary chain of signifiers, aiming for the signified or meaning which could finalise this journey. In addition, in order to make the path of desire indestructible, the metonymic structure needs to locate the subject of the unconscious in the imagined place of an agent, separate from signifiers on the axis, given that this illusion of agency or autonomy – as inscribed in cogito ergo sum – is a necessary condition for the survival of the subject on the plane of adaptation.

In contrast, metaphor highlights the constitutive and creative moment of signification where the signified is created – not sought after – through a break in the metonymic chain

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of signifiers. The algorithm that appeared in Lacan’s 1957 lecture “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” illustrates how metaphor functions as constitutive process of signification.\footnote{Ibid., 429.}

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The above, read as the substitution of one signifier for another, is congruent with the process of signification by pinning down a signifier to a signified. This metaphoric mechanism, Lacan suggests, shows how the actual process of signification and the construction of the ‘place’ for a signified become possible despite the impasse written into the metonymic structure of the signifiers. With a poetic and creative break in a metonymic chain of signifiers, a metaphoric signifier replaces a signifier at a point where its position as a signifier as well as its assumed connection to the target signified becomes annihilated – in other words, “at the precise moment at which meaning is produced in nonmeaning.”\footnote{Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud,” in \textit{Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English}, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 423.}

In so doing, the metaphorical replacement of another signifier with a signifier brings about signification, the illusionary link between a signifier and a signified. Lacan explains as follows:

Metaphor's creative spark does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of...two equally actualized signifiers. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain.\footnote{Ibid., 422.}

It is important to recall that Lacan never considers a signified to be an anchor of reference, where one finally discovers and captures the meaning of a signifier which has been
repressed under the bar between a signifier and a signified. Rather, it is the point of rupture where a signifier breaks free from the chain and substitutes for another signifier, only to transform itself into a signified, or ‘the occulted signifier’ in his words. Substitution here should imply a much more radical and subversive process than metonymic displacement since substitution encapsulates both annihilation and re-birth. As such, the concept of metaphor accounts for the highly deconstructive and transgressive side of adaptation, which is the substitution of an original text with a film adaptation inasmuch as such metaphorical substitution proves that the two – that is, an original text and a film adaptation – are not at all heterogeneous by nature. Indeed, what demarcates the two seemingly opposite terms is the different positions they momentarily occupy in the metonymic chain of adaptation between any two metaphorical moments. More importantly, I would like to emphasise that such a metaphorical moment in the course of adaptation is what sustains the metonymic progression of screen adaptation. Indeed, without the promise of the metaphorical substitution of an original text and hence creation of a new meaning, the deferral would be unbearable and the desire for adaptation could never exceed the frustration of an adaptor who can never complete his or her task, like Jack Torrance in Kubrick’s maze.

So far, I have scrutinised the two axes of adaptation: metonymy, which indicates the horizontal path of desire for adaptation, and metaphor as a deconstructive and creative moment of substitution. I would like to conclude this discussion by opening it up to a more metaphysical speculation about adaptation as a metaphor for the subject, which Lacan sees as “a being in the process of becoming.”\textsuperscript{385} To me, the significance of the concept of

metaphor as one *trope* of adaptation lies in its ability to bring insight to the enigmatic crux of human subjectivity – this problematic object of philosophy, which is not an object but a fluid *being* in the continual process of adaptation. Lacan stresses the importance of metaphor in understanding how the subject functions in reality as text by maintaining that “the most serious reality, and even the sole serious reality for man, if one considers its role in sustaining the metonymy of his desire, can only be retained in metaphor.”

Here, I would like to recapitulate the concept of metaphor, but in the slightly different sense of reading *metaphor* as connoting a certain mythical moment of inserting a signifier into the realm of meaning. If so, it is possible to make a comparison between this signifier and the ‘*I*’ representing the indefinite and thus adaptable state of the subject. Indeed, from the moment of its birth as a speaking subject, this ‘*I*’ is *inserted* into the reality, which is organised as a metonymic chain of signification; thenceforth the ‘*I*’ is thrown into the world as textual structure, as an object of adaptation rather than an agent. One must remember that, even though this metaphoric leap when the ‘*I*’ realises itself as an object of adaptation can be creative, the confrontation with this Real evokes in the subject a depth of anxiety which can be compared with the experience of death. Therefore, adaptation is no easy task. Transforming a written text into a film and transposing narrative and characters of the original while preserving ‘meaning’ at the back of letter and image requires the subject to take a painful glance at its ontology as a de-centred object who is neither agent nor bearer of meaning. This task is not to be bypassed. Rather, it is the irresistible necessity originating from the Real of a speaking being that returns the ‘*I*’ to the place of an adaptor over and again. In other words, adaptation becomes a survival function of subjectivity, without which there is no chance of moving on and finding a place for the ‘*I*’. Indeed, one

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must take a risk like Charlie Kaufman does in *Adaptation*. This risk coincides with the
chance that adaptation might turn into a furnace that melts the subject and texts together –
after which, if one is lucky, the subject can resume its place of agency but with a new
meaning to follow.
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