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Cinematic Desire and Fantasy in Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La Invención De Morel* (1940)

Desejo e Fantasia Cinematográficos em A Invenção de Morel (1940) de Adolfo Bioy Casares

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze the relationship between the concepts of desire and fantasy, as understood by Lacanian theory, and their manifestation in cinema. In order to do so, it explores and discusses cinema's influence over literature, focusing on how this relationship is reflected in the novel *La Invención de Morel* ([1940] 1953), written by Argentinian author Adolfo Bioy Casares. The analysis employs scholarship from film critics McGowan (2007), Metz (1982), Zizek (1989, 2006), Mulvey (1975, 1989), and others through the lens of Psychoanalytic Film Theory.

KEYWORDS: Literature and Cinema, Psychoanalytic Film Theory, Desire, Fantasy, *La Invención de Morel*

RESUMO: O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar a relação entre os conceitos de desejo e fantasia, conforme compreendidos pela teoria lacaniana, e sua manifestação no cinema. Para tanto, explora e discute a influência do cinema sobre a literatura, com foco em como essa relação se reflete no romance *A Invenção de Morel* ([1940] 1953), escrito pelo autor argentino Adolfo Bioy Casares. A análise emprega referencial teórico de críticos de cinema tais quais McGowan (2007), Metz (1982), Zizek (1989, 2006) e Mulvey (1975, 1989), dentre outros, sob a ótica da Teoria Psicanalítica do Cinema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura e Cinema, Teoria Psicanalítica do Cinema, Desejo, Fantasia, *La Invención de Morel*

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1. INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

> *"Comencé a estudiar el lugar exacto de la sala donde Faustine mira y sonríe. Si alguna vez llego a ese lugar – pensé – estaré al alcance de sus miradas. Si logro moverme con suficiente rapidez, tal vez las palabras lleguen a sus oídos, tal vez ella me conteste."*[3] (*La invención de Morel*, Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940)

One particular paradox concerning cinema as an audiovisual medium is its intrinsic capacity to capture moments in time, creating the illusion of making them perpetually accessible yet forever out of reach. A characteristic which is often noticed from Film Theory and corelated scholarship. In Giles Deleuze's *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986), for instance, the philosopher suggests that cinema creates a movement-image that represents time and desire in ways that challenge conventional perceptions of reality. The desire to interact with a cinematic image, which will be further discussed within this paper, exemplifies how cinema produces a reality that is simultaneously present and inaccessible, aligning with Deleuze's view of the image as both a manifestation and a mediation of desire. A simulacrum, to quote Jean Baudrillard's (1981) term, i.e. a medium that constructs hyperreal scenarios, merging and distorting the boundaries between reality and fiction. However, so has literature long been.

It is no surprise, then, that the influence of literature on cinema has been widely acknowledged by the general public, writers, and scholars alike. Since the emergence of cinema, writers and critics have debated the relationship between these two art forms. While some were enthusiastic about this new medium and its connection to literature, others viewed it in a far more pessimistic light. Writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), for instance, offered a wholly negative assessment of film adaptations of novels, perceiving them as a predatory attack by cinema on literature by sarcastically posing that

[3] Free translation: I began to study the exact spot in the room where Faustine looks and smiles. If I ever get to that place – I thought – I will be within reach of her gaze. If I manage to move quickly enough, perhaps the words will reach her ears, perhaps she will answer me.

> [a]ll the famous novels of the world with their well-known characters and their famous scenes only asked to be put on the films. What could be easier, what could be simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results have been disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. (Woolf, 2009, n.p).

Despite Woolf's lament over cinema's alleged parasitic nature, the relationship between cinema and literature is not truly one-sided; literature was also shaped by the arrival of this new medium. Actually, both art forms have influenced one another to such an extent that cinematic language increasingly permeates contemporary writing, reshaping storytelling. As Jonathan Foltz discusses in *The Novel After Film*, "one can appreciate this fact by taking stock of the many genres and textual forms that arose in conjunction with the cinema: including scenarios and screenplays, synopses, novelizations, and serialized tie-in fiction" (2018, p. 20).

Thus, it is a misconception to minimize cinema's contributions to literature. For as André Bazin observes, "[i]t is in fact commonly agreed that the novel [...] has come under the influence of the cinema" (1967, p. 61). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, cinema represented the culmination of groundbreaking developments in visual technology that shaped the consciousness of the modern era. Its emergence as an art form offered writers new creative possibilities. Colin McCabe, discussing Fredric Jameson's reflections on cinema, points out that "new media are not simply added to an existing discrete set of technologies, audiences, and forms, but that each new form of media reconfigures a tightly integrated cultural-economic ecosystem" (2003, p. 16). This same notion establishes that cinema had, still according to the scholar, "repercussions across the whole range of aesthetic possibilities" (MacCabe, 2003, p. 16), affecting not only literature but also theater, dance, painting, and other arts. Indeed, as Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford poetically assert:

> Harder, saner, nearer the bone; dismissive of weary abstractions and the insidious ideologies that lurked within them; machinic, free of sentimentality, and able to be assembled in new and unpredictable ways: how much Modernist literature owes to the cinema, its techniques and forms, is still a long way from being properly ascertained. (2003, p. 3).

One cannot overlook the irony in citing such a quote, as Woolf, mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper, was herself a modernist writer whose storytelling techniques –

most notably the stream of consciousness – are often described as cinematic. For in the context of the early 20th century, this influence becomes particularly evident. As Foltz observes, "the early film culture was a culture of writing" (2018, p. 20). A fascination with both the limitations and the potential of cinema seemed to occupy the minds of modernist authors and critics, eventually reflecting in their writings. For instance, despite her criticisms of novel-to-movie adaptations, Woolf also speculated on the possibility of a better cinema, one where the medium's unique artistic language could be used to express things that other art forms had not been able to express due to their inherent limitations when she suggested that "[…] if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures, the actual words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression". (Woolf, 2009, n.p.). Foltz further notes that while critic Roger Fry did not initially recognize cinema as an art form in itself, he acknowledged that it had the same effect as the arts in "revealing us to ourselves [and enabling us to] see what we had failed to see, feel what we are always failing to feel" (2018, p. 35). Meanwhile, Tolstoy, quoted by Jay Leyda (1960), commented on how cinema was poised to "make a revolution in our life — in the life of writers," since "in life, too, changes and transitions flash by before our eyes, and emotions of the soul are like a hurricane."

As noted, there seemed to be a recognition that cinema could capture something that eluded other arts. Additionally, writings on cinema highlighted its potential to reshape and extend the living experience of its spectators. Sigmund Freud, for instance, perceived the image of cinema as "an unexpected extension to our sense of sight, a sort of telepathy of the eye" (*apud* Marcus, 2007, p. 33). Marcus remarks that this observation aligns with Freud's belief that "all the forms of auxiliary apparatus which we have invented [are] for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions." She also notes that similar observations were made by filmmaker and film theorist Jean Epstein, who attributed to cinema "the unexpected extension of our sense of sight" (*apud* Marcus, 2003, p. 33). Extending this argument to the emergence of novel art forms, it is evident that new modes of expression introduce innovative elements to artistry. These elements are likely to influence and merge with existing art forms, reflecting a process intrinsic to the evolution of art itself.

One of the most ambitious accounts of the potentialities of the cinema comes from novelist and critic Robert Herring. As Marcus notes, Herring envisioned cinema as a revolutionary art form with the capacity to transform not only artistic expression but also the very nature of perception and experience. He believed that cinema could synthesize various sensory elements, creating an immersive and multifaceted form of storytelling that no other medium could achieve. For

> [h]is models of the destruction of the 'aura' (the distance between spectator and spectacle) and of the blurring of a body/world division as the spectator inserts him or herself into the spectacle are characteristic of modernized vision and its altered perceptions of subject/object relationships. (Marcus, 2007, p. 41, *author's emphasis*)

He takes this idea further by imagining (Marcus, 2007, p. 41) "[t]he film of the future [, which] will not need to be seen by the eye: it will be felt, heard, smelled, and tasted. Its shapes will be made of all matter. The film will not be watched but lived" This visionary perspective highlights Herring's belief in cinema's potential to transcend its current form, transforming into a medium that engages all senses and blurs the line between reality and representation. The critic adds that

> If the voice can leave this machine, as I know it can, and be itself, why should not the visual image leave the screen, why should we not do without screens? They are giving stereoscopy to the image, giving them depth and solidity. They will be able to be brought into the room, as the voice is. It is after all, absurd to be tied down to a screen. There was a time when one was tied down to a canvas on which only static things could be represented. Before that, man could keep nothing of himself. Little by little that has been changed. First what he did can survive, now what he is. First the work of his hands, work of brain, the effects of his hands and brain. But all still and mute. Then his voice could be kept, and his image could be kept. Moving. Now they will have to be detached, and instead of him contenting himself with making dolls and statues and music he could only hear as it was being played, he will have these images in which sound and sight meet, detached so to speak from their owners. Man making man, of a kind. (Herring, 1999, p. 56).

Herring's speculation, as an overall representation of the revolutionary role that film occupied in the modernist consciousness, is particularly relevant for this paper. Our object of analysis consists of the modernist novel *La Invención de Morel* (1953), by Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914-1999), which ambitiously portrays a mechanical invention that resembles Herring's vision for the future of cinema. Originally published in 1940, the novel encapsulates various perceptions

and conjectures about cinema and other visual technologies that permeated the imagination of contemporary writers. The cinematic aspects presented in *La Invención de Morel* have been explored by numerous critics. For instance, Edgar Morin, while discussing the relationship between cinema and *La Invención de Morel*, compares Morel's invention with his concept of total cinema. According to Morin:

> Morel's invention proposes the final cinematographic myth: the absorption of man into the universe of doubles so that — at last — eternity saves him just as he is. This way, it shows us that if the latent myth of the cinematograph is immortality, the total cinematograph is itself a variant of imaginary immortality. Is it not in this common source, the image, the reflection, the shadow, that the first and ultimate refuge against death lies? (2005, p. 44)

Besides Morin, other authors have discussed *La Invención de Morel* in relation to cinema. Benjamin Fraser (2008) explores the reconciliation between film studies and geography in *La Invención de Morel*, while María del Mar Martín Leal (2023), building on the relationship between cinema and immortality posited by Morin, extends her analysis beyond the novel to other films inspired by *La Invención de Morel*, such as Alain Resnais's 1961 feature film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*.

The speculative nature of *La Invención de Morel*, which reimagines cinema to its full philosophical and utopian potential, reflects the subsumption of technological advancements under the creative potential of fictional stories, particularly those labeled as science fiction. Marcus (2007, p. 44) highlights this connection between the period's technological inventions and fiction, noting that Thomas Edison – the inventor of devices similar to the cinema, such as the Kinetoscope and the Vitascope – had his own plans to write a science fiction novel. This anecdote reveals what Gaby Wood points out as "the inseparability in this period of science-fiction fantasy and technological inventions, such as the creation of moving images" (2002, p. 125).

This paper, however, is not limited to analyzing the influence of cinema on the writing of *La Invención de Morel*. It is primarily concerned with how cinema creates a fantasmatic reality saturated with ideology, capable of producing and manipulating the desires of its spectators. As Murphet and Rainford (2003, p. 6) argue, "the role of cinema in the twentieth century's refashioning of not only art and literature, but of subjectivity, desire, and the social itself, has

been inestimable" It is precisely the relationship between cinema, desire, and social life that creates the most compelling parallels with the cinematic machine in *La Invención de Morel*. The invention can be interpreted as metaphor for cinema itself (or the potentialities of cinema as speculated by modernists). To understand how this perspective affects the psyche of the characters in the novel, particularly Morel and the unnamed protagonist, this paper utilizes psychoanalytic film theory as its point of departure, as this approach allows for an extensive discussion of the nuances of desire and fantasy that pertain to the novel's narrative.

Psychoanalytic film theory, as the term implies, is an academic framework that applies principles of psychoanalysis to the study of film, focusing on how cinematic texts reflect and shape psychological processes and desires. Emerging in the early 20th century, the theory draws from the foundational scholarship of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan that explored the unconscious mind, repression, and desire. The formal scholarly application of these ideas to film began in the 1970s with scholars such as Laura Mulvey, whose essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) introduced the concept of the 'male gaze,' examining how cinema perpetuates patriarchal structures by objectifying women. Another key figure, Christian Metz, published *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* ([1977] 1982), which examined how films serve as visual representations of unconscious processes and how cinematic language functions as a form of symbolic communication. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, contemporary scholars like Teresa de Lauretis and Slavoj Žižek have expanded the field. De Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) explored feminist psychoanalytic theory in film, while Zizek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and the later documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) applied Lacanian psychoanalysis to contemporary film analysis. However, before addressing those psychoanalytic film theory constructs, it is important to grasp the psychoanalytic concepts from which the field operates in order to build a solid foundation for our further analysis.

2. DESIRE AND FANTASY: A LACANIAN UNDERSTANDING

It is widely acknowledged that Lacan significantly expanded upon Freud's ideas, emphasizing the complexities of the unconscious mind. Thus, Lacan's concept of desire is not merely a straightforward wish for a specific object, but rather an ongoing, elusive pursuit that is

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rooted in the unconscious. For Lacan (1977), desire is characterized by its insatiable nature and its reliance on the *object petit a*, an elusive object of desire that is forever unattainable, symbolizing the gaps and lacks within the subject's experience. This concept of desire underscores the perpetual sense of incompleteness that drives human behavior and thought.

Evans (1996) poses that fantasy, on the other hand, plays a critical role in Lacanian theory as a mechanism through which individuals construct and negotiate their desires. For according to Lacan (1998a), fantasy is a symbolic narrative that provides a framework for experiencing and managing desire. Thus, it is through fantasy that individuals attempt to reconcile their fragmented sense of self with their desires, creating a cohesive yet illusory scenario that masks the underlying lack. This interplay between desire and fantasy is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977, 1998a, 1998b), offering insights into how individuals grapple with their internal conflicts and aspirations.

Desire arises from a fundamental lack, which Lacan attributes to a primordial loss experienced by the subject. This lack emerges through a process of separation and alienation that begins in early childhood. Lacan argues that the subject becomes aware of their own lack when they recognize that they are not in a state of unity with the mother; instead, both the child and the mother are separate, desiring subjects. Bruce Fink (1995) elaborates on this process, describing it as a critical moment of realization for the child: a fundamental separation occurs when the child becomes aware that they are not one with the mother but an independent being with their own desires, distinct from those of the mother. This recognition initiates a perpetual quest for the lost object, the aforementioned *objet petit a*, which Lacan identifies as the unattainable object that drives human desire. Thus, *the objet petit a* represents the residue of the original loss, a persistent reminder of what the subject can never fully recapture, shaping the trajectory of their desires throughout their life.

Fink (1995) also describes the Lacanian concept of alienation as the institution of the symbolic order, in which the subject is submerged in language and becomes eclipsed by signifiers that are external and foreign to them. As the subject is plunged into the social order – which, according to Lacan's theory, is marked by language – this brings another loss to the subject. Linda Williams (1981, p. 40) expands on this explanation, commenting on how, through the mediation of language, "the human subject is divided from itself, alienated by the effect of the

signifier". She notes how this 'intrusion of language' – which is equated with the interdictions of the Law of the Father in the Oedipus phase – "marks the end of the Imaginary unity with the mother, causing the child to renounce and repress what can now be called desire" (Williams, 1981, p. 40). Entering the symbolic order thus inevitably forms the lack in the subject. As she puts it, "all desire is thus, fundamentally, a desire for what has been irretrievably lost within the subject itself."

This break of unity leads to the formation of the *objet petit a*, which Fink describes as:

> [t]he remainder produced when that hypothetical unity breaks down, as a last trace of that unity, a last reminder thereof. By cleaving to that rem(a)inder, the split subject, though expulsed from the Other, can sustain the illusion of wholeness; by clinging to object a, the subject is able to ignore his or her division. (Fink, 1995, p. 59).

The *objet petit a*, in this way, becomes the ultimate cause of desire. It is the *objet petit a* that the desiring subject intends to obtain, as its possession could remediate the original losses they experienced. Tood McGowan (2007, p. 6) provides an account of this process by stating that

> The *objet petit a* is in each case a lost object, an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject. It is the loss of the object that inaugurates the process of desiring, and the subject desires on the basis of this loss. The subject is incomplete or lacking because it doesn't have this object, though the object only exists insofar as it is missing. As such, it acts as a trigger for the subject's desire, as the objectcause of this desire, not as the desired object.

However, as "the object only exists insofar as it is missing," the *objet petit a* cannot ever be actually apprehended by the desiring subject. As McGowan (2007, p. 6) points out, "though the subject may obtain some object of desire, the *objet petit a* lacks any substantial status and thus remains unobtainable". This means that the subject is always pursuing something they can never fully attain. Interestingly, Lacan claims, in Seminar V, as quoted by McGowan, that "what we find at the foundation of the analytic exploration of desire is masochism." If we recognize the *objet petit a* as unattainable, this proposition makes a lot of sense, as the actual goal of desire is "not finding its object, but perpetuating itself" (McGowan, 2007, p. 9).

If the *objet petit a* leads to an unending desire, or desire that perpetuates itself, fantasy appears as a solution, albeit not a completely satisfactory one. For Lacanians, fantasy is closely related to the Imaginary register, the process of ego formation that Fink (1995, p. 36) describes

ISSN: 2448-0916

"as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images, tantamount to a fixed, reified object with which a child learns to identify, which a child learns to identify with him or herself." Fantasy operates similarly, creating ideal images that the subject clings to in order to escape the disappointment of not obtaining the *objet petit a*. As Zizek (1989, p. 114) explains: "fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the desire of the Other". McGowan complements this idea by highlighting the fantasmatic scenario created by the fantasy:

> Fantasy does not give the subject the object of desire. Instead, it furnishes a scene in which the subject can take up a relation to its impossible object. The fantasmatic scenario provides a setting in which desire can locate itself, thereby alleviating the constitutive indeterminateness of desire. Fantasy transforms the dissatisfied subject of desire into a subject satisfied with an imaginary enjoyment. (McGowan, 2007, p. 37)

Such argument seems to find its roots in Zizek's (1989) Lacanian reading, that emphasizes that this frame sustains the subject's desire by making the impossible object seem tangible, even if only in the realm of imagination. The philosopher argues that fantasy does not simply fulfill a lack but structures our very relationship to reality by organizing our desires. Additionally, as posed by Joan Copjec (2015), fantasy does more than offer a scenario for impossible objects; it also constructs a unique subjective position for the individual. Fantasy, gives form to the excess of the drive, allowing the subject to articulate a distinctive way of being in relation to lack and loss. Thus, fantasy does not only resolve the indeterminateness of desire but also produces the subject's unique modality of enjoyment, which adds nuance to McGowan's conjectures on the reason why fantasy is such a seductive mechanism for the subject, when he poses that

> [i]t doesn't eliminate loss as such, but it holds out the possibility of its elimination, the possibility that the subject could relate to the present object of desire rather than the absent objet petit a [...] Fantasy relieves the subject from the burden of perpetual lack; within fantasy, lack magically becomes contingent rather than constitutive". (McGowan, 2007, p. 81).

Thus, fantasy, according to Richard Kearney (1988), operates as a dynamic interplay between the possible and the impossible, where desire is both projected and contained. Kearney (1988) highlights its creative and transformative potential, viewing it as a means to engage imaginatively with the unknown or the Other.Therefore, fantasy functions as a fantasmatic

ISSN: 2448-0916

solution that provides the subject with the illusion that their desire can be fulfilled and the object of desire can be attained. By creating and nurturing a fantasy, the subject can maintain the belief that the fundamental lack that has characterized their relationship with desire can be overcome, as if it were not an intrinsic component of their identity. However, considering a feminist perspective on Lacanian approach to the matter presented by scholars such as De Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender* (1987), fantasy can serve as a space for both the reiteration and the contestation of dominant cultural narratives. Hence, in Lauretis' view, fantasy is a site where desire is articulated not only through a personal psychological framework but also through socio-cultural and political contexts. Such perspective complements the aforementioned arguments by suggesting that while fantasy provides a scenario for desire, it is also embedded within broader ideological structures that shape what can be imagined and desired.

2.1. Psychoanalytic Film Theory

Cinema, as a technological apparatus that produces fantasmatic images on a screen for the delight of its spectators, inevitably conveys the impression of being particularly conducive to discussions about fantasy and desire. Psychoanalytic film theorists, in particular, have sought to understand how these concepts apply to the cinematic experience. As an example, Mulvey posits that

> The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, […] Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. (Mulvey, 1989, p. 16)

Thus, Mulvey considers the images on the screen to be transformed into objects of desire by spectators who long to conquer them through their gazes. However, aligned to De Lauretis (1987) at this point, she identifies a discrepancy between the one who watches and desires and the one who is watched and desired. For according to Mulvey, cinema also reveals itself as an ideological conduit for the values of our sexist society, positioning the medium as a vehicle for male visual pleasure. For

> [i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1989 p. 19)

Mulvey's arguments align as well with those of Christian Metz (1982) on the role of the spectator's gaze in the cinematic experience. As Metz (1982, p. 54) puts it, "[t]he spectator is absent from the screen as perceived, but also (the two things inevitably go together) present there and even 'all-present' as perceiver. At every moment I am in the film by my look's caress." The expression 'all-present perceiver' seems to indicate an illusion of mastery, as if the spectator, through imaginary identification, could possess the cinematic images on the screen. Additionally, before Metz, John Berger (1990) had already presented a parallel idea that in Western art, men act while women appear. The scholar suggests that women are portrayed primarily as objects to be looked at, their value derived from their appearance and the pleasure it provides to the male viewer.

In this sense, Berger's concept of 'men look, women are looked at' aligns with Mulvey's argument about the male gaze's dominance in visual culture, reinforcing the notion of a split between active/male and passive/female roles. Both scholars' shared idea has faced criticism, though. Therefore, the women on the screen exist purely as fantasy, meant to be consumed by the eyes of male spectators and male characters who captivate the viewer as the "image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 21). Cinema, then, becomes a game of dominance, in which men assert ownership over women.

Scholar Griselda Pollock's (1988) expands on Mulvey's concept by examining how historical and social contexts shape representations of gender in visual culture. While she agrees with the critique of the male gaze, Pollock (1988) also argues for a more nuanced understanding that considers how female spectatorship and female artists resist and subvert these dominant visual codes. She advocates for a deeper analysis of how visual texts can contain multiple gazes and how the female viewer might identify with or reject the gaze imposed by the visual narrative. On the racial specter, bell hooks (1992) challenges Mulvey's idea of the male gaze by addressing

ISSN: 2448-0916

its racial limitations, arguing that Mulvey's analysis does not account for the experiences of Black women, who, historically excluded from mainstream cinematic representations, develop what hooks calls an oppositional gaze. A gaze which allows them to critique, resist, and find new ways of seeing outside the normative white, male-centered visual culture that Mulvey describes. Kaja Silverman (1996) goes further, expanding on Mulvey's concept by exploring how the gaze is not only male but also a complex psychic function that can be appropriated or resisted by viewers of any gender.

Thus, the criticism on Mulvey and Bergers' argument is more related to its limited scope, which will not apply to all object-matters. As observed by De Lauretis (1984), Mulvey's binary of male/active and female/passive may be very restricting. That is why the scholar proposes a more complex understanding of how spectators engage with film, suggesting that women can occupy multiple positions in relation to the gaze – not merely as passive objects but also as active agents. By emphasizing the role of narrative and semiotic codes in shaping spectatorship, De Lauretis (1984) advocates for a broader view of visual pleasure beyond the male gaze framework.

However, it is precisely this focus on a desire for mastery that becomes a point of contention for McGowan (2007). He argues that, for Lacan, the desire for mastery is not a primary desire and that the conception of desire by early psychoanalytic film theorists has more in common with the ideas developed by Nietzsche and Foucault than with Lacanian theory. Yet, going back to the beginning of the 19th century, McGowan's idea also resonates with Hegel's concept of the master-slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2019), where self-consciousness seeks recognition from another self-consciousness. Complementary, in Freudian (2010) terms, desire is not merely about satisfaction but also about the drive for mastery over external objects. Freud (2010) identifies a compulsion to repeat and dominate as a way to regain control over experiences that cause anxiety or pain. Desire, in this sense, becomes a way for the subject to assert mastery over the other and, by doing so, mitigate internal conflict. An idea initially close to Jean-Paul Sartre's (2021) own thoughts on desire, which, according to the philosopher, often manifests as a form of control over the other's freedom. For in Sartre's view, to desire another person or object is to attempt to absorb it into one's subjectivity, erasing its otherness. This, however, is always a failed project because the Other retains their autonomy, creating a constant tension between desire and freedom. And Lacan (1977) himself, as already mentioned,

ISSN: 2448-0916

complicates McGowan's notion by highlighting the perpetual deferral and impossibility of mastering the Other.

According to Hegel (2019), desire for mastery over the Other stems from a need to establish dominance and validate one's self-consciousness. The subject's desire is not only to possess the other but also to be recognized by them, ultimately leading to a dynamic of control and dependency. However, as posed by Zizek (1989) in a complementary manner to Lacan (1977), while the subject might believe that they can achieve mastery over the other or the object, this is a fantasy that sustains desire. The pursuit of possession, for Žižek (1989), is what structures subjectivity, but its fulfillment would collapse the system of desire itself, leading to a realization of the void at the core of the subject's being.

McGowan asserts that for to Nietzsche and Foucault, desire is fundamentally informed by power, "rather than being something enigmatic or uncertain, the goal of our desire is clear: we want mastery over the other or the object; we want to possess the alien object and make it a part of ourselves" (McGowan, 2007, p. 8). But the idea of clear mastery over the object, is challenged by René Girard (1976), who suggests instead that desire is always mediated through the Other, leading to rivalry and conflict. The goal of possession is thus complicated by the social and relational dimensions of desire, a notion that further echoes in Pollock's (1988) view on the matter. McGowan problematizes this conception of desire, since it situates desire as an active process in which "the desiring subject actively takes possession of the passive object" (McGowan, 2007, p. 8). To him, this conception opposes Lacan's view of desire, which is born out of lack and is essentially masochistic.

McGowan points out that despite the contentious relationship between desire and power, it does not mean that "subjects never act out of – nor go to the cinema because of – a desire for mastery" (2007, p. 11). In the hyperreal world of contemporary culture, Baudrillard (1981) states that mastery is often an illusion. While subjects may believe they are acting out of a desire for mastery, what they are engaging with are simulations – images and representations that bear no direct relation to reality. In this sense, he would thus challenge McGowan's notion by suggesting that the cinema offers only an illusion of mastery, trapping viewers in a cycle of consumption rather than actual control, a notion which is also presented by Baudrillard (2017) in his earlier works. And such cycle persists, in Zizek's (2006) words, because cinema provides a space for

spectators to confront their desires in a safe, mediated environment. However, like Lacan, Zizek emphasizes that the viewer's quest for mastery is always incomplete, as cinema operates by playing on the gap between desire and fulfillment.

On the other hand, in defense of his point, McGowan (2007) argues, the desire for mastery is not a fundamental one; it is secondary to the more primary Lacanian notion of desire driven by lack and fundamentally masochistic.

> It represents an attempt to short-circuit the path of desire in order to derive satisfaction from the *objet petit a* [...] Mastery aims at regulating enjoyment rather than being overcome by it, but it nonetheless posits the experience of the *objet petit a* as its ultimate end. (McGowan, 2007, p. 11)

For Roland Barthes (1990), however, this desire is often subverted by the text itself, which may resist complete interpretation or mastery. Thus, while the desire for mastery may drive subjects to consume media, the experience often eludes full comprehension or control. As observed by McGowan, "the desire for mastery is itself never primary but always the displacement of another desire" (McGowan, 2007, p. 11). And regarding media consumption, still according to Barthes (1990), this desire is ultimately redirected to the longing for mastery over meaning. This means that the male desire to control the female figure through the gaze is itself a fantasy, an illusion produced by the imaginary nature of the cinematic experience, which actually obscures the *objet petit a*, the true object of desire.

Ultimately, "power fails to provide satisfaction [...] No matter how much power one acquires, one always feels oneself missing something – and this something is the *objet petit a*" (McGowan, 2007, p. 10). Individuals, as posed by Erich Fromm (1994), often seek power and control as a way to escape feelings of alienation and insecurity, but this pursuit of power leads to further dissatisfaction, as it isolates the individual and intensifies the sense of existential emptiness, which is reinforced by Simone de Beauvoir's (2011) perception that power cannot provide fulfillment because it does not address the fundamental human condition of lack and ambiguity. That is why to affirm one's subjectivity is a quest faded to failure because it seems to be rooted in a desire to overcome the inherent ambiguity of existence itself, as it is presented in Casares' novel.

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3. DESIRE AND FANTASY IN *LA INVENCIÓN DE MOREL*

La Invención de Morel is narrated from the perspective of an unnamed protagonist, who presents the story as an account from his journal. He is a fugitive from the police who, seeking refuge, escapes to a seemingly deserted island in the Pacific Ocean. The island, though devoid of inhabitants, contains several structures: a mansion, which the narrator designates as the 'museum,' a chapel, and a swimming pool. After spending many solitary days on the island, the narrator is startled awake one night by the sound of music and voices.

The narrator is both perplexed and astonished by the sudden appearance of these visitors, whom he regards as a miraculous phenomenon. Despite his fear, he dismisses the idea that it might be a hallucination. Observing them in secret, he concludes that they are "real men, at least as real as I am" [4] (Casares, 1953, p. 10, free translation). He also notes a peculiar detail: the visitors are all dressed in clothes that were fashionable some years prior.

Soon, he becomes infatuated with Faustine, one of the women from the mysterious group of people. He spies on her every day while she watches the sunset from a cliff. One day, he finds the courage to speak with her, and as he appears in her field of vision, he notices that Faustine acts as if he were not really there: "However, the peace of her bosom was not disturbed; her gaze disregarded me, as if I were invisible"[5] (Casares, 1953, p. 28). Undeterred, he starts to address her, but she continues acting as if she is unaware of his existence, no matter how loudly he speaks with her and implores for her attention. About the experience, the narrator writes: "It was not as if she had not heard me, as if she had not seen me; it was as if the ears she had did not serve to hear, as if the eyes did not serve to see"[6] (Casares, 1953, p. 28).

The narrator soon notices that Faustine seems to be romantically involved with a man named Morel. Due to his obsession with Faustine, he constantly stalks the couple, spying on their conversations on the cliff where Faustine likes to watch the sunset. He starts to notice something unusual: the conversations between Faustine and Morel, as their movements repeat every eight days: "With a slow awareness, punctual in reality, the words and movements of Faustine and the

[4] In the original: "hombres verdaderos, por lo menos tan verdaderos como yo".
[5] In the original: "sin embargo, la paz de su pecho no se interrumpió, la mirada prescindía de mí, como si yo fuera invisible".
[6] In the original: "no fue como si no me hubiera oído, como si no me hubiera visto; fue como si los oídos que tenia no sirvieran para oír, como si los ojos no sirvieran para ver".

bearded man coincided with their words and movements from eight days ago. The atrocious eternal return"[7] (Casares, 1953, p. 28).

More strange events continue to occur, leaving the narrator utterly confused. One day, the tourists suddenly disappear just as mysteriously as they had first appeared on the island, only to reappear again at night, as if they had never really left. At one point, the narrator notices the presence of two moons and two suns in the sky. He also overhears Morel talking with someone else, asking them what they would think if he told them that all their actions and words had been recorded. Eventually, he hides himself in the museum while the group attends a meeting planned by Morel. There, he hears Morel describe his invention to the group of tourists, initially presenting it as follows:

> My abuse consists of having photographed them without authorization. It is clear that this is not an ordinary photograph; it is my latest invention. We will live in that photograph, forever. Imagine a stage where our entire life over these seven days is represented. We act out. All our actions have been recorded.[8] (Casares, 1953, p. 72)

His invention is a machine installed on the island and powered by the energy produced by the tides and the wind. The machine records each action and sound that occurs on the island and projects them. These projections are described as indistinguishable from real humans to an observer, even though Morel admits they are merely simulacra, destined to repeat themselves like a record or a film that begins again after it has ended. The narrator discovers that Morel's intended goal was to record his friends while they were on vacation on the island, so they could live forever in their "private paradise." Morel also believes that their souls will be captured by the machine and alludes to spending eternity with the one he loves, whom the narrator assumes to be Faustine. Despite Morel's enthusiasm, the narrator and the others on the island soon find out a serious drawback of the invention: everyone who had been recorded by the machine had eventually died.

[7] Original text: Con lentitud en mi conciencia, puntuales en la realidad, las palabras y los movimientos de Faustine y del barbudo coincidieron con sus palabras y movimientos de hacía ocho días. El atroz eterno retorno".

[8] Original text: Mi abuso consiste en haberlos fotografiado sin autorización. Es claro que no es una fotografía como todas; es mi último invento. Nosotros viviremos en esa fotografía, siempre. Imagínense un escenario en que se representa completamente nuestra vida en estos siete días. Nosotros representamos. Todos nuestros actos han quedado grabados.

The narrator, upon discovering the true nature of the island's inhabitants, feels repulsed at the thought of being surrounded by ghosts and falling in love with an image. However, as time goes on, he becomes increasingly fascinated by the possibilities afforded by the invention. He accepts the possibility of his death, learns to operate the machine, and records himself in strategic ways to make it appear as if Faustine and he are in love.

From this brief summary of the novel, one can recognize the themes and elements that closely correspond to the theoretical concepts discussed in this paper. Firstly, the novel's two prominent characters, the narrator and Morel, can be identified as quintessential Lacanian desiring subjects. Both Morel and the narrator have their sights set on Faustine, their object of desire. To them, Faustine represents the Other, ostensibly embodying the *objet petit a*. They pursue Faustine in hopes of fulfilling their desire; however, since the *objet petit a* is, by its nature, unattainable, possessing Faustine would not actually alleviate their desire.

Morel creates his invention precisely because he is searching for his lost object. He may have already understood the painful and masochistic nature of desire: that it can never be truly satisfied. Even if he and Faustine were an actual couple, this would not provide a definitive resolution, as no obtainable object can fill the lack caused by the absence of the *objet petit a*. To desire is to desire eternally, and to escape this deadlock, Morel creates his own version of eternity: a cinematic simulacrum that borrows from the fantasmatic nature of ideological audiovisual productions.

It is not a coincidence that Morel's tool to combat his own desire is one that functions as an extension of the senses, especially vision. Scopophilia, as Mulvey (1989, p. 16) posits, results in objectifying the one who is looked at. However, in actuality, the subject does not have much control over the gaze. As McGowan (2007, p. 6) clarifies, the gaze is an actual representation of the *objet petit a* – our eyes are always searching for what we desire, hoping to subdue our sense of lack. Following this logic, Morel creates his invention as a facsimile of his real senses, in an attempt to circumvent his own desire. It is a representation of his male gaze, which he uses to control Faustine and the others on the island.

As the narrator learns about the true nature of the island, Faustine, and the invention, he decides to follow in Morel's footsteps. From then on, the narrator stops viewing reality as a plane of existence in which his desires can be satisfied. His inauspicious circumstances (being a fugitive

and factually alone on the island) do not present him with many alternatives. Thus, he chooses to surrender to the fantasy engendered by Morel and manipulates it to create his own fantasy.

As a final point, the solution found by Morel and the narrator bears significant resemblance to a concept introduced by McGowan: the cinema of integration. According to McGowan, this type of cinema "chooses to resolve the deadlock of desire; it produces a kind of film that functions ideologically by integrating desire and fantasy" (2007, p. 112). Consequently, the subject is offered a sense of security, because

> the cinema of integration allows the subject to find support for its identity in the image of the nonlacking Other. This offers the subject a sense of security, but at the cost of the space for the subject's freedom. The subject has freedom on the basis of the constitutive incompleteness of the Other—an incompleteness that disappears in this type of cinema. (McGowan, 2007, p. 128)

Ultimately, in *La Invención de Morel*, the non-lacking Other is represented not only by Faustine but also by the entire artificial reality created by the machine. This machine constructs a fantasmatic scenario that functions as a zero-sum game. For the subject, there is no actual substance to be gained from relinquishing its desiring function, except for an imaginary mitigation of its sense of loss.

4. FINAL REMARKS

At this point, we expect to have made the relevance of Psychoanalytical Film Theory as an alternative approach to the study of both literature and cinema clear, particularly through its exploration of fantasy and desire (our objects of study), the unconscious, and the mechanisms of identification. Such theoretical body, although traditionally applied to cinematic texts, is equally valuable in the study of literary works and their adaptations into film. By means of the examination of the psychological processes that inform both media, it may provide other perspectives on how narratives express and mediate fantasies and desires within these two independent yet complementary art forms.

A central concern of this theoretical approach, as stressed throughout this paper, is the way in which both spectators and readers engage with narratives through identification and

desire. Desire, in this context, is understood as a driving force structured around the pursuit of something elusive, the Lacanian unattainable object that motivates action and narrative progression. In both literature and film, this object shapes character development and audience engagement while providing insight into the psychic undercurrents that define the plot, which allows for an analysis of how desire manifests in narrative form and how, not overlooking the intrinsic characteristics of each medium, it positions readers or viewers within that structure.

Another contribution herein stressed is the exploration of the concept of gaze, particularly in terms of how power dynamics are embedded in acts of looking. In narratives, both literary and cinematic, characters are often situated within structures that reflect broader societal relations of dominance and subordination. These dynamics are visible in how the act of looking itself becomes a means of asserting control and satisfying desire, which enables theoretical analysis on how gender, power, and desire are represented across media, revealing the ways in which visual and narrative elements are intertwined in both literature and film. Specially regarding the study of literary adaptations in film, we highlight, researchers would also benefit greatly from a psychoanalytic approach. For while traditional approaches may focus on how closely a film mirrors its source material, psychoanalytical film theory not only encourages, it rather pushes the researcher towards a different form of inquiry that considers how the unconscious desires and fantasies expressed in both media operate at a deeper level. Such a perspective allows for a richer analysis on the complexities of adapting narrative desire from text to screen.

One practical application of this approach, for instance, would be the analysis on how desire operates within both the original literary text and its adaptation – even the other way round –, particularly with regard to character motivations, narrative progression, and audience reception. This goes beyond simplistic comparisons of plot or form, rather opening for the investigation of the psychological dimensions that shape the relationship between two versions of a same story. As a result, such analysis can uncover the ways in which certain desires are transformed, suppressed, or amplified during the adaptation process, providing insights into the ideological and psychological tensions that shape the translation processes of artistic works.

As for fantasy, psychoanalytical film theory may serve as tool to investigate the narrative space where desire is articulated, allowing subjects to engage with unconscious longings in a mediated, symbolic form. This operates not only at the level of individual characters but also in

the structure of the text or film themselves, shaping how the story unfolds and how audiences are invited to participate in it. Thus, one can explore how the fantasies of the original text, be it either literary or cinematic, are reimagined, offering a comparative analysis of the ways both media create and sustain their respective spaces of desire.

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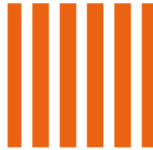

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