Beyond Symbolism:

Object a in Film Perception

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Introduction

In Chapter Two: *Representing the Unrepresentable*, I asked the question, “Is it possible to perceive film outside of symbolic structures?” This means perceiving beyond meaning and utilizing non-verbal modalities when viewing film. I introduced various theories on non-symbolism, both in film and still art as it could also pertain to film. I found that indeed many theorists contend that it is possible to perceive not only film but other art forms as well beyond symbolic meaning, and that in most cases, it was the films in which one could perceive beyond symbolic meaning that were the most highly regarded. I then compared these various theories to find what they had in common. What are the common attributes of the non-symbolic? By doing this, I aimed to uncover the psychological source of the non-symbolic. If we live in a symbolic order and rely on symbols and verbal language to understand not only the film image but also the natural image, the world we see and navigate every day, then how is it possible to consciously perceive anything outside of that construct? By analyzing and comparing the various theories which illuminate a hole in the symbolic order in Chapter Two, I aimed to answer that question.

From this comparison, I found several characteristics that were fundamental to these theories on non-symbolism as they pertain not only to film perception, but to nonverbal thought in general. To begin with, what is perceived in film that cannot be put into words is beyond meaning. Meaning is assigned through a signifier/signified relationship, the symbolic image signifying a concept. What is perceived outside symbolism pertains to a signifier without a signified. This means we perceive something that has no meaning that can be nailed down or reduced to verbal description; no signification in the traditional sense. In other words, it is a surplus signifier, the extra remnant that eludes symbolisation. It is important to note that these theories all pertain to figurative visuals. This means that there was already a layer of symbolic significance, as recognizable forms lend themselves to
symbolism. For instance, Barthes designates two layers of meaning in film, the informational and symbolic, which require recognizable forms, before acknowledging the Third Meaning, the “one too many, the supplement that my intellect cannot succeed in absorbing,”¹ the remnant of symbolisation. Abstract or non-figurative film doesn’t necessarily have such a symbolic framework from which to start. This ‘empty signifier’ illuminates a hole in the symbolic order, a place where words fail. Hence when we perceive the non-symbolic, we have no words to describe the experience.

Because this surplus signifier eludes symbolisation and description, it also is difficult to name. A name would be a representation for something said to be unrepresentable. Thus Barthes settles on the label, the ‘Third Meaning’ as this empty signifier defies linguistic tethers. Another characteristic of this indefinable presence is that it represents or rather evokes the idea of something hidden; hidden within the frame and perhaps hidden in reality. This is possibly due to its fleeting quality, the idea that this presence emerges as a detail that comes and goes, appearing and disappearing on screen. It is perhaps its temporality that in part makes us desire its presence even more. That is another common characteristic: it is what we desire most in film. The presence of this surplus signifier is what makes the film transcendent. Barthes even calls it the essence of film and what marks one as great.² It is precisely that indescribable unknown that draws us to art in the first place. So paradoxically, this empty void of a signifier acts as the object-cause of our desire.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of this mysterious presence is that it is sensed rather than understood. This means that it appeals to the senses rather than logical symbolic thinking. It makes sense that the unrepresentable is what draws us to film, that it is what we

² Ibid., 65.
desire, because film is a sensuous medium. It appeals to our senses of sight, sound, and even has a certain visual texture produced from the film grain and processing. Certainly film is not the only thing that appeals to the senses. And this is the final common characteristic of the theories in Chapter 2. The theorists acknowledge that the unrepresentable is not necessarily limited to the film medium or any medium for that matter, but exists “in a certain manner of reading 'life' and so 'reality' itself.”

History and Context

As mentioned earlier, the non-symbolic that is perceived in film is a signifier without a signified. This is based on a dyadic structure of linguistics formulated by twentieth century European linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure’s sign consists of a signifier, a word for example, representing a signified concept. This representation is an arbitrary one in that, for example, there is nothing dog-like in the word dog. The reason it works as a signifier is its conventional use within a given culture. Central to his theory is that language is based on a system of differentiation or langue. For instance, the signifier ‘cat’ is understood because it is different from the signifiers, ‘mat’, ‘bat’, ‘cot’ and so on.

The aim of this kind structuralism was to do away with the subject and subjectivity, leaving the autonomy of linguistic structures. This did not leave much room for personal interpretation or evolution of sign systems. It de-emphasized the centrality of the human subject which was in contrast to the Existentialist movement that preceded it. It also had a great influence on subjects other than linguistics including media theory and psychoanalysis. Within these areas, theorists who built upon Saussure’s linguistic structuralism were many mentioned in Chapter Two, notably Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Another figure

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3 Ibid., 60.
who, not only was greatly influenced by Saussure but who also influenced the same theorists mentioned above, was French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan.

Lacan emphasised a return to Freud and built upon Saussure’s model of structural linguistics to formulate his own theories. However, where Freud focused on neurological or ‘natural’ causes for sexual development, Lacan proposed a linguistic model for understanding the structure of the psyche. In fact, Lacan argued that “the unconscious is structured like a language.” He used Saussure’s signifier/signified sign dyad as a basis for his theories yet evolved it as well. Structuralism removed the subject and proposed a stable relationship between signifier and signified. The structure of language here is based on the negative relation between signs, i.e. ‘cat’ differs from ‘hat’, etc. Although Lacan shared Saussure’s conception of the autonomy of the symbolic, he also aimed to situate the subject within the symbolic. Also, rather than the negative relation between signs, Lacan focused on the relations between signifiers, how words lead to other words in a signifying chain. The words or signifiers he is concerned with are elements of the unconscious: wishes, desires, images, etc. It is the relation between these signifiers in the signifying chain which is of importance since they are not stable but are in constant flux. Therefore, there is no way to proclaim that this means that or this represents that with any kind of definitiveness. So, even though Lacan starts with Saussure’s model of structural linguistics, he modifies it to a more post-structuralist stance.

Lacan, like Barthes and Foucault, was a French twentieth century theorist who was greatly influenced by Saussure. Lacan also influenced Barthes and Foucault themselves to a

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high degree. The study of perception, which is at the core of this research, is a major field of psychology. But we mustn’t forget that it is the perception of film which is the focus; film which is, like art, like language, a form of communication. Placed within this context, it is reasonable to suggest that Jacques Lacan’s linguistic theories on the psyche might hold the key to what is behind our perception of the non-symbolic in film. Amanda Loos agrees:

[…] If we’re talking about media, perception, and representation, we begin with the symbolic-real-imaginary triad of Jacques Lacan’s three psychoanalytic orders, developed during a series of lectures in the 1950’s. In the Lacanian arena, the symbolic-real-imaginary forms a trio of intrapsychic realms which comprise the various levels of psychic phenomena. They serve to situate subjectivity within a system of perception and a dialogue with the external world. Since perception, subject formation, language and image are common stakeholders in both psychoanalytic and mediatic discourses, theories of media (in their various forms and abstractions) are embedded with invocations of these three Lacanian orders and a further concern with their interplay. In a general sense, attempts to theorize media in terms of the intricate and slippery border between the internal and the external, discussions of language, image, sound…often begin with Lacan’s infantile mirror stage and further align the continued reproduction of subjectivity with the influences of external stimuli such as media. From that point, theorists engaged in Lacanian analyses situate the functioning and internalization of media experience/production in terms of the real-symbolic-imaginary (or their designated equivalent) the three orders that, according to Lacan, originate in this mirror stage.8

Lacan in Film

Lacanian psychoanalysis entered film theory most notably in the 1970’s by way of theorists like Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry and later, Laura Mulvey. They focused on the process of specular identification understood through Lacan’s mirror stage. According to Lacan, the mirror stage occurs in infants approximately between the ages of six and eighteen months. The infant sees its image in the mirror and misrecognizes the image as a stable, complete self which does not correspond to the real child which is incomplete having little control over its motor and communication functions. The child identifies with this image of

fullness which gives the child an illusory mastery over its body. Through the mirror stage, the child enters the Imaginary, one of Lacan’s three structures of the psyche. The fantasy image compensates for the child’s sense of lack or loss caused by the child seeing itself as separate from its mother and the world around it. This separation and misidentification of self forms the ego. As the child misidentifies with the completeness of the image in the mirror, so the movie goer misidentifies with the image of the protagonist on the film screen. Lacanian film theorists simply used the film screen as a metaphorical mirror.

Slavoj Žižek used the film screen as a metaphor not for the imaginary but for the following structure of the psyche, the Symbolic. For Lacan, where the imaginary is about identification, the symbolic is about language and narrative. The acceptance of the rules of language is aligned with the child’s passage into adulthood and entrance into its community through the Oedipal stage. Once the child accepts the Name-of-the-Father, or the laws that govern both one’s desire and the rules of language, it enters successfully into the Symbolic Order. The symbolic is what we think of as reality. If something does not exist in the symbolic or cannot be symbolised, it does not exist in reality.

Žižek used the symbolic film screen as a metaphor for the symbolic order, or reality. The film screen shows image after image. And an image is a representation, “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced.” It is therefore a signifier for some signified. This is why Žižek refers to the screen as symbolic. He, like the theorists in Chapter Two, also introduces concepts of non-symbolism in his film theory. However, Žižek’s theory does not address perception outside symbolism. Rather, he uses the concept of the non-symbolic in terms of what is barred from the symbolism of the screen image through the concept of Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz.

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Žižek employs Lacan’s notion of *Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz* in terms of the film narrative, unlike the concept of the Third Meaning which Barthes insists is not part of the film’s narrative. It is an object or signifier on screen that stands in for something that we are not allowed to see, something or someone that is barred from the symbolic diegesis on screen. To Žižek, these characters escape symbolism because they are not represented on the symbolic reality of the screen. Therefore, they exist beyond symbolism, outside of reality (reality as the symbolic). Though we may never see the characters excluded from the screen, they still ‘exist’ even if beyond symbolism as they serve to motivate the characters that we do see. Žižek uses an example from *The Lady Vanishes* where punctuating traces of the vanished Miss Froy can be seen on screen even though she herself cannot.

As the Third Meaning breaks through the symbolic meaning in the form of a “penetrating trait,” so does *Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz* break through the symbolic reality of the screen and appear as a detail, a signifying trace of the repressed. In the film, Miss Froy breaks through the symbolic diegesis and manifests as a symbol, the name Froy written on a dusty glass window and the label of a particular tea brand, Haniman’s, which Froy had introduced to the narrative. Although she doesn’t appear on screen through much of the film and her very existence is denied, Froy’s reality breaks through the symbolic reality of the visual plot: “What is excluded from reality reappears as a signifying trace (as an element of the symbolic order…) on the very screen through which we observe reality.” Yet the reality of the character, though not represented on screen by an actor, serves to motivate the characters on screen. The protagonists search for Miss Froy, the desired object, while the other passengers try to convince them of her non-existence, an allusion to the void of the

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10 Translated literally, this means Performance Representative.
empty signifier. Yet, as in psychosis, what is repressed, what is excluded from symbolic reality will at some point break through it – here in the intangible details of fleeting signifiers which appear and disappear from the symbolic screen.

The Unrepresentable Real

Žižek identifies Vorstellung-Repräsentanz as a replacement signifier for something barred from symbolic reality. In film terms, this is the screen. In life, this is the symbolic order which we enter into post-Oedipal phase. Žižek explains this through the first of the three structures of the psyche, the Real. What we consider to be reality is an amalgam of the imaginary and the symbolic. The order of the real is prior to and opposed to the imaginary and symbolic. The imaginary introduces loss and fissure into the child as it begins to see itself as separate from its mother and its environment. The symbolic works on a system of differences and gaps. But in the realm of the real, there is no separation, no differentiation and no loss. The child sees itself as one with everything. It is a time of fullness or completeness which is lost once it enters into language. We use language to communicate our wants, to fill in the gaps of what is missing. In the real, there is no lack, no differentiation, and hence no language. It is what we lose forever once we start to speak but what we desire to reclaim the rest of our adult lives.

What is most important to understand about the real is that it is prior to the imaginary and situated “beyond the symbolic.”14 The real emerges as that which is outside language and thus as Lacan says, “it is that which resists symbolization absolutely.”15 Thus, Žižek situates Miss Froy in the realm of the real since she is barred from being represented on screen by a real person. He designates the name on the glass and the tea label as

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Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz, replacement signifiers ‘representing’ what is barred from the symbolic screen. Thus, Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz represents on screen what cannot be represented, representing the unrepresentable.

A similar plot device that Žižek illustrates is the MacGuffin. A MacGuffin is any object that drives the storyline, the characters and their motivations, yet has no intrinsic value or relevance to the story in and of itself. It’s not important to the plot what the object actually is, it’s important what it does: it motivates the actions of the characters, both within the story and with regard to other characters. The MacGuffin might be a briefcase, government documents, or a hidden secret. It is the object of everyone’s desire. It might even be ambiguous in identity. In fact, as the struggles and motivations of the characters play out through the film, the materiality of the MacGuffin declines in importance and can be all but forgotten by the conclusion. It doesn’t matter to the audience what the MacGuffin is. Through their suspension of disbelief, the audience accepts its importance because the characters do. Whatever it manifests as, the MacGuffin serves as the unattainable desired object, the secret to uncover which is empty in content.

Žižek explains the MacGuffin in Lacanian terms as well. Where Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz is the stand-in representation for the real barred from the symbolic screen, the MacGuffin is the return of the real which functions as the object of desire. “[…] The MacGuffin is the purest case of what Lacan calls objet petit a: a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire.”16 It is the object effectively empty in content yet it is what is desired by the characters in the plot.

Strictly speaking, the real does not exist. It is lost to us forever once we enter into language. It is outside symbolisation, outside linguistic description. Object a is the surplus,

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“the remainder of the Real.”\textsuperscript{17} So object \textit{a} as surplus real does not exist in reality insofar that reality is symbolic. “‘Reality’ is the field of symbolically structured representations, the outcome of symbolic ‘gentrification’ of the Real; yet a surplus of the Real always eludes the symbolic grasp and persists as a non-symbolized stain, a hole in reality which designates the ultimate limit where ‘the word fails’”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Object \textit{a} as the Non-Symbolic in Film Perception}

It is my contention then that non-symbolic perception in film as investigated in Chapter Two is a return of the real, the remnant of symbolization, that which cannot be symbolised: object \textit{a}. Let us look more closely at the object \textit{a} and see how it compares to the characteristics of non-symbolic film perception.

Object \textit{a} as mentioned earlier is the remnant of the process of symbolisation. What does this mean exactly? It means that within our symbolic order, we attempt to symbolise, to assign meaning to everything we see. But there is always something left over that eludes symbolisation. This remnant or leftover is how Barthes defined The Third Meaning in film. It is “the third, the one 'too many', the supplement [one’s] intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive.”\textsuperscript{19} It is for the fact that the non-symbolic, the object \textit{a} cannot be symbolised that it cannot be absorbed or grasped by one’s intellect.

Lacan situates object \textit{a} within his four formulas for discourse or the process of symbolisation in his \textit{Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis}. These are the discourses of the master, university, hysteric, and analyst. The master’s discourse is the primary discourse, providing the starting point for all other discourses. The term discourse

\textsuperscript{17} Lorenzo Chiesa, \textit{Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 22.

\textsuperscript{18} Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze, My Ruin Is Writ Large," 239.

\textsuperscript{19} Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 54.
implies an interchange of words, of speech. And yet Lacan stresses that this does not have to be the case. “Discourse can clearly subsist without words.”\(^{20}\) And it is at the non-linguistic level that the study of these discourses can be the most profound. It is at this level that we can see how the process of symbolization, the introduction of the symbolic into the real, effects how we perceive the world around us.

The four discourses are each comprised of varying displacements of four elements: the master signifier (S₁), the split or barred subject ($\S$), the network of all other signifiers (S₂), and the remnant of the process of symbolization (a). In the primary or founding discourse of the master, a master signifier represents a subject - which is split or fractured in its submission to the symbolic process – for a network of signifiers (the field of knowledge) leaving a remnant of the real which eludes this process of symbolisation. It is this remnant, this object a, that is the focus of interest here, for, in eluding symbolisation, it also eludes our immediate grasp and understanding. It is the return of the real through the symbolic that manifest as the sensations and experiences that we can’t put into words.

Object a then is a surplus of the real which cannot be signified. “The elementary feature of a symbolic order in its relation to ‘reality’ is that it always contains a surplus-signifier, a signifier which is ‘empty’ in the sense that there is nothing in reality which corresponds to it…”\(^{21}\) A signifier without a signified. This is how Barthes describes the Third Meaning and the punctum in photography. It is also how Žižek defines Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz. If we remember from Chapter Two how Magritte defines the familiar icons in his paintings, he doesn’t. He says, “People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image.”\(^{22}\) In speaking about the non-symbolic object a, it is sometimes confusing as to when we’re talking about the signifier and when we’re talking

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\(^{21}\) Žižek, “In His Bold Gaze, My Ruin Is Writ Large,” 236.

\(^{22}\) Suzi Gablik, Magritte (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 11.
about the signified (or lack thereof). Is it what we see in the film that is object \( a \) or is it what it evokes? Lacan himself was quite vague on this and often used object \( a \) to denote both the signifier and the lack of a signified.\(^{23}\)

Indeed anything that cannot be described and is beyond description has to be somewhat vague. The \( a \) in object \( a \) or objet petit \( a \) stands for \textit{autre} (other). This small other differentiates it from the capitalised Other while at the same time relating to it. However, Lacan always insisted that the \( a \) be left un-translated as to shake off any connotations or cultural meanings carried by words. Thus, the \( a \) acquires the status and variability of an algebraic sign.\(^{24}\) This is another characteristic of the non-symbolic in media perception; the inability to name. In his theory on the Third Meaning, Barthes designates a layer of film perception beyond the informational and symbolic layers of meaning. This third layer of meaning cannot be described in words or even named, hence its non-descriptive ‘name,’ The Third Meaning. “The \textit{obtuse} (Third) meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it.”\(^{25}\) Godfrey Reggio experienced a similar conundrum when having to choose a title for his wordless feature film, \textit{Koyaanisqatsi}. “I wished for \textit{Koyaanisqatsi} not to have any name at all. […] I thought that we shouldn’t have a name, we should have an image. Why use a word to describe something that we’re trying to say is \textit{unnameable}, or \textit{undescribable}?”\(^{26}\) For Barthes, even an image would be too descriptive, too full of cultural baggage. After all, an image is a symbol, a representation of something else. And symbols are based on cultural usage. Barthes insists that the Third Meaning, where the essence of film can be found, is outside of such cultural symbolism. It is more sensed than understood in words. “[…]\textit{It is at the level of the Third Meaning, and at that level alone, that the 'filmic'}

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\(^{25}\) Barthes, “The Third Meaning.”

finally emerges. The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented.”

The function of the object $a$ is as “a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire.” The pure void references the open sign of a signifier without a signified. In other words, a signifier which references nothing in symbolic reality. This again is how Barthes sees the non-symbolic in his theories. “If the obtuse (Third) meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything - how do you describe something that does not represent anything?” If we cannot describe it or name it, that is because it is unknown to us. To know something is to have a symbolic representation for it which allows us to categorize and store it away in our minds; something which allows us to say this means that. It is precisely this unknown which draws us to art in the first place. It is the unknown which cannot be signified, which is beyond meaning that is at the heart of our desire for art. As filmmaker Godfrey Reggio has said, “Art has no intrinsic meaning. This is its power, its mystery, and hence, its attraction.” It is the idea that art can present something new and unknown to us which makes it so desirable. As Barthes has said, it is precisely those films and those photographs which contain the non-symbolic that are the most desirable, that are held in the highest regard. It therefore follows that the non-symbolic in film perception shares this characteristic of the object $a$: desire for something that strictly speaking does not exist.

The MacGuffin as object $a$ functions in the narrative film as the object cause of desire, even though it is empty in content. Miss Froy functions as the object of desire as the protagonists aim to find her even though she is barred from the screen. In other words, in

27 Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 64.
28 Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 163.
30 Carson, “Koyaanisqatsi: Essence of Life.”
terms of the screen as symbolic reality, Miss Froy does not exist throughout much of The Lady Vanishes. But because she motivates the characters and is the object of their desire, she functions as a return of the real through the symbolic, manifesting as fleeting replacement signifiers or Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz. As object a, Miss Froy is a pure void, barred from being represented on the screen. As in psychosis, the real returns, breaking through the symbolic screen to be represented by replacement signifiers, the tea label, the name on a dusty window, which appear and disappear as details, fleeting.

This is another feature of object a, that it appears in fleeting details. In psychosis, when the real as desire, is repressed, it “will emerge in little details, and hence Lacan’s insistence on hunting it down, on searching for desire in between the lines, where it is least obvious.” It is important to distinguish desire from an ordinary wish here. A wish is something we want consciously. But desire is fundamentally barred from consciousness. It is repressed real. So in the same way that the real does not exist (as in symbolic reality) so the object of desire does not exist in reality. We see the same characteristics in the non-symbolic in film. Barthes describes the Third Meaning in film perception as “at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive.” He also describes the punctum as that ‘detail’ of the photograph which pricks. These are the details that elude description. He even insists that the Third Meaning is so fleeting that one must look at the still images of the film in order to really witness it. He materializes the Third Meaning as smooth, as if any meaning assigned to it might slip off. Barthes even dubs the Third Meaning as the obtuse as in obtusus meaning “that which is blunted, rounded in form...like the blunting of a meaning too

31 Leader, Introducing Lacan, 84.
32 Ibid., 88.
33 Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 54.
clear, too violent.”\textsuperscript{35} Alternatively, he visualizes the punctum as something sharp, pointy; a detail that punctures through the layer of symbolic meaning, that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces…”\textsuperscript{36} Although Barthes visualizes the physicality of the obtuse and punctum as completely opposite, paradoxically, they carry the same fundamental characteristics of being a fleeting detail, the object of desire devoid of symbolic meaning.

Fleeting details are also how Žižek’s \textit{Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz} manifest on screen. Miss Froy is barred from the screen yet she returns through replacement signifiers which appear as tiny details which go almost unnoticed by the films protagonists. Iris and Gilbert have an entire conversation all the while the signifier ‘Froy’ which Miss Froy had marked herself upon the window lingers in the background between them. As quickly as Iris finally notices it, it disappears. Similarly, the Haniman’s tea label flies upon the window out of which Gilbert is gazing, only to be peeled away by the wind a moment later.

Miss Froy must return through these fleeting details in the symbolic because she is hidden from the symbolic reality of the screen. This is another characteristic of the object $a$ – as the object of desire, it is hidden from reality, “a gap in the centre of the symbolic order…a pure semblance of the Mystery to be explained, interpreted, etc.”\textsuperscript{37} During the Oedipal phase, Lacan designates the phallus as the object $a$, the object of the mother’s desire. The phallus is not the male penis but the maternal penis or the non-existent penis. Again, the object $a$ does not exist in reality. To pass through the Oedipal phase, the child must realize that it cannot be the missing phallus for the mother, for it is impossible. To Lacan, the best way to represent the missing object of desire, the object $a$, is with an object that hides it. So, if we want to represent the unrepresentable object $a$, that which cannot be symbolized because it is barred

\textsuperscript{35} Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 55.
\textsuperscript{36} ———, \textit{Camera Lucida}, 26.
\textsuperscript{37} Slavoj Žižek, “Alfred Hitchcock, or, the Form and Its Historical Mediation,” in \textit{Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)}, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), 8.
from symbolic reality, we must represent it with something else entirely which covers it. “As something missing, the phallic object is best represented by a veil or something which covers or conceals. How else can a lack be represented, after all, than by the image of a screen which points to something beyond itself?”38 In fact, when Miss Froy is finally found, she is literally hidden, veiled beneath layers of bandages which mask her identity. Magritte used this concept with his apple in one of his most famous paintings *Son of Man*. An apple masks a bowler hated man. Where most want to know what the apple itself is supposed to mean or represent, Magritte uses it as a veil, devoid of any meaning. As Magritte has said, it is what is hidden from reality that so intrigued him, not the visible object and its assigned meaning:

Well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It's something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.39

We desire what is hidden from reality, what is missing, what the symbolic order represses. This is the non-symbolic, the object *a*. This is what we perceive in film that cannot be named or described because it is hidden from symbolic reality. It is beyond symbolism. But it does exist as a return of the real, to a time before language when we lived through our senses. This is why the real can be found not only in film but in other artistic media as well, because they appeal to the senses. The return of the real takes the sign of *a* as the remainder of the process of symbolization in Lacan’s formulas of discourse. Art is discourse; it is communication. And in any discourse, there is a leftover piece which cannot enter the symbolic order. This is the mystery as Magritte would call it that cannot be

understood in verbal terms but can still be perceived. In fact, Barthes says it is the greatest films which contain this extra non-symbolic layer. That is because, as object $a$, it is what we desire, but what we also cannot grab onto for it appears and disappears eluding symbolic reality, not only in film or art, but every day of our adult lives.

**Conclusion**

Lacan’s theory of the three orders of the psyche, the real, imaginary, and symbolic has been used notably in media theory by theorists such as Metz, Baudry, Mulvey, and Žižek. Theorists like Metz used the film screen as a metaphor for the mirror in Lacan’s mirror stage in order to bring new understanding to how we identify with the characters we see on screen. Žižek used the film screen as a metaphor for the symbolic order, as the image is a representation, a signifier for something else. He used Lacan’s notion of the object $a$, the little ‘other’ as a way to investigate the film narrative, designating it as the object of desire which is effectively empty in content yet still exerts an influence within the narrative.

I am using Lacan’s triad structure of the psyche in media theory but in a different way. Many media theorists have suggested that it is possible to perceive film outside of symbolic structures. In other words, when we perceive film, it is sometimes possible to perceive more than what can simply be put into words. This, many have said, is the essence of art, to express what words cannot, to go beyond meaning to touch something much deeper. Although many theorists have written on this ability of art to ‘express the inexpressible,’ none have offered a reason for our ability to perceive what falls outside of the symbolic.

This is my intention, to offer a theory as to how we perceive beyond symbolism in film and to acknowledge that not everything, in art or in life for that matter, can be understandable. Perception is a major area in psychoanalysis which is why I contend that Lacan’s theories can be used to investigate this problem. Where others have used Lacan in
media theory, they have not used his theories in this area of media perception. In Chapter Two, I found the attributes of non-symbolic perception. Here, I have shown that these qualities can be attributed to Lacan’s theory of the object $a$. The object $a$, as a return of the real, is beyond symbolism and verbal language, for the real is the first order of psychological development, lost to us once we enter into language. It is a signifier without a signified. It cannot even be named, assuming only the variable sign, $a$. It returns in the symbolic order through fleeting details, evoking the idea that something is hidden from every day reality; that there is something more than what we see in the symbolic order. Based in the realm of the senses, it is the object of desire. It is not what we consciously wish for, but a hidden desire. These are the common attributes of non-symbolic perception of film and art. This is why what we perceive outside symbolism in film can be attributed to the one order of the psyche which contrasts the symbolic order. This is why it is the object $a$ which is at the root of why we perceive beyond symbolism.
Works Cited


