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“I thought perhaps the reaper was going to do something to you”:
The Serpent's Kiss and the Issue of Reverse-Objectification

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In this discussion, I examine the continual problem of female representation in the movie narrative. Movie narratives often rely on female characters situated in roles that find them objectified by males, allowing us to hypothesize--as the body of feminist film criticism has done since at least the mid-1970s--that she also becomes objectified by her viewing audience. In calling for a sweeping change in the mindsets of both male and female filmmakers, Sharon Smith precisely points out the problems of female representation:

The role of the woman in a film almost always revolves around her physical attraction and the mating games she plays with the male characters. On the other hand a man is not shown purely in relation to the female characters, but in a wide variety of roles--struggling against nature..., or against militarism..., or proving his manhood on the range. Women provide trouble or sexual interludes for the male characters, or are not present at all.¹

I will use Smith's observation as a springboard into a brief examination of female representation in *The Piano*.² Using this movie as a guide, I will then demonstrate how *The Serpent's Kiss*, much as *The Piano* does, provides us with a model of female empowerment--a model that subverts the patriarchal order of the movie narrative.³

As my colleagues, Bruce Brandt and Karen Zagrodnik have pointed out, *The*

¹Sharon Smith, "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research" in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* ed. Sue Thornham (New York: NYUP, 1999), 14.

²*The Piano*, dir. Jane Campion, Miramax Films, 1992.

³*The Serpent's Kiss*, dir. Philippe Rousselot, Berryer Films, 1997.

Serpent's Kiss follows the actions of garden architect Meneer Chrome (Ewan McGregor) as he struggles to design a garden for Thomas (Pete Postlethwaite) and Juliana (Greta Scacchi). Chrome is the pawn of Juliana's cousin Fitzmaurice (Richard E. Grant), who has come to the estate to bring ruin to Thomas and force Juliana to rekindle a love they shared when they were young. Fitzmaurice plans to use Chrome to bait Thomas into purchasing the most elaborate garden possible, and in the process, Thomas will ruin himself financially and force Juliana into his arms. Chrome influences all of the characters, but he most directly affects the life of their daughter, Anna (Carmen Chaplin), who has changed her name to Thea. Compelled by the Marvell poetry she continually reads and cites, Anna/Thea has grown quite fond of the wild foliage that grows upon the ground where the garden will be established--she prefers the chaos and disorder of the wild growth as opposed to the structured order of the new garden. In addition, Chrome's actions allow us to see Juliana as symbolically castrated (she is revealed to be barren), and she in effect reminds us that the threat of symbolic castration--and a removal of female empowerment--poses a problem for Anna/Thea.

What I find compelling is that Anna/Thea directly avoids her mother's plight through her struggle for feminine autonomy despite the patriarchal order of the home. Upon completion of the garden, Anna/Thea defies her symbolic castration (for we are to believe she has drawn her power from the wild flora) and returns even stronger. As I discuss momentarily, she becomes the resurrected destructive force when she "destroys" the finished garden by channeling the winds and bringing ruin to Chrome's design.

Similar themes exist in Jane Campion's *The Piano*. Protagonist Ada (Holly Hunter), a mute woman who plays her piano to convey her feelings, provides for us a glaring symbol of how female castration is represented in mainstream cinema, and the threat of castration is placed on her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin) to recognize that she too can fall victim to this. Ada arrives in colonial-era New Zealand as a product of an arranged marriage to Alisdair (Sam Neill). Their marriage is loveless and sterile--she defies his sexual advances and he, in turn, is unable to display love and affection for his new bride. The natives refer to Alisdair as "old dry balls," and in a cruel act, he sells Ada's beloved piano to Baines (Harvey Keitel). Baines, who begins to fall in love with Ada, works out an exchange with Alisdair--an exchange that will have Ada come to his home and teach him how to play. He begins to "sell" her piano back to her, key by key, in return for sexual favors. They eventually fall in love against these improbable circumstances, and upon finding out, the enraged Alisdair chops off Ada's finger with an axe.

When Alisdair cuts off Ada's finger, we see an example of what feminist film criticism suggests is a symbolic castration scene. Alisdair forces Ada's daughter, Flora, to deliver the finger/penis to Baines in a symbolic transfer of masculine power: Alisdair has "castrated" the autonomous Ada (autonomy, of course, is a trait that movies often reserve for the male protagonist), and in so doing, he strips her of her

power and attempts to take her back from Baines. Baines must receive the finger because he has, in effect, shown her how to attain her autonomy by helping her realize that love can never be forced. Flora, as the instrument of delivery--the instrument that conveys the transfer of power--allows us to see how the child plays a role in developing a narrative's power structures. (Flora, as we see in the movie, betrays her mother by taking a piano key inscribed with a love message not to Baines, as Ada intends, but to Alisdair.) By movie's end, despite Alisdair telling Ada that "I clipped your wing, that's all," Baines and Ada move to England, where he has procured for her a prosthetic finger.

The colonization of New Zealand, which serves as a backdrop of the colonization of women, allows us to imagine that the female character is often "colonized" within the movie narrative. Flora, like Anna/Thea does in *Kiss*, serves as a means to assess the plight of the mother. Like *Kiss*, the natural landscapes of the movie serve as a means to gauge the psychology of the narrative. We see that Flora "peeks" through holes and witnesses the primal scene between Ada and Baines. The first scene of Alisdair's cabin reveals a home on a barren, scorched landscape, and we see that in traveling to the cabin, they have to walk through muck and mud into the prison of his settlement. Later, when he first discovers Ada's affair with Baines, he literally traps her in the cabin. Ada's struggles throughout the movie suggest that the emancipation from the patriarchal order for the female protagonist is a journey fraught with horror.

Using feminist film criticism allows us to effectively access the plight of the female in the movie narrative. In Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" allows us to gauge how the female character

connotes something that the look [the masculine gaze both within the film and imparted by the viewers] continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of a penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threaten to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.⁴

She suggests three possible solutions to this: 1) "investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery"; 2) the "devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object"; and 3) "complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring

⁴Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 21.

rather than dangerous" (21).⁵

The Piano's narrative works to "investigate the woman" and, by movie's end, we see her "devaluation, punishment, [and] saving" as well as her reconstitution not as a "dangerous" woman but as an autonomous subject who realizes her love for Baines. In addition, we see similar actions at work in *Kiss*, where Anna/Thea has a dream about a reaper who has killed a bird. Anna/Thea has dreamed of this bird, and when, in reality, the reaper does kill the bird with his scythe (in an image that suggests the male is the castrator of the female), he then eats one of its eggs raw in front of her. We see a symbolic representation of a fate that she will share with her barren mother--she will become suppressed by the patriarchal order. Her mother, after hearing about her dream, tells her: "I thought perhaps the reaper was going to do something to you." Anna/Thea replies: "Sometimes I'm the bird."

We have a clue that Anna/Thea will suffer the same fate as her mother when later, upon looking upon an image of her younger self, Juliana comments that she looks like Anna/Thea. Chrome senses this, too, and in looking upon the potential garden, comments, while glancing at Thea: "I wonder if I should ever get used to the unevenness of this country." Thomas tells him: "Chaos awaits you... Can you create order?" Thomas's existing grounds-crew tells them both that the wild land should be left untouched, and in this notion, we sense that breaking the ground for the garden will create chaos rather than order. Chrome defies this notion, however, and declares his allegiance to the patriarchal order of the home: "I am set designer for every human drama... The garden reflects glory and prestige and power upon its owner." Thomas tells him, in further establishing the father's order: "I have no son. But I intend to leave something behind with my name on it. You have my wife as your inspiration--that should be enough for any man!"⁶

Whereas *The Piano*'s Flora serves as an instrument leading to her mother's symbolic castration, Anna/Thea--whose barren mother is already symbolically castrated--seems to have the over to control whether or not she will fall victim to the patriarchal order. While dining one evening, Thomas nearly cuts off several of Anna/Thea's fingers while he is carving the bird they will eat. Yet she avoids the

⁵We might also consider another key figure in feminist film criticism in order to make our segue from *The Piano* to *The Serpent's Kiss*. Teresa de Lauretis, in "Oedipus Interruptus," writes that "If narrative is governed by an Oedipal logic, it is because it is situated within the system of exchange instituted by the incest prohibition, where woman functions as both a sign (representation) and a value (object) for that exchange. And if we remark ... that the woman as Mother (matter and matrix, body and womb) is the primary measure of value, 'an equivalent more universal than money,' then indeed we can see why the narrative image on which the film, any film, can be represented, sold, and bought is finally the woman.... In cinema as well, then, woman properly represents the fulfillment of the narrative promise (made, as we know, to the little boy), and that representation works to support the male status of the mythical subject (in Thornham, ed., *Feminist Film Theory*, 88). de Lauretis suggests, too, that the "female position" is the "figure of narrative closure."

⁶Later, in reinforcing the movie's establishing a male dominated order, Chrome tells Anna/Thea--who is challenging his creation of the garden--that his father and his family were ruined by a great sea storm: "Nature is my enemy. It must be controlled."

danger posed by this symbolic castration while she also thwarts the ramifications posed through the vision of the reaper destroying the bird. She proceeds to flip the bird on its back, drawing attention to its asexual position and reminding those at the table--and those of us in the audience--that she could very well share that bird's fate. She flees the room, and Thomas declares: "She's not a child. She must be made to behave like a young lady! . . . I believe it's you [Juliana] indulging her that does the greatest damage of all."

The "serpent's kiss" symbol--a snake with its tail in its mouth--that Chrome places in the garden serves as an interesting reminder that the movie is occupied with a perpetual cycle of castration. Castration plays a large role in how we envision the actions of both Juliana and Anna/Thea as well as the actions of Chrome and Thomas. Kaja Silverman, in working with Mulvey's work, writes that "cinema's male viewer finds the vision of woman's lack threatening to his own coherence... [and that through fetishizing the female as an object of desire] an item of clothing or another part of the female anatomy becomes the locus of compensatory investment, and substitutes for the organ which is assumed to be missing."⁷ Silverman writes that feminist film theory has focused on the "woman-as-lack": "the coding of the female subject as inadequate or castrated within dominant cinema" and that in addition to the focusing on a physical object, viewers are also able to see a shift to her "inside": a revelation that the woman has "either committed a crime for which she has to be punished, or suffered from a crippling illness. Since in either case woman's castration can be traced back to her own interiority, this resolution of the male viewer's anxiety permits him to place a maximum distance between himself and the spectacle of lack--or indulge in an attitude of 'triumphant contempt' for the 'mutilated creature' who is his sexual other" (101-2).

Anna takes the role of the Other--Thea--an act that in itself promotes a feminist reading of her character. Elizabeth Cowie writes that the woman's identity can be seen in two ways: 1) as a "socially defined" identity that she recognizes as "other" and thus resists; and 2) as a "social agent and psychical subject [that] is also a divided subject . . . in that splitting which arises when the subject identifies with its image as other, taking that image as its own. As a result our image of ourselves always comes to us from outside ourselves, from the place of the other. The story of our identities is the negotiation of this otherness of ourselves."⁸ Anna/Thea struggles with this in the most obvious sense, but Juliana--as symbolically castrated feminine other--sees in her potential reawakening a chance to regain her sexual potency and recognize the role patriarchal society demands of her: the bearer of presumably masculine children--a role she has not fulfilled. In fact, it is Anna/Thea who has subverted this order

⁷Kaja Silverman, "Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects" in Thornham, 101.

⁸Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

because she avoids symbolic castration and emerges as the movie's most glaring symbol of power.

Through various interactions with Anna/Thea, Chrome begins to realize that he is falling in love with her--largely because her fierce independence and her love of nature have captivated him. Before the crew will destroy the wilderness that sits on the grounds where the garden will exist, Chrome tells Thomas that he is concerned about the destruction of the garden and its "consequence" on Anna/Thea. Yet Thomas rebukes him, and stays focused on the father's order. Thomas tells Chrome: "The fever is nourished by that chaotic place; it breeds distortion. An ordered, planned, patterned garden--governed by reason--with the reassuring works of man in evidence all around it." The wilderness is destroyed, and the garden completed. Chrome, however, keeps a small patch of "wilderness" in the garden for Anna/Thea, and upon seeing it, she declares: "It's far too well-behaved for me!"

The narrative of *The Serpent's Kiss* relies on the tensions between the mother/daughter relationship, and how this relationship can illustrate the plight of the female who tries to shake off the constraints of the patriarchy. Juliana, who senses that Chrome and Anna/Thea are experiencing feelings for each other, begins to wonder if Chrome--whose role as a gardener is not the most subtle symbol--can help her both eliminate her barrenness and regenerate passion in her life, for her marriage to Thomas is constructed as loveless and routine. It is Chrome, ironically, who suggests that Thomas include a "hothouse" in the garden. The hothouse will contain numerous exotic plants. Juliana welcomes the idea, and she watches as Chrome troubleshoots he building for drafts. He tells her that the hothouse space "must be controlled very precisely...an awakening...a resurrection" will take place when the seeds arrive and are allowed to germinate in their new home. Juliana, too, wants the hothouse (and Chrome) to serve as a means for her "awakening." She tells Chrome that she needs an "expert's touch." Although Juliana and Chrome never physically act upon the sexual energy in the hothouse because Chrome is too infatuated with Anna/Thea, their time together allows us to see how the constrained female can attempt to manipulate the masculine order so that she might break free of its rigid boundaries. It is shortly after this hothouse scene that Anna/Thea brings on the storm that destroys the garden and the hothouse, demonstrating that, like her mother, she wishes to break free of the patriarchy and experience a sense of autonomy.

Because both women attempt to manipulate Chrome to achieve their own goals (Anna/Thea wishes to return to the "wild"; Juliana wishes to reconstitute the passion of her marriage), Chrome becomes symbolic of what I call reverse-objectification. (As I mentioned earlier, he is also the instrument that Fitzmaurice uses to enact his scheme.) This process ultimately forces him to confess the scheme and escape. He and Anna/Thea end up at the sea, while Thomas and Juliana rekindle their relationship. They sit and stare at the ruined garden, and Thomas declares: "We'll all have to learn to do without. We must start again."

Juliana, through her travails, curiously has thwarted the potential for Anna/Thea's

to be completely objectified by the patriarchy. Anna/Thea does indeed represent a subjective presence, finally freed from the clutches of the patriarchy when her father realizes she is a person and sends away the cruel physician he has hired to cure her of her "ill humors." The narrative reveals an objectification of Chrome--he is the object of both Anna/Thea (who *takes him with her* to the sea) and Juliana as well as Thomas and FitzMaurice. By the end of the narrative, we see in the image of Juliana and Thomas speaking of "starting again" that Juliana, too, has regained her own subjectivity because Thomas no longer recognizes her as only a procreator, but as a life partner.

It is interesting to note, finally, that as feminist film theory continues to fill in the gaps of a lost female history by moving from subject-position and psychoanalytic theories into the realm of assessing the female's power not as sexual equal but as an equal earner (equal to the male in the realm of capitalism), Juliana and Thomas end up nearly ruined, equals in that regard as well. Their new start suggests that they, like Anna/Thea and Chrome at the sea, will begin their new lives on equal ground. But yet there is the grim specter that, as Mulvey writes in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" there still exists a problem in narrative cinema, whereupon the "woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (30). The characters in these movies begin to show us a move toward a female subjectivity, and this subjectivity--as the conclusions of both movies suggest--reveals itself in unique and at times unpredictable ways.