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Like Spectator, Like Subject: The Cinematic Framing of the Dialectics contra Object-Oriented-Ontology Debate

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the contemporary philosophical disagreement between dialectics and Object Oriented Ontology should be understood as a repetition of a debate in Lacanian film theory which began in the 1980s. What is at stake in both exchanges is the critical relationship towards subjectivity, specifically, its reduction to an ideological illusion or the radical reappraisal of the concept. Following an initial survey of the key moments and theorists in both contentions, the affinity between the philosophical work of Quentin Meillassoux and the film theory of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry is considered. While distinct in their approach, these three thinkers are united by an emphasis on subjective de-exceptionalization, each pinpointing a moment of hubris in which the subject assumes to find themselves reflected in the world, or cinematic image. For Meillassoux, Metz and Baudry, this mirroring ultimately has pernicious effects, as the material pre-conditions of subjectivity are left unaccounted for, and illusion is accepted as real. In this respect, a critique of idealism is shared between these thinkers. In their respective critiques, the work of Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan insists upon the cinematic screen and ontology as conflictual sites, characterizing the cinema spectator (and by proxy, the philosophical subject) as a rupture within ideology, rather than running parallel to it. From this dialectical standpoint, the severe duality between idealism and materialism is sublated through the recognition that both positions intrinsically rely upon each other. In placing these debates side by side, the interconnected histories and theoretical concerns of cinema and philosophy are elucidated, with reference to the field of cinematic and philosophical idealism.

KEYWORDS

dialectics, Object Oriented Ontology, subjectivity, film theory, Jacques Lacan

Introduction

In an article from 2000, Slavoj Žižek laments the broader state of the Humanities, arguing that the discipline has fallen into monadic relativism. As he remarks, “[c]inema theorists in Cultural Studies no longer ask basic questions like ‘What is the nature of cinematic perception?’” instead, “they simply tend to reduce such questions to historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations” (101). For Žižek, what the historicist turn has inaugurated is the “abandonment of the very question of the inherent ‘truth-value’ of a theory under consideration” (101). In addition to David Bordwell and Noel Carroll’s 1996 collection *Post-Theory*, an example of such a trend can be found in Janet Staiger’s 2000 work *Perverse Spectators*, which outlines the standard historicist position with regard to cinema:

I believe that contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives. These contextual factors are social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions.
(1)

Against Staiger’s insistence on immediate context, Žižek’s comments not only call for a return to truth within cultural inquiries but also to trace a greater interconnection between the fields of cinema and philosophy. In the contemporary context, the influence of film theory on the broader intellectual landscape has seemed to wane amid the further saturation of close historical analysis, which does away with theoretical and speculative claims in order to transcribe a scholarship grounded in limited historical periods. The prevalence of this approach marks the background of a contemporary philosophical debate, one in which Žižek is himself a participant, between the dialectical theorists and those who defend an Object Oriented Ontology (hereafter, OOO), with both camps agreeing that the historicism of the present day is inadequate and reductive. Beyond this shared critique, the crux of the debate between these positions is on how to theorize an alternative, with dialectics insisting upon a conception of subjectivity, which OOO seeks to do away with altogether to get at relations between objects. Notably, this debate is an exceptional case for not only considering the turn away from relativism within philosophy but also for apprehending an expected connection to film studies.

As this article will argue, the disagreement between dialectics and OOO emerges as a repetition of an earlier debate within psychoanalytic film theory, namely, between the early and later Lacanian film theorists on the topic of the cinematic gaze and its effect upon the spectator. In psychoanalytic theory, a repetition can never be dismissed as a meaningless occurrence, as it not only changes the signification of the original event but indicates a structural failure in the signifying chain. Within this failure, a symptomatic singularity emerges which prompts re-interpretation. What repeats in each iteration of the debate in focus is the question of subjectivity, namely,

whether it should be dismissed as an illusory remnant of Enlightenment thinking, or if it remains an essential concept for philosophical and cinematic inquiries. Despite their seeming incommensurability, for both the early Lacanian theorists, specifically the work of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, and the contemporary emergence of thinkers in the vein of OOO, New Materialism and Speculative Realism, in particular, Quentin Meillassoux, a similar trajectory of thought can be traced. Notably, for both schools of thought, subjectivity is an illusory construct, which marks the uncritical acceptance of ideology. As both positions outline, this acceptance leads to an unfortunate endorsement of idealism. On this point, the early Lacanian film theorists and object-oriented philosophies share a common enemy in the figure of the idealist, a dupe who can't apprehend the underlying materiality of a philosophical inquiry or cinematic apparatus. For Metz and Baudry, the idealist is cinematically captured by André Bazin, in addition to the models of thought expounded by Plato and Edmund Husserl. According to Meillassoux, the idealist figure par excellence is Immanuel Kant, whose insistence on the correlation between thought and being blinds him to material reality. While all of these thinkers see subjectivity as analogous with ideology, the later Lacanians, such as Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan, foreground the cinematic gaze as the point of rupture within cinema, coinciding with the emergence of the spectator (and subject) as a gap in ideology. In the terms of Jacques Lacan, instead of the Imaginary realm of identification, these later theorists emphasise the register of the Real as the radical site of spectatorship and encounter for the subject, which comes through the failure of transcendental subjectivity, rather than an elision of it. Through understanding the significant works and figures within each of these debates, the resonance between philosophical and cinematic inquiries comes to the fore, in particular, questions of subjectivity, spectatorship and idealism.

Contours of the Contemporary Debate

In the contemporary debate, the position of dialectics is taken up as the flagship approach by groups such as the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, which includes Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar, as well as the Lacanian current of thought in the United States of America, in figures such as Todd McGowan, Adrian Johnston and Russell Sbriglia. While acknowledging disagreements and divergences within these groups, these theorists have all contributed to enacting a critique of the litany of object-oriented approaches to philosophy through a combination of the psychoanalytic thought of Jacques Lacan and the philosophical work of G.W.F. Hegel. A crucial stance within this tradition is, against currents to dissolve the concept of subjectivity for a more free-form or decentralized mode of agency, to affirm the subject as an essential component of philosophical inquiry. This reappraisal is, however, not a mere return to the typical rationalist, Enlightenment ideal, but one that addresses the constriction of the subject by the signifier and points to where ideology fails. In "Beyond Interpellation," Mladen Dolar considers the psychoanalytic subject alongside the Althusserian subject. For Althusser, interpellation addresses an individual, conveying upon them a stable symbolic identity and

thus converting them into an ideological subject. This process is characterized as a clean “transition from a pre-ideological state into ideology: successfully achieved, it wipes out the traces of its origin and results in a belief in the autonomy and self-transparency of the subject” (77). In contrast to this seamless transition, Dolar claims that the subject for psychoanalysis takes the clean cut initiated by this process but adds the crucial frustration that interpellation is never completely successful and always produces a definitive remainder. For Dolar, this remainder, rather than an obstacle to the subject’s existence, forms the very basis for it, as “the subject is precisely the failure to become the subject” (78). Through this failure, the subject avoids total absorption into the ideological field, always exceeding its capture. What unites the thinkers of this tradition is a common philosophical investment in centring dialectics as the fundamental ontological and epistemological grounding towards the world, reappraising the necessity of previously dismissed categories of universality, subjectivity and philosophical negativity.

While there is relative uniformity and extensive collaboration between the dialectical theorists, the OOO side of the debate appears as a seeming plurality of positions. Initially, what unified most of this field was the signifier of Speculative Realism, a label at the forefront of several colloquiums and conferences in the late 2000s decade and was united by four main thinkers: Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier and Ian Hamilton Grant. In their unity, these theorists sought to trouble the reliance of continental philosophy on the transcendental subject, which stood in a position of exceptionality to the natural world and non-human objects. Since the turn of the decade, the cohesion of this field has fractured, with the notable break between Harman and Brassier and the proliferation of various other forms of object centred thinking taking up the alternative banners of New Materialism and Realisms. Without doubting the singularity of each position and articulation, these theorists are united by a common flat ontology, indicating a de-privileging of the Enlightenment subject and an elevation of, or, at least, a re-orientation towards the objectal world [1].

[1] Graham Harman has articulated the specificities of these internal variances in “The Battle of Objects and Subjects.”

Other prominent thinkers in this field, such as Jane Bennett, have a similar diagnosis but emphasise the affective capability of objects to appear “as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (1). Likewise, the work of Levi R. Bryant stands out as defending the turn towards the object, claiming that “while our access to objects is highly limited, we can still say a great deal about the being of objects” with Bryant describing his broader project of ontological realism as one which “refuse[s] to treat objects as constructions of humans” (18). The popularity of these object-oriented philosophies has likely been spurred by their insistence that the turn away from subject-object relations is an urgent part of ameliorating the effects of climate change. As Bryant puts it, “with the looming threat of monumental climate change, it is irresponsible to draw our distinctions in such a way as to exclude nonhuman actors” (24), while for Bennett “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (ix). In Bruno Latour’s *Facing Gaia*, eco-critical work is equally framed around the need to reorient discussions

regarding the nature and culture divide. For these theorists, a turn from the subject towards the material world of objects is a political gesture, given contemporary ecological crisis.

The debate between these two fields, one united by a dialectical approach and the other by an object-centred one, has found expression in several formats. The most likely origin of the exchange occurs in Graham Harman's 2009 *Prince of Networks*, which is an appraisal of Bruno Latour's work. In passing, Harman cites Žižek, alongside Alain Badiou and Jacques Lacan, as leaving "nothing to non-human entities" in contrast to Latour, who "lets non-human actors do as much ontological work as people do" (101). For Harman, Žižek peripherally falls into the category of thinker who denies the distinction between object and subject, implicitly elevating the human subject. From this brief encounter stems the 2011 anthology *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman and featuring contributions by Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston. While exploring the disagreements between their positions, this work notably links figures from either side of the debate to name a trend in philosophy towards the speculative claim and away from a focus on linguistics and cultural relativity. As Bryant, Srnicek and Harman claim in their opening remarks, every thinker in the volume has "certainly rejected the traditional focus on textual critique" and "begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and humanity more generally" (3).

The 2020 edited collection *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan and the Future of Materialism* marks a notable moment in this contemporary debate, with several prominent critics from the dialectical perspective, such as Mladen Dolar, Todd McGowan, Slavoj Žižek, Adrian Johnston, Alenka Zupančič and Russell Sbriglia contributing chapters that engage with the recent upsurge in what they call "recent constellations of materialist and realist thought such as actor-network theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology" which are united in calling "into question the continued relevance of cultural materialism, especially as regards its political efficacy" (Sbriglia and Žižek 1). In their introduction to the collection, Sbriglia and Žižek make clear the dialectical standpoint, which they refer to as the Lacano-Hegelian, as turning around the reappraisal of subjectivity, as different to classical conceptions:

[I]n opposition to the new materialists and realists, we insist on the necessity of continuing to "think subject" for any robust materialism or realism going forward, the subject that we would continue to think is not the (consciously) thinking subject, but the subject thought by the unconscious. (8)

Graham Harman explicitly responded to this collection, naming the current debate the "battle of objects and subjects" and accusing the contributors of *Subject Lessons* showing no evidence "of having learned anything new from the "New Materialist" figures," lamenting the collection as "a missed opportunity" ("The Battle of Objects and Subjects"). In response to

Harman's contribution, Russell Sbriglia's counters Harman's claim that the Lacano-Hegelian position is "fully blown idealism," instead formulating the notion of an extimate materialism, that is, a dialectical model of materialist thought (Sbriglia, "Notes Toward an Extimate Materialism"). Elsewhere, individual authors have raised the opposing side in their work, including Levi Bryant's dismissal of Žižek's treatment of objects as a form of "absolute correlationism," in his 2011 work *The Democracy of Objects* (81). An extended consideration of Harman and Bennett is explored in Žižek's 2017 *Incontinent of the Void*, while in the same year, Alenka Zupančič enacts a critique of Quentin Meillassoux's work in *What is Sex?!*. Another facet of this debate is the platform of public debate, as on several occasions Žižek and Harman have engaged in public conversations, notably at the Southern California Institute of Architecture on March 1st 2017, and again in Germany, hosted by the Munich School of Philosophy on December 1st 2018. Elsewhere, Harman and Todd McGowan participated in a direct discussion over the platform YouTube. This debate, conducted in a civil and respectful manner, was cast by the host "telosbound."

The Delusions of Subjectivity in Baudry and Metz

The debate between these two broad, but theoretically consistent groups is waged on the level of philosophy and critical theory, taking the endorsement and refutation of ideas as the primary mode of exchange. In the domain of film studies, the work of OOO has had less of an immediate impact than other cultural disciplines, such as architecture and video game studies. As Luka Arsenjuk argues, this absence stems "from a set of fundamental impediments (a denial of the reality of images, the exclusion of time and movement from aesthetic experience)" which make OOO "incapable of producing constructive effects in the domain of film theoretical research" (199). Arsenjuk goes further to claim that the broader emergence of the philosophical project of OOO might be read as "one of the symptoms of some wider post-cinematic realignment of the relationship between cinema and philosophy," in which film takes a less dominant place among cultural and aesthetic discussions (213). While the possibility of a direct exchange between object-centred philosophy and cinema might be compromised, several of their ideas find resonance in a prior debate within film studies surrounding the application of Jacques Lacan's work, specifically the concept of the gaze. By returning to the original articulation of the early Lacanian theory, and then the response from contemporary Lacanian film theorists, the cinematic framing of the present philosophical debate between dialectics and OOO is thrown into relief.

While the work of the early Lacanian film theorists precedes the object-centred philosophy of the 2000s by several decades, both groups share an analogous critical aim, namely, to emphasise that the human subject is not an exceptional figure in its environment, and to position a common theoretical opponent, the idealist. The form this argument takes in film theory is as follows: despite attempts to find points of attachment or connection via the process of secondary identification, the spectator is ultimately not part of the

cinematic fabric, with the figure who is ultimately duped by this manoeuvre taking the title of the idealist. To make this claim, they required the theoretical articulations of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser. The arrival of Lacan's work in French film studies circles followed the peak of his popularity in the 1960s, in which his public seminars were attended by important figures within the Parisian intellectual milieu such as Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault and Felix Guattari. By the 1970s, Lacan's work had been taken up in a variety of fields, not least, the emerging and not yet standardized discipline of film studies. In particular, the journal *Communications* was an important platform for many of what would become the movement of film theory and semiotics proposed by Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Pierre Oudart and Raymond Bellour. While disparate in their approaches to his thought, the writings of these theorists were all highly influenced by the work of Lacan, with Baudry focusing on the infantilising function of the cinematic apparatus, Oudart using the concept of suture to describe cinematic dynamics and Metz arguing that the screen obscures the symbolic cinematic structure underneath [2]. This theoretical position took up an almost sole focus on the essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" which was first delivered as a presentation in 1936 [3]. In this essay, Lacan details the formation of a subject's ego through the process of identification, with the mirror functioning as the site in which the subject identifies themselves with their specular image. Despite Lacan's later attempts in the 1950s to downplay the significance of this encounter compared to his theories of the signifier and sexuality as constitutive of subjectivity, this work has found popular appeal within Cultural Studies. Notably, for the early Lacanian theorists, the work of Louis Althusser was a theoretical bridge between the psychoanalytic insights of Lacan and the political emphasis of structuralist Marxism, particularly in essays where the social aspects of misrecognition are explored. As Althusser himself puts it, "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (173). The logical outcome of the early Lacanian film theorist's application of the mirror stage is a critique reminiscent of the Frankfurt School, with cinema subsumed by the political perniciousness of ideology.

[2] Outside of France, Britain was another location where several theorists shared an emphasis on the mirror stage and Louis Althusser. These writers were associated with the journal *Screen* and included figures such as Colin MacCabe, Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath.

[3] Todd McGowan also cites the Jacques Alain Miller essay "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)" as having a noted influence on this tendency.

The arrival of Jean-Louis Baudry's essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" in 1970 began this refashioning of film studies in France, pointing to the ideological underpinnings of previous phenomenological theories. Baudry's aim from the outset of the essay is to assert that the ideological effects produced by cinema had been ignored because of the assumed scientific and technological neutrality of the medium, with film critics placing almost exclusive emphasis on "the field of what is signified," to the elision of the "technical bases on which the effects depend" (40). For Baudry, the origins of this material elision stem from a tendency within Western pictorial representation, one that finds its culmination in photography and then cinema. In contrast to the multiplicity of perspectives in Greek art, for Baudry, paintings from the renaissance elaborated a logic of space based "on the principle of a fixed point by reference to which the visualized objects are organised" (41). The organization of space in this way

requires the construction of a subject position which coheres the otherwise discontinuous virtual image, elaborating the “space of an ideal vision” and assuring the necessity of a metaphorical and metonymic transcendence (41). In this sense, Baudry emphasises the fictive construction of the cinema spectator around a set of technical mechanisms, which are seemingly divine in their ability to introduce an impossible continuity. One such mechanism is the free-mobility of the camera beyond all physical limits, with Baudry emphasising the effect of fantasy that culminates in the capacity of the subject:

[I]f the eye that moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement – conditions fulfilled by the shooting and of film – the world will not only be constituted by this eye but for it. The movability seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the “transcendental subject.” (43)

As Baudry will later succinctly articulate in the 1975 essay “The Apparatus,” “[o]ne cannot hesitate to insist on the artificial character of the cine-subject” with the “entire cinematographic apparatus . . . activated in order to provoke this simulation: it is indeed a simulation of a condition of the subject, a position of the subject, a subject and not reality” (187). In the space of illusion and artificiality, the cinema spectator is blinded to the material reality of the filmic apparatus, relying on an illusory concept of subjectivity encoded with a catalogue of ideological mystifications.

Likewise, a major objective of Christian Metz’s 1977 work *The Imaginary Signifier* is to outline how cinema lures the spectator into assuming subjectivity. Metz makes a distinction between primary and secondary identification, with the former taking place between the subject and mirror, while the latter occurring between the subject and the camera. While the primary identification of the subject is thus assumed as constitutive before the subject encounters the cinematic apparatus, secondary identification is manufactured by the cinematic apparatus, eliding the material forces beneath the spectator’s feeling of mastery. As Metz writes, the cinema “succeeds in giving the spectator the impression that he is himself that subject, but in a state of emptiness and absence, of pure visual capacity” (96). As he describes this dynamic, Metz utilizes a distinctly objectal vocabulary, claiming that what allows for a film to unfold “is the fact that the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror . . . and is thus able to constitute a world of objects without having first to recognise himself within it” (46). Put succinctly, “[i]n the cinema, the object remains: fiction or no, there is always something on the screen” (46). Furthermore, when discussing the distinction between artistic forms, Metz claims that cinema’s singularity derives from its capacity to evoke the inhuman:

The cinema deviates from the theatre on an important point . . . it often presents us with long sequences that can (literally) be called ‘inhuman’ – the familiar theme of cinematic ‘cosmomorphism’ developed by many film theorists – sequences in which only

inanimate objects, landscapes, etc. appear and which for minutes at a time offer no human form for spectator identification: yet the latter must be supposed to remain intact in its deep structure. (47)

While Metz broadly insists on retaining the language of subjectivity, the theoretical gesture he makes is one of flattening. Specifically, the theory of imaginary identification shows that the subject, who assumes they are something of an exception regarding the cinematic image, is in reality, one object among others. Like the flat ontology articulated by OOO, the subject is not granted any privileged status or taken as the essential starting point for understanding reality. While Metz doesn't go as far as to theorize object to object relations, his framework for understanding how the cinematic apparatus works relies on this implicit mechanism of subjective flattening.

Metz's final 1991 work *Impersonal Enunciation* has been understood as marking a final stage in the theorist's critical work, contrasting with his earlier psychoanalytic and structuralist periods. As Robert Riesinger frames it, this final period of Metz's work marks a "third semiology" distinct from his work in *The Imaginary Signifier*, otherwise described by Tröhler as performing "a text-pragmatic turn with its studies on filmic enunciation under the banner of a return to linguistics" (24). Despite this periodization, the development from his 1970s work on cinematic identification to the final explorations of enunciation are unified by a progressive de-exceptionalisation of the spectator at the heart of the cinematic experience, with the 1990s work showcasing several dismissals of a human centred analysis of cinematic perception. In one instance, referring to structural linguistics, Metz writes that "words such as enunciator and addressee, with their suffixes, carry with themselves anthropomorphic connotations that are difficult to avoid and are quite bothersome in various fields, especially in film, where everything is based on machines" (4). Metz's refusal of subjectivity is drawn out further in his extended engagement with Francesco Casetti, an Italian film theorist whose 1998 work *Inside the Gaze* is taken as a foil to the anti-linguistic turn of *Impersonal Enunciation*. Specifically, Metz opposes Casetti's emphasis on deictic, or "anthropomorphic," enunciation to his own explorations of metafilmic enunciation, which supports "a complete instance of enunciation all by itself," outside of human mediation (10). Directly, Metz puts it: "[f]ilm enunciation is always an enunciation about film. More metadiscursive than deictic, it does not inform us about the out-of-field but about the text that bears within itself its own source [foyer] and destination [visee]" (18). Elsewhere, Metz describes film as existing between two absences, "the author, who disappears after the film is made" and "the spectator, who is present but whose presence is not manifested in anything, as he knows all there is to know about having no role" (16).

In this respect, Metz's critique of subjectivity forged in his earlier work is intensified, with both the notion of authorship and spectatorship, two positions occupied by subjects, simultaneously placed into doubt. For Metz, the only plausible field that might insist on the existence of a spectator is empirical audience reception studies, which "needs to constantly conjure up a Figure of the Spectator" for which the camera is oriented, although he

doesn't seek to follow this path (16). Whereas the subject of the enunciated marked the subjective trace upon the cinema in *The Imaginary Spectator*, the later work reframes this association, attempting to conceive this assumption outside of strictly human terms. As Cormac Deane interprets, at this stage in Metz's thought the "text and the people who watch it are of two totally different orders, and it is impermissible to allow anything from outside the text into film analysis" (xiii). Further, "it is therefore a mistake to look for humanoid "markers" of enunciation, traces of some kind of subject who is both inside and outside the film" (xiii). In Metz's own words, enunciation is "coextensive with film" (23). While in *The Imaginary Spectator*, the subject's ego is the assumed precondition for the cinematic apparatus, in *Impersonal Enunciation*, this subject is further de-centralized to the point of almost redundancy, as enunciation takes place without the mediation of the spectator. From the early 1970s work of Baudry to the later 1970s and final 1990s work of Metz, the subject in cinema is progressively debased to the point of complete redundancy.

A Shared Critique of Idealism

Like the object-centred philosophies, the early Lacanian film theorists position the idealist as their central theoretical opponent. Specifically, Metz places his theories on the imaginary function of cinema against the idealism of theorists such as André Bazin, who he takes to believe in a real fusion between the spectator and the cinematic text. Framing this branch of thought, as well as his disagreements with it, Metz writes:

It is certainly no accident that the main form of idealism in cinematic theory has been phenomenology. Bazin and other writers of the same period explicitly acknowledged their debt to it, and more implicitly (but in a more generalised fashion) all conceptions of the cinema as a mystical revelation, as 'truth' or 'reality' unfolding by right, as the apparition of what is. (*The Imaginary Signifier* 52)

Baudry also finds a similar issue with idealism's reliance on a what he calls the "principle of transcendence" which is inherited from Western perspective construction ("Ideological Effects" 42). The mystification that cinema inherits from painting and then photography is responsible for inspiring "all the idealist paens to which the cinema has given rise [such as we find in Cohen-Séat and Bazin]" (42). The idealist reliance on transcendence, for Baudry, seems to elicit the emergence of a subject which believes themselves to be divine, and thus attain mastery over the images before them. Describing the ideological role of film, Baudry underwrites idealism as the position which makes the mistake of assuming the subjectivity granted by cinema as real:

[cinema] constitutes the subject by the illusory delimitation of a central location – whether this be that of a God or of any other substitute. It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmatic-

ion of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism. (46)

While Metz isolates Bazin, Baudry draws his critique of idealism from philosophical references, namely, Plato's allegory of the cave and Husserl's transcendental deduction. For Baudry, Plato's tale of a group of people chained to a wall of a cave and forced to watch projected shadows "is the text of a signifier of desire which haunts the invention of cinema and the history of its invention" ("The Apparatus" 178). While Plato envisages a way out of the cave through a commitment to reason, Baudry argues that the *mise en scène* of the cave, that is, the arrangement of false images and emphasis on the passivity of the spectator, provides the foundational gesture of idealism, namely, to always keep the material world at an arm's length. In his own words, the "idealist's prudence" results in "the calculated progress of the philosopher who prefers pushing the real back another notch and multiplying the steps leading to it" (175-76). Elsewhere, Baudry isolates Edmund Husserl's procedure of phenomenological reduction (or bracketing) as running parallel to the constitution of continuity within cinema. Following Husserl, this technique involves excluding the inessential dimensions of a mental object to isolate the necessary conditions of its possibility. Notably, the "putting into parentheses" of reality which Husserl forwards in his description of the transcendental subject becomes another clearly cinematic correlate for Baudry ("Ideological Effects" 43) As he claims, for Husserl "it is a question of preserving at any cost the synthetic unity of the locus where meaning originates [the subject]" a function "to which narrative continuity points back as its natural secretion" (44). In each of these philosophical models, the subject puts themselves at a remove from reality, preferencing the immaterial world of ideas as their point of departure. While Metz and Baudry don't go as far as to label themselves as materialists, they do insist upon correcting the mistakes of idealism by emphasising the materiality of the cinematic apparatus.

Likewise, for the co-founder of Speculative Realism, Quentin Meillassoux, the critique of idealism takes the shape of a renunciation of correlationism, a broad region of philosophy defined as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5). In irrevocably fusing these two modes together, correlationism essentially disqualifies "the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another" (5). Meillassoux's critique rests not only upon the anthropomorphic excess of finding the subject in every relation but also in correlationism's incapacity to think what he calls *the ancestral*, that is, what pre-exists the emergence of humanity, "anterior to every recognized form of life on earth" (10). In its inability to comprehend what predates its own form of consciousness, correlationism is guilty of an untenable idealism that first appears as a duality (transcendental and subjective) before collapsing into a single form. As he writes:

Confronted with the arche-fossil, every variety of idealism converges and becomes equally extraordinary – every variety of correlationism is

exposed as an extreme idealism, one that is incapable of admitting that what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science. (18)

In this position, the idealist finds themselves proximate to “contemporary creationists” in “accordance with a ‘literal’ reading of the Bible” (18) surrounding the age of the earth. It is in this way in which the object-centred philosophy tends to centre material or matter as its central focus, as the turn away from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the later 20th century fixation on linguistic and cultural forms is marred by the same transcendental idealism which finds its expression in the subject. For Meillassoux, Metz and Baudry, the deviation from properly apprehending a material object – for the former, the ancestral fossil and for the two latter, the cinematic apparatus – leads to idealism. For Meillassoux, the correlationist’s inability to answer the call of the fossil is proof of their absolute idealism, whereas for Metz and Baudry, the spectator’s identification of their subjectivity with the cinematic image is equally proof of one’s idealist commitments.

At one point of his essay on the cinematic apparatus, Baudry offers a definition of his critical task, namely, to “determine what is at work on the idealist philosopher’s discourse unknown to him, the truth which proclaims, very different yet contained within the one he consciously articulates” (“The Apparatus” 174). This elucidation clearly highlights what is at stake within his as well as by proxy Metz and Meillassoux’s dismissal of the transcendental subject, that is, the unacknowledged assumptions the idealist brings forward through an uncritical acceptance of subjectivity. However, the ensuing appraisals of the cinematic and philosophical turn away from subjectivity have seemed to have returned to the form of Baudry’s statement, specifically, to consider what exactly is missed in the elision of the subject itself.

The Dialectical Subject: Copjec and McGowan

In *What is Sex?*, Alenka Zupančič addresses the tendency towards object-centred philosophy, explicitly taking up Meillassoux’s work in light of the contemporary debate between dialectics and OOO. For Zupančič, the emergence of new realisms and materialisms, in the vein of Meillassoux, Bennett and Harman, is symptomatic of a “feeling of frustrating impotence,” which has, after Descartes, been dominated by the axiom of Kantian transcendental finitude, namely that nothing escapes the discursive conditioning of correlationist philosophy (76). In contrast, the turn away from the subjective has a certain “redemptive charm of a project that promises again to break out into the great Outside, to reinstate the Real in its absolute dimension, and to ontologically ground the possibility of radical change” (76). However, for Zupančič, the truth of Meillassoux’s project doesn’t lie in this narrative, but rather in what this narrative (the “fantasy of the “great Outside”) ultimately attempts to escape from (76). Specifically, taking this fantasy seriously reveals it as “a screen that conceals the fact that the discursive reality is itself leaking, contradictory, and entangled with the

Real as its irreducible other side” (76). Put directly, “the great outside is the fantasy that conceals the Real that is already right here” (76). In this sense, Meillassoux’s ontology isn’t truly emancipatory, given its turn away from the transcendental subject involves an elision of the Real, the point in which the subject’s division and the gap in ideology is revealed. Zupančič’s invocation of the notion of the fantasy screen is a crucial link between the critique of OOO and the critique of the early Lacanian film theorists. For the psychoanalytic film theorists of the late 1980s onwards, the screen functions as the mediating platform by which the Real is encountered by the subject, and by extension, the spectator.

In the work of Joan Copjec, the category of absence, rather than identification, is insisted upon as the cornerstone of Lacanian film theory. In 1988, Copjec presented at the conference “Théorie du Cinéma et Crise dans la Théorie” in Paris, with Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour scheduled as respondents. Both Metz and Bellour expressed disagreement with Copjec’s paper, but a telling moment came when Bellour was asked to write a response essay to Copjec. As McGowan explains, “[i]nstead of an essay, [Bellour] wrote a letter to the journal explaining why he couldn’t write a response. In this brief letter, he contends that Copjec failed to appreciate the genuine contributions of both French and American psychoanalytic film theorists” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory* 65-66). As McGowan speculates, the “existence of the letter in place of an essence is an absence indicative of a trauma” (66). In the following year, Copjec published the essay “The Orthopsychic Subject,” an expanded version of her paper which addressed the reception of Lacanian theory in cinema studies. Copjec’s explicit theoretical target is the work of Michel Foucault, which she sees as having influenced a cultural turn which de-emphasises the place of the desiring subject. As Copjec writes, the “subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore wants to see” (70).

In contrast to Metz, for Copjec the subject doesn’t disappear with the manifestation of their desire but comes into being through it: “[d]esire in other words, the desire of representation, institutes the subject in the visible field” (70). In this sense, the subject emerges through what is lacking in the visual field. Furthermore, Copjec outlines the essential difference between the earlier Lacanians and her own reading of Lacan, claiming that in Lacanian “film theory the subject identifies with the gaze as the signified of the image and comes into existence as the realization of a possibility,” whereas for Lacan, the “subject identifies with the gaze as the signifier of the lack that causes the image to languish” (70). As Copjec goes on:

This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the absence of the signified; it is an unoccupiable point, the point at which the subject disappears. The image, the visual field, then takes on a terrifying alterity that prohibits the subject from seeing itself in the representation. (69)

For Copjec, the dialectic of lack and desire, rather than a deluded presence characterizes the position of the spectator in cinema, marking the emergence of the subject “in a conflictual place” (70). In this sense, the emergence of the subject in cinema doesn’t lead to an endorsement of idealism, but reveals the contradictions of this position.

The work of Todd McGowan stands alongside Copjec’s work in overturning the centrality of identification and the refusal of subjectivity in the Lacanian theory of cinema. Like Copjec, he insists upon the spectator’s encounter with the Real (the gaze) as the radical moment within the cinematic experience. McGowan’s most significant intervention into the field is the 2008 work *The Real Gaze*, which outlines the gaze not as a moment of subsumption within ideology, but as an exceptional moment of rupture within the spectator’s experience, which coincides with the emergence of the subject. As he puts it, “[t]he gaze is a blank point – a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience – within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film” (8). McGowan’s analysis of *Lost Highway* (1997) is one case example which captures the new Lacanian theory’s understanding of the gaze as traumatic and radical. Analysing the sudden appearance of headlights as an instance of the traumatic gaze, McGowan writes:

The shot of the blinding car headlights allows the spectator a direct experience of the gaze. Lynch shoots them so that the spectator must look away, an act which has the effect of rendering the spectator visible. Here, one experiences on both a physical and psychic level one’s involvement in the events on the screen . . . The gaze is nothing but our presence in what we are looking at, but we are nothing but this gaze. We are, that is to say, a distortion in Being. The direct encounter with the gaze exposes us as this distortion and uproots every other form of identity to which we cling. It marks a genuine existential turn in the cinema, made possible by films that present us with a divided cinematic experience. (209-10)

The turn in cinema that McGowan describes is equally a turn in cinematic theory, as the identification-oriented trajectory of the gaze is replaced by the gaze as an encounter with the Real.

For Copjec and McGowan, the cinematic gaze isn’t the mechanism of imaginary identification between the spectator and the image, but is rather the point in the visual field that accounts for the spectator’s desire. In opposition to previous theories, this new articulation of the gaze doesn’t emphasise the spectator’s disappearance from the cinematic image, but rather, the emergence of the spectator through the absent gaze. This vein of thinking shares the early Lacanian theory’s insistence that the spectator is not all seeing but takes this further in locating the subject within this moment of absence. Against both the initial wave of psychoanalytic film theory and the recent tendency towards flat ontology in cinema and philosophy, the reclaiming of the cinematic gaze by Copjec and McGowan emphasises the

spectator as an exceptional figure, however, one marked by lack, desire and the signifier. The dismissal of the spectator by Metz and Baudry, and the transcendental subject by Meillassoux, thus elides the dialectical possibility of both encountering the contradictions within subjectivity, but also in seeing a way out of the duality between idealism and materialism. While Copjec and McGowan's interventions into film theory aren't framed around materialism and idealism, their insistence on the conflictual nature of the subject (as spectator) opens up a space between these positions, not only showing that the early Lacanian film theorist's turn to the materiality of the cinematic apparatus elides the radical potential of cinema, but that claims to subjectivity need not simply recuperate the idealist position.

McGowan's interventions into the philosophical disagreement between OOO and dialectics clarifies that the crucial element in both debates is the reappraisal or rejection of the subject, which in turn elucidates the distinctions between the idealist, materialist and dialectical positions. As McGowan argues, the shared trait among these new materialisms and realisms "is their rejection of the idealist transcendental structure that Kant develops," directly stating that even though "they are not uniformly materialist, they are uniformly anti-idealist" ("Objects after Subjects" 80, note 13). With this in mind, McGowan takes up a defence of subjectivity, revealing that the subject eludes a simple assimilation into either materialism or idealism. In an essay addressing the work of Meillassoux, he takes issue with the philosopher's claim to know objects outside the frame of subjectivity. While acknowledging that Meillassoux doesn't take the openly speculative path of Graham Harman, McGowan claims that his commitment to empiricism over transcendental subjectivity ultimately undoes itself on its own terms. As he writes, the "problem with refuting transcendentalism on the basis of empirical observations is that these observations rely tacitly on some form of transcendentalism" as "his observations concerning the arche-fossil depend on a conception of time that some contemporary scientists have called into question" ("On the Necessity of Contradiction" 108). While initially Meillassoux seems to be occupying a materialist position, as McGowan rightly points out, his endorsement of empiricism implicitly relies on a platform of the exchange and debate of ideas, thus involving a minimal level of subjectivity. Without this transcendental backdrop, Meillassoux's materialist and object-centred philosophy loses its very foundation, revealing the immaterial core at the centre of his, and perhaps all materialisms.

Parallel with his critique of the apparatus film theorists, McGowan insists on the persistence of the subject, rather than its vanishing, arguing that the point of transcendental philosophy is that when objects are encountered, it is "through our subjectivity, which is a form rather than a being, and this form cannot be separated from the content of the event, no matter how removed the event is from subjectivity" ("On the Necessity of Contradiction" 110). Articulating his own position within the debate between idealism and materialism, McGowan makes the dialectical point that "[r]ather than choosing between idealism and materialism, we must turn to idealism and follow where it leads absolutely in order to become authentic materialists" ("Objects after Subjects" 79). In other words, while an idealist cannot

transcend their relation to the material world, equally, the materialist cannot overcome the world of ideas. Rather than an uncritical return to idealism, the perspective of McGowan and his fellow dialecticians refuses to completely side with either approach, instead taking the truth of both positions and insisting upon their inter-relation towards each other. Instead of approaching them as discrete categories, the dialectical theorists treat idealism and materialism as curves along the same möbius strip, as following the logic of one position inevitably leads to the emergence of the other [4].

[4] McGowan's articulation reverses Slavoj Žižek's re-development of dialectical materialism in which the split in the material world leads to the necessity of the idea. Despite the opposite starting and ending points of McGowan and Žižek, the unity between their positions is found in the dialectical relationship that emerges between the two categories.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that the contemporary philosophical disagreement between dialectics and OOO can be understood as a repetition of the debate between early and later Lacanian film theory in the 1970s and 1980s. After considering the contours of the present debate, I have argued that a lineage exists between the object-oriented philosophy of figures like Quentin Meillassoux and the film theory of Christian Metz and Jean Louis Baudry on the basis of a shared dismissal of transcendental subjectivity, which forms into a common rejection of idealism. In particular, from the initial work Baudry up to the late work of Metz, a progressive refusal of subjectivity takes place, mirroring Meillassoux's call to think the material world outside of the effects of the subject. However, in tracing the critique of early Lacanian film theory by Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan, and Alenka Zupancic's and McGowan's later criticisms of OOO, the significance of the notion of subjectivity and the elision of the Real in both debates takes on a renewed salience. Specifically, the insistence on the subject by McGowan in both debates reveals a dialectical position between idealism and materialism, one which shows the inter-reliance between each field. In placing these debates side by side, the interconnected histories and theoretical concerns of cinema and philosophy are foregrounded, showing how the fiercely debated concepts of subjectivity, spectatorship, idealism and materialism cannot be isolated to a single field, but remain shared concerns of both disciplines.

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