The Impossible Love of Images: Morel, Marienbad, and the (Re-)Production of Fantasy Beyond the Lacanian Symbolic

by

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Abstract

My intent with this thesis is to outline an aesthetic relation that challenges the Lacanian conception of a human subject “captured and tortured by language” (Seminar III 243). Through a reading of two works, a novel and a film, I demonstrate that the Lacanian symbolic—the register of language—cannot sufficiently describe the processes of subjectivation manifest in the works. A consideration of the subject as participating in a reflexive construction of psychical reality through the proliferation of fantasy is necessary to comprehend these works and the unique relation among them. Jean Laplanche’s theory of fantasy serves a model for this understanding. The first of these works is a novel published by the Argentine writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares, in 1941, *The Invention of Morel*, and the second is the well-known film from the French New Wave, *Last Year at Marienbad* from 1961, directed by Alain Resnais and written by novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. These works stage a scene of fantasy (a fantasy of seduction) that involves the intervention of image-making technologies—this intervention allows the fantasy scene to self-duplicate to the point of organizing the formal arrangement of the works themselves. Finally, the production of *The Invention of Morel* and *Last Year at Marienbad* comes to replicate this same fantasy scene, suggesting that fantasy itself, through aesthetic (re-)production, can perform the function that Lacan’s ascribes to the symbolic—that is, *insistence*. 
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, M. Ruby.
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Introduction: The “Emergence” of The Symbolic

“Think about the origins of language,” Jacques Lacan instructs his audience near the outset of his second seminar in 1954.

We imagine that there must have been a time when people on this earth began to speak. So we admit of an emergence. But from the moment that the specific structure of this emergence is grasped, we find it absolutely impossible to speculate on what preceded it other than by symbols which were always applicable. What appears to be new thus always seems to extend itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself. We cannot through thought abolish a new order. This applies to anything whatsoever, including the origin of the world.

Similarly, we can no longer do our thinking without this register of the ego… (5)

In this seminar on the concept of the ego in Freudian theory, Lacan set out to expand upon the reading that he had begun with his presentation on the “mirror stage” at the Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in Marienbad in 1936. Lacan had there introduced the order of the imaginary in which the ego emerges as the subject comes into a relation with its own specular image.¹ In the seminars of the 1950’s, Lacan would add to his theory the order of the symbolic, the field of language in which the ego circulates as symbol; in this second seminar, Lacan spends considerable time detailing this autonomous world of the symbolic—drawing especially on the newly founded field of cybernetics—to demonstrate the de-centered status of this subject-ego relation vis-à-vis the operation of language. He foreshadows this agenda in the passage excerpted above, establishing a preliminary correlation between the ego and language;

once he affirms that the ego is in fact a property of the subject’s negotiated position in the field of language, the ego’s ability to “extend itself…prior to itself” appears as a function of its status as a symbol, and, as such, a borrowed property of the symbolic. In short, language here regulates the imagination of the subject in time.

It becomes clear, chiefly in Lacan’s next seminar on the psychoses, that the stable circulation of the subject-ego relation in the symbolic requires a certain capitulation to a paternal signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, which maintains the integrity of the signifying field. The subject’s self-enunciation as an “I” requires a performance of this paternal signifier that, consequently, manifests the subject’s subordination to its primary place. Lacan does not attempt to conceal the way in which this linguistic theory of the subject grafts the Oedipus complex to the subject’s relation to language: the struggle against the father is re-coded as the struggle for the primacy of the paternal signifier. As such, Lacan defines the object of his theory quite clearly in this seminar: “Psychoanalysis should be the science of language inhabited by the subject. From the Freudian point of view man is the subject captured and tortured by language” (243).

This articulation of the symbolic in the development of Lacanian theory thus acts as an “emergence” not dissimilar to that of the object it describes—the origin of language. Lacan’s elaboration of the symbolic in this period necessitates its placement among the other two overlapping registers of experience in Lacanian theory—the imaginary and the real—allowing these two registers to come into view as well in a reified form. It does not, therefore, seem to be an exaggeration to say that Lacanian theory as such emerges along with the symbolic; the triadic relation of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real—the three loops of the Borromean knot—remains the object of Lacan’s inquiry through his final seminar on James Joyce and the sinthome. It is one of the objectives of this paper to return to this moment in the development of Lacanian
theory and investigate theoretical possibilities that were closed off at the moment of this emergence. Jean Laplanche, for one, has called the Lacanian symbolic a “narrowly linguistic, supra-individual, structural (in a word *metaphysical*)” entity, and lodged a critique on this basis—namely, that language, for Lacan, takes on the full burden of expression for the unconscious (*Essays on Otherness* 93). Indeed, it is true that Lacan goes so far as to nominate linguistics as a “guiding science” for psychoanalysis during this period.

Such a project—an attempt to get behind the “supra-individual” status of the Lacanian symbolic—should, I argue, reflect Lacan’s method, which is to say it cannot proceed principally through a reading of Lacan’s seminars and writings themselves. As Roberto Harari points out, Lacan’s method is to turn to art for the development of his psychoanalytic concepts: he reads Joyce, for example, and accepts the imperative presented by him to invent a new concept—the *sinthome*—as opposed to applying an established psychoanalytic apparatus to the explanation of art; similarly, the fact that Lacan moves his seminar on Poe’s “Purloined Letter” to the front of his *Ecrits*, breaking the chronological ordering of the rest of the volume, speaks to the primary importance of this reading to the development of the concepts of that period—the symbolic foremost among them. As Harari writes, “When [Lacan] studied a work of art, it was in an attempt to advance, not merely to apply, psychoanalysis. The *desideratum* was always some new element” (*How Joyce Made His Name* 26).

This attention to art—which manifests itself principally as an attention to form—is one of the ways that this reading expands upon the existing critiques of the Lacanian symbolic,

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particularly that of Jean Laplanche, author of perhaps the most sustained critique of the symbolic from within the field of psychoanalysis. The fields of literary and cinematic criticism are already accustomed to treating aesthetic framings of consciousness as surfaces of desire and fantasy; as Dina Al-Kassim has written with regard to the reification of the symbolic and the imaginary in Lacanian theory, “Literature poses particularly difficult problems for the Lacanian theory of language when it is displaced from its clinical setting, insofar as literature produces fantasy, image, and hallucination in the symbolic register of words addressed to the other” (On Pain of Speech 182). This aesthetic relation, then, has served as a privileged site for the consideration of technologies of subjectivation that cannot be reduced to the symbolic. Lacan himself, over the course of his long career as a theorist, strays from his initial understanding of the relation between literary writing and the symptom: the traditional conception of the symptom in psychoanalysis as a message to be decoded by the analyst is first challenged in “Psychoanalysis and its Teaching” (1957)—“symptoms are not significations, but their relation to a signifying structure that determines them” (Ecrits 371); by the time of Lacan’s seminar on Joyce (1975-6), the symptom has become the sinthome and describes the jouissance of the artist’s experience of his own embeddedness in the symbolic.

I want to focus specifically on two works of art—and the encounter between them—as instances of the elaboration and transmission of fantasy. What I hope might be sketched out in a negative register, in the way in which Lacan’s theoretical apparatus fails to describe the function of fantasy in these works, is an opening out of the theoretical determination of the subject as one “captured and tortured by language,” and a consideration of the subject as participating in a reflexive construction of psychical reality through the proliferation of fantasy. The first of these

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3 The exception is Laplanche’s early work on Hölderlin—Hölderlin et la question du père (PUF 1961)
works is a novel published by the Argentine writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares, in 1941, *The Invention of Morel*, and the second is the famous film from the French New Wave, *Last Year at Marienbad* from 1961, directed by Alain Resnais and written by novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. Since the release of *Last Year at Marienbad* in 1961, some critics have taken to circumventing the difficulty of the film by drawing on *The Invention of Morel* as the alleged inspiration for the film.\(^4\) The parallels between the two works are undeniable: both are, to some degree, stories of an attempted seduction mediated by the ever-present, observing role of a third. The focal point of analysis here will be the way that a certain technics of memory in both works operates as an instrument of fantasy, and in particular the way this (attempted) instrumentalization functions as the field of an Oedipal drama that counterposes the Lacanian struggle in the symbolic.

While any number of commentators have speculated about the relation between the two works in passing since the film’s release, there has not been, to my knowledge, a sustained study dedicated solely to a comparative analysis of the two works that does not engage in this politics of influence or inspiration.\(^5\) Both works can be said to engage with (and depart from) the predominant psychological realisms of their respective literary and cinematic traditions that tend to localize and circumscribe psychology within characters; *The Invention of Morel* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, working against this reification of psychology, distill fantasy into form in such a way that the psyche becomes co-extensive with the works themselves. Robbe-Grillet had already made this approach to “total subjectivity” manifest in his 1957 novel, *La Jalousie*, where the narration manages to suffuse a jealous fantasy of an elided subject into a notoriously detailed and

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\(^5\) Gulney (2012) notes, “Few people have undertaken to examine the parallels between Morel and Marienbad.”
rigorous third-person description (*For a New Novel* 138); the text does not indicate the existence of the narrator except through its own absences and inconsistencies, where the detached objective narration is overdetermined as fantasy. In his essays on the theory of the *nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet self-consciously positions this aesthetic as the successor to the outmoded “novel of characters” descending from Balzac (28). In a parallel sense, Jorge Luis Borges claims in his prologue to *The Invention of Morel* that Bioy Casares’ work of “reasoned imagination” introduces “a new genre to our land and language” (7); Borges places this new genre in a lineage with the literature of the fantastic, making a case for Stevenson and Poe against Balzac, Proust, and the Russian practitioners of the “psychological novel”: he writes, “The Russians and their disciples have demonstrated, tediously, that no one is impossible. A person may kill himself because he is so happy, for example, or commit murder as an act of benevolence” (6). This “vain precision” of psychologism in literature acts in service of an acceptance of realism, Borges argues, at the expense of a sensitivity to artifice, or invention (6).

My intent here is to elaborate a comparative reading of these works as the staggered (re-)production of fantasy, and situate this reading as an intervention into the reification of the Lacanian symbolic. In my estimation, the concept fantasy is the site at which Lacan’s subordination of the imaginary to the symbolic might be most pronounced: for him, “the notion of unconscious fantasy no longer presents any difficulty once it is defined as an image set to work in the signifying structure” (*Ecrits* 532). In this sense, the production of fantasy is a process involved in the signifying chain that passes through but is not determined by the subject. Lacan’s reformulation of the Oedipus Complex is emblematic of this movement from the symbolic to the imaginary: what was for Freud an originary structuration of the psyche along the fault lines of
the family that gave rise to desiring fantasies of the parent,⁶ Lacan re-describes as an identification to a signifier, and thereby, the Oedipal identification as a relation to signification as such. Malcolm Bowie helpfully describes this Lacanian reformulation of the Oedipus Complex this way:

Where Freud had largely been content to see the Oedipal identifications as primary—and fraught with potentially disastrous consequences for the individual as he or she grew towards adulthood—Lacan presents them as secondary and having a pacifying and normalizing role. (Lacan 33)

In other words, what for Freud was a potentially destabilizing fantasy at the center of gender formation, Lacan reformulates as a necessary passage of the subject-ego relation into the structure of signification.

Against this relegation of fantasy to the status of symbol, Jean Laplanche has argued for a theoretical understanding of fantasy as an end-product in itself, and a constitutive element in the formation of “psychical reality”—a third term which mediates the opposition fantasy-reality. As such, for Laplanche, what appears critical in fantasy is structure, and the way that this structure articulates desire:

Fantasy...is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it (hence the danger, in treatment, of interpretations which claim to do so). As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that

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is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question. (“Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” 27)

For Laplanche, then, fantasy is not a derivation from reality or an ideal in relation to which the subject stands at a distance, but instead the means through which the subject synthesizes a psychical reality. Laplanche’s definition of “phantasy” for *The Language of Psychoanalysis* with Jean-Bernard Pontalis includes a similar emphasis that the subject of the fantasy is present in the fantasy itself: “[Fantasy] is not an object that the subject imagines and aims at, so to speak, but rather a sequence in which the subject has his own part to play” (318). We might notice that a circular temporal logic is operative here: the labor of fantasy produces and organizes a constitutive drama for a subject that must be already present in that drama.

Commenting on the passage from “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” quoted above, Judith Butler emphasizes what remains implicit in Laplanche—namely, that this site of constitution for “psychical reality” of the subject is also the site of a constant threat of dissolution:

“There is, then, strictly speaking, no subject who has a fantasy, but only fantasy as the scene of the subject's fragmentation and dissimulation; fantasy enacts a splitting or fragmentation or, perhaps better put, a multiplication or proliferation of identifications that puts the very locatability of identity into question. In other words, although we might wish to think, even fantasize, that there is an ‘I’ who has or cultivates its fantasy with some measure of mastery and possession, that ‘I’ is always already undone by precisely that which it claims to master. (*Butler Reader* “Force of Fantasy” 462-3)
Between Butler and Laplanche, then, fantasy becomes a *scene* in which desire is articulated according to a certain structuring of roles and actions, but this same articulation involves the “splitting” or scattering of desire away from the locality of the subject in question.

In relation to the works analyzed here, this simultaneous movement toward structure and scattering will be understood as fantasy lending structure to aesthetic form, on the one hand, and on the other hand *overrunning* its function as address to the ego. To borrow Butler’s phrasing from the passage quoted above, this movement stages the works as dramas of the “multiplication or proliferation of identifications that puts the very locatability of identity into question.” The performance of subjectivation manifest in these works should thus properly be understood through the circulation of a de-individualized fantasy—that is, the fantasy of the seduction of an image. As we will see, in both works, this fantasy contains a paradoxical kernel: the fantasy of seducing the image involves the transversal of the boundary that separates the image from the seducer—however, transversing this boundary would negate the property that characterizes the loved object, which is its *status as image*.

Contrary to Lacan, the circulation of this fantasy and its performance of the ego cannot be described by the itinerary of the signifier, a reduction employed by Lacan in his famous reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”; doing so would require the amplification of the category of the signifier to a degree that would render it unrecognizable from the standpoint of its Saussurean origins. Instead of the trajectory of fantasy and its iterations is determined, in both works, by a certain self-duplicating technology of memory. Control of this technology recapitulates a persistent Oedipal relation that can be traced throughout both works; as such, a contrast appears quite clearly between this version of the Oedipal drama—one mediated, not by language, but by image-making machinery—with the Lacanian assimilation of the Oedipus Complex to the
emergence of the symbolic; this contrast will structure the following analyses and mark their points of departure from the Lacanian matrix.
1. An “Impossible Love”

In his memoir, Adolfo Bioy Casares writes of his desire for the American actress, Louise Brooks, in the context of many “impossible loves” for movie actresses that he developed as a young cinema-goer in Buenos Aires:

Of these impossible loves, the one that I felt for Louise Brooks was the strongest, the most wretched. How I disliked to think that I would never meet her! Even worse, that I would never see her again. And this is precisely what happened. After three or four movies, in which I watched her spellbound, Louise Brooks disappeared from the movie screens of Buenos Aires.7

The end of Brooks’ career represented to Bioy that nothing new would be added to the existing set of images of her, emphasizing that his desire stretched across an impassable boundary. On the basis of this disappointment, Bioy conceived of the plotline for his most famous novel, The Invention of Morel, which places its narrator in this position of impossible desire for an image—the image of a woman named Faustine. The Invention of Morel offers itself to this particular project because the image of Faustine is recorded on a machine that can be placed alongside a remarkably similar machine described by Lacan in his second seminar, 1954-1955; both machines are, in fact, collections of devices situated on remote landscapes intended to record and preserve their contents for some future observer. Highlighting the differences between the machine in The Invention of Morel and the apparatus imagined by Lacan will be the avenue for

7 My translation; original text reads: “De estos amores imposibles, el que tuve por Louise Brooks fue el más vivo, el más desdichado. ¡Me disgustaba tanto creer que nunca la conocería! Peor aún, que nunca volvería a verla. Esto, precisamente, fue lo que sucedió. Después de tres o cuartos películas, en que la vi embeselado, Louise Brooks desapareció de las pantallas de Buenos Aires” (Memorias 43)
us to suggest that the Lacanian registers of experience cannot precisely describe the textual function of Morel.

Lacan’s machine appears as an element in a thought experiment designed to advance his hypothesis that consciousness is a neutral mechanism divested of egoic investment. After pointing to Freud’s description in Beyond the Pleasure Principle of consciousness as “a surface exposed to the external world” (Beyond 20), Lacan furnishes his argument with what he will call a “myth of consciousness without ego” (177):

Suppose all men to have disappeared from the world. I say men on account of the high value which you attribute to consciousness...There are only waterfalls and springs left—lightning and thunder too. The image in the mirror, the image in the lake—do they still exist? It is quite obvious that they still exist. For one very simple reason—at the high point of civilization we have attained, which far surpasses our illusions about consciousness, we have manufactured instruments which, without in any way being audacious, we can imagine to be sufficiently complicated to develop films themselves, put them away into little boxes, and store them in the fridge. Despite all living beings having disappeared, the camera can nonetheless record the image of the mountain in the lake, or that of the Cafe de Flore crumbling away in total solitude. (47)

Such a configuration of devices, Lacan argues, fulfills the conditions of a “phenomenon of consciousness,” but requires no human operator, nor indeed any human presence. To summarize, the reflection of the mountain in the lake is a surface of consciousness whose existence can be verified without the intervention of human consciousness through the intervention of the camera. “Consciousness, in the end, becomes a mechanism,” Lacan concludes (78).
The thought experiment arises as a means for Lacan to make his distinction between the ego and the role of consciousness, effectively decentering the ego and allowing it to obtain the status of an object (and a symbol) at a remove—that is, alienated—from the subject. He argues in the process that this discovery of Freud’s marks his departure from the Western philosophical tradition that would identify the singularity of the human subject in the phenomenon of consciousness, or the transparency of consciousness to itself; this tradition culminates in 20th century phenomenology—represented for Lacan by his contemporary, Maurice Merleau-Ponty—that embraces consciousness as an “enveloping totality” that “always finds its origin in the subject” (78). For Lacan, by contrast, consciousness requires only a receptive surface exposed to the world of impressions, operative as much in a spherical drop of water or a camera lens as in the human nervous system:

Consciousness in man is by essence a polar tension between an ego alienated from the subject and a perception which fundamentally escapes it, a pure percipi. The subject would be strictly identical to this perception if there weren't this ego which, if one may put it like this, makes it emerge from out of its very perception in a relationship of tension. (177-8)

The subject appears, in turn, as a relation (an unspeakable relation) that falls out of the tension between the alienated ego and “the immediacy of sensation” whose impressions are “neutral” (49-50). As such, for Lacan, there is no ego involved in his camera or its capture and storage of the image of the mountain in the lake; there is only neutral perception, a “pure percipi.”

The invention that figures in Bioy’s novel is almost functionally equivalent to Lacan’s; it is made up of a system of receivers, recorders, and projectors operating continuously on a landscape from which humans have departed. It is a device through which the inventor, Morel,
has attempted to immortalize himself and the seduction of the woman he loves, Faustine, as they
vacationed on a remote island with a community of friends for a week. In the present of the
novel, the principal drama involves an unnamed fugitive who takes up residence on the small
island haunted by these images that “dance, stroll up and down, and swim in the pool, as if this
were a summer resort like Los Teques or Marienbad” (11); the fugitive himself eventually falls
in love with the projection of Faustine, and finally integrates himself into Morel’s recording to
“spend eternity in the joyous contemplation of Faustine” (101).

Of course, there are notable differences between the machines of Lacan and Morel: (1) on
a technical level, Morel’s invention records not just the optic impression of its object, but its
entire sensory presence and thus preserves total images indistinguishable from their object; (2)
these total images indeed the machine’s recording and projection of its objects causes the
objects’ subsequent decay—as the fugitive narrator states:

The vegetable transmitters—leaves, flowers—died after five or six hours; the
frogs, after fifteen.

The copies survive—they are incorruptible.

I do not know which flies are real and which ones are artificial. (92-3)

(3) Morel’s invention continuously projects these absolute images through an apparatus powered
by the island’s tidal patterns, regardless of the presence of human observers; when the novel’s

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8 Quotes in English taken from NYRB edition translated by Ruth Simms. Spanish text (Emecé) reads: “los pajonales de la colina se han cubierto de gente que baila, que pasea y que se baña en la pileta, como vereantes instalados desde hace tiempo en los Teques o en Marienbad” (15).

9 “La verdadera ventaja de mi solución es que hace de la muerte el requisito y la garantía de la eterna contemplación de Faustine” (122).

10 “Los emisores vegetales—hojas, flores—murieron después de cinco o seis horas; las ranas, después de quince. Los copias sobreviven, incorruptibles. Ignoro cuáles son las moscas verdaderas y las artificiales” (113).
narrator arrives on the island, a fugitive that has arrived in flight from the law, the total images thus appear to him as “real” individuals.

There remains one more difference between the two machines, the most significant: while Lacan’s fundamental thesis is that his apparatus constitutes a “phenomenon of consciousness” but not, strictly speaking, an ego, the invention of Morel cannot be assimilated to this distinction; indeed, it occupies precisely the position that Lacan isolates for the subject itself—a place of ineradicable tension among perception and egoic projection. We can, I argue, understand the invention of Morel as not only a phenomenon of consciousness, but a consciousness whose perceptive parameters are conditioned by the egoic drama of Morel—that is, a fantasy. What circulates on the island in the form of the total images and what the fugitive encounters upon his arrival is, therefore, not a neutral surface of inscription, but what I will call an ego machine—a term to designate the space of collapse between the mechanism of consciousness and the alienated object of the ego. As we will see, the ego machine that is Morel’s invention becomes the site of an identification between the fugitive and Morel once the fugitive wanders into the space of Morel’s recorded fantasy. In its refused status, this identification gives rise to the fugitive’s desire for Faustine.

We might say that when the fugitive narrator begins to roam among the projections on the island, he inhabits the position of Lacan’s future human observer returning to see if the mechanism of consciousness (the camera) has been operative in his absence; it has been operative, of course, but it has also overrun this function and transmitted the obscure object of Morel’s fantasy—Faustine—and its attendant desire, a desire which structures his very act of perception such that the fugitive becomes interpolated as its vehicle. This overrunning of the representative function is the fundamental characteristic of the ego machine. Unlike Lacan’s
theorization of the ego, the ego machine is not subordinated to a symbolic function, but engages with and manifests the subject-ego relation through a direct coordination of perception with the imaginary, a coordination in which language is operative but not altogether determinant. It is not so much an address that names the subject into its status as a social being; it is rather, a drama into which the subject becomes interpolated in a fantasy among bodies. We might consider it as a field, or a framing, through which already-articulated desire contours perception and stages an egoic performance in relation to which the subject is both interior and exterior.

The Ego Machine

The difference between Lacan and Morel’s machine—that is, what distinguishes Morel’s machine as an ego machine—settles, in this sense, upon a question of desire. The claim that the invention of Morel is an ego machine simultaneously acts as a confession that a certain desire (for Faustine) circulates in the technology of recording and projection itself. This confession would be impossible for Lacan: for him, desire cannot be conveyed through the mechanism of perception because desire arises in relation to the lack in the symbolic. As an infant, according to Lacan, a child is subject to the desire of the mother. Only upon the introduction of the paternal signifier as prohibition and ordination of the incest taboo does the child enter into the symbolic order (through a nominal identification with the Name-of-the-Father) and, as a speaking subject, can be said to be the site of a desire that emerges from this lack at the heart of the symbolic itself.\footnote{Cf. “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” in \textit{Écrits.} trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.} Desire, for Lacan, is thus sustained along the metonymic sliding of signification in the symbolic.\footnote{12}
What, then, might serve as justification for us to understand the invention of Morel as an ego machine capable of the transmission of desire, considering the machine does not operate in the symbolic but as a mechanism of consciousness?

To begin to answer this question, we must consider the figure of Morel, his psyche and his fantasy—his invention, in short—insofar as it is determined in the novel. Through his device, Morel believes himself to have achieved a form of immortality for himself, his friends, and his ambitions for a seduction of Faustine. As he claims:

I thought I would synchronize all the parts of my machine and take scenes of our lives: an afternoon with Faustine, conversations with some of you; and in that way I would be able to make an album of very durable and clear images, which would be a legacy from the present to the future; they would please your children and friends, and the coming generations whose customs will differ from our own.13 (70)

The ostensibly preservative ambition of Morel’s intentions is here laid out quite clearly; he outlines his project as one of a representation of the present for the future in fulfillment of a principally historical and scientific interest. Nevertheless, his discourse is here overdetermined by his own fantasy; his explanation to his companions that the machine has taken scenes of a collective experience—“our lives”—is punctured immediately afterward in the following line: Morel prioritizes his personal fantasy—“an afternoon with Faustine, conversations with some of you”—and reveals that the object of his recording is not a collectively lived week of vacation but an orchestrated drama centered on Morel’s interactions. Morel’s speech, intended as a

13 “Pensaba coordinar las recepciones de mis aparatos y tomar escenas de nuestra vida: una tarde con Faustine, ratos de conversación con ustedes; hubiera compuesto así un álbum de presencias muy durables y nítidas, que sería un legado de unos momentos a otros, grato para los hijos, los amigos y las generaciones que vivan otras costumbres” (86).
Laplanche’s formulation of fantasy as a “a sequence in which the subject has his own part to play” describes precisely the drama that Morel organizes and records on the island: in the same sense that he is both the inventor of the recording and its eventual object of preservation, so too is he the orchestrator of a fantasy in which he is an active participant. The resulting ego machine thus unites the architecture of technicality to the architecture of the egoic relation—the ego of the inventor both occasions the recorded drama and is elaborated through its performance. In this sense, the invention becomes not only Morel’s invention, but also the technical elaboration of “Morel” as a stitched-together ego machine; in short, the recorded image of Morel is recast in the paradoxical status of both the cause and effect of this mechanical consciousness.

This self-recording mimics the function of what Lacan describes as the self-enunciation of the subject as an “I” within the symbolic and its relation to the ego. For Lacan, when the subject enters the symbolic order through this self-enunciation, the identification with the ego that began with the mirror stage and its relation to a coherent body becomes redoubled in relation to this signifier, “I”. The emergence of the subject into language requires thus a certain recognition of a pre-existing place for itself, on the order of the historical retroprojection of language that Lacan expresses in the quote that opens this paper. Morel’s actions as inventor involve a similar process of simultaneous self-recognition and self-elaboration but are, of course, not situated in the symbolic in the same way as Lacan’s social and linguistic “I”—but neither can they be situated properly in the imaginary. For Lacan, the imaginary remains defined by its field of unified objects that oppose the real of fragmentation:
Every imaginary relation comes about via a kind of you or me between the subject and the object...the objects only ever appear to man within relations which fade. He recognises his unity in them, but uniquely from without. And in as much he recognises his unity in an object, he feels himself to be in disarray in relation to the latter. (Seminar II 177)

The invention of Morel, however, produces a real residue (the recording itself) that destroys its recorded object, and thus cannot be described as an opposition between the imaginary and the real. This real effect is something that Lacan attributes only to the symbolic: as he famously states in his Rome Discourse, “the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing” (Ecrits 262). The total recording machine thus possesses the function of the Lacanian symbolic to destroy its purported object of representation in the act of imposing and perpetuating its own projected order.

The destructive function of the symbol is, nonetheless, not the only property of the Lacanian symbolic that the recording machine retains; it also demonstrates the possibility of exchange among subjective positions. In the Lacanian symbolic, this exchange progresses along the itinerary of the signifier as it calls to various subjects to inhabit it through a metaphorical identification; the most well-known demonstration of this exchange might be the repeated “purloinings” in Lacan’s analysis of “The Purloined Letter.” With regard to the invention of Morel, however, this exchange occurs not through the itinerary of the signifier, but through a kind of scopic identification with the gaze of the seducer. To be more precise, we might notice that immediately upon seeing the images of Morel’s fantasy, the fugitive becomes interpolated in the drama of seduction and begins to reproduce Morel’s own desire for Faustine. In fact, in describing the sight of Faustine watching the sunset, the fugitive identifies the compelling
element of her appearance as a certain relation to another’s gaze: “The sight of her: As if she were posing for an invisible photographer, she surpassed the calm of the sunset. And I did not wish to interrupt that” (26). The “invisible photographer,” of course, we discover to be Morel—and so Morel’s orchestrative imprint is present from the beginning as the mediating element of the fugitive’s desire for Faustine. Indeed, in their common devotion to Faustine, he comes to identify with Morel and assume his position as orchestrator of the fantasy: “This is what I dreamed last night:

I was in an insane asylum. After a long consultation with a doctor (the trial?), my family had me taken there. Morel was the director of the asylum. Sometimes I knew I was on the island; sometimes I thought I was in the insane asylum—sometimes I was the director of the insane asylum.” (121)

He finally affirms conclusively, “Perhaps the hell I ascribe to Morel is really my own. I am the one who is in love with Faustine, who is capable of murder and suicide—I am the monster” (236). Indeed, the fugitive’s repeated trips to watch Faustine sitting on the rocks at sunset, reveals a voyeuristic enrapture that suggests his desire for Faustine as a desire for an image—that is, the growing awareness of the fugitive that Faustine circulates on a different plane of existence appears as a condition rather than an obstacle to his desire.

14 “Verla: como posando para un fotógrafo invisible tenía la calma de la tarde, pero más inmensa. Yo iba a interrumpirla” (34-5).

15 This mediating presence of the other’s gaze—the “invisible photographer”—in particular its suggestion of the entrance into an Oedipal remediation of the father’s desire for the mother will be addressed in more detail in the next section in relation to L’année dernière à Marienbad.

16 “Yo estaba en un manicomio. Después de una larga consulta (¿el proceso?) con un médico, mi familia me había llevado ahí. Morel era el director. Por momentos, yo sabía que estaba en la isla; por momentos, creía estar en el manicomio; por momentos, era el director del manicomio” (65).

17 “Quizá atribuya a Morel un infierno que es mío. Yo soy el enamorado de Faustine; el capaz de matar y de matarse; yo soy el monstruo” (121).
The identification of the fugitive with the figure of Morel in his status as “invisible photographer” is, at first glance, congruent with the Oedipal arrangement: the father is the third mediating term in the imaginary relation between the mother and child and a site of prohibition; the rivalrous feelings that the fugitive displays continuously towards Morel certainly resemble Freudian descriptions of the Oedipal rivalry. The fugitive’s jealousy of Morel is revealed quite transparently through his protestations to the contrary:

His appearance should discourage any feelings of jealousy. He is very tall and was wearing a wine-colored tennis jacket, which was much too large for him, white slacks, and huge yellow and white shoes. His beard seemed to be false, his skin effeminate, waxy, mottled on his temples. His eyes are dark; his teeth, ugly. He speaks slowly, opening his small round mouth wide, vocalizing in a childish way, revealing a small round crimson tongue, which is always close to his lower teeth. His hands are long and pallid—I sense that they are slightly moist.18 (35)

This passage is not only suffused with the fugitive’s jealousy of Morel but also symptomatic of a refused identification. The fugitive has incessantly remarked upon the inadequacy of his own appearance to beauty of Faustine: “After I had bathed, and was clean but more unkempt looking than ever (the humidity has that effect on my beard and hair), I went down to see her”19 (25); his description of Morel thus projects his own self-understanding—a “bearded” man, nervously approaching Faustine.

18 “La presencia de este hombre debe calmar los celos. Es muy alto. Llevaba un saco de tenis, granate, demasiado amplio, unos pantalones blancos y unos zapatos blancos y amarillos, desmesurados. La barba parecía postiza. La piel es femenina, cerosa, marmórea en las sienes. Los ojos son oscuros; los dientes, abominables. Habla despacio, abriendo mucho la boca, chica, redonda, vocalizando infantilmente, enseñando una lengua chica, redonda, carmesí, pegada siempre a los dientes inferiores. Las manos son larguísimas, pálidas; les adivino un tenue revestimiento de humedad” (44)

19 “Después de bañarme, limpio y más desordenado (por efecto de la humedad en la barba y el pelo), fui a verla” (33).
Butler locates “refused identification” as a preoedipal sexual attachment to a body of the same sex, an identification that must be refused upon the normative appearance of the Oedipal Complex:

The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been accomplished, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire. (The Psychic Life of Power 135)

The primary “prohibition on homosexuality” that conditions the Oedipal relation, for Butler, creates a broken attachment to the same-sexed body that becomes a melancholic site on the body. The performance of gender becomes, to some extent, a memorial recuperation of that lost body. In The Invention of Morel, we do not have textual evidence to support a claim for refused homosexual desire; however, the identification of the fugitive with Morel’s performance in his own fantasy constitutes a refused identification within the parameters of this fantasy. And just as, for Butler, this refused attachment subsequently shapes desire from the site of this loss, so the fugitive comes reproduce desire that emanates from his identification with Morel.

The fugitive’s identification remains, however, an interpolation within fantasy and, as such, the Oedipal drama of Morel is not determined in the arena of the symbolic, as it is for Lacan. Firstly, this mediation that prohibits the relation between the mother and child, for Lacan, gives rise to a symbolic identification of the child with the father; in Morel, however, we cannot properly understand the identification of the fugitive with Morel as symbolic—as the description Faustine watching the sunset reveals, what the fugitive comes to occupy and identify with is the vector of a gaze that marks the subject of fantasy. Secondly, despite the fugitive’s jealousy,
Morel does not inhabit the Name-of-the-Father that interdicts the desire for the mother-figure (Faustine) via the symbolic ordination of the law; instead, the interdiction is the result of an impassable mediatic intervention between the fugitive and Faustine, the undetectable surface of recording upon which she appears to the fugitive. This mediatic intervention is the occasion for the fugitive’s jealousy—he assumes that Morel exists alongside Faustine in her temporal present while he remains imprisoned in the future. Nonetheless, what the fugitive does not realize is that this mediatic intervention is itself a condition of Morel’s own fantasy—the seduction that the recording manifests is thus not a “real” seduction, insofar as Faustine never reciprocates Morel’s desire; Morel’s fantasy of seduction is, plainly, realized as a murder that kills Faustine and commits her to the status of an image. As such, to the degree that the fugitive comes to remediate Morel’s fantasy, Faustine must remain an image, and the object of an “impossible love” on the order of Bioy’s own desire for Louise Brooks.

But this role does not prove adequate to the transposed fantasy of Morel; recalling Laplanche’s formulation of fantasy, the fugitive cannot content himself with remaining a spectator to the fantasy seduction, but must become an active participant. To this extent, he stages his own seduction of Faustine through the appropriation of Morel’s invention; that is to say, he directly recapitulates Morel’s fantasy in a performative sense.

Seven days have been recorded. I performed well: a casual observer would not suspect that I am not a part of the original scene. That came about naturally as the result of my painstaking preparation: I devoted two weeks to continuous study and experiment. I rehearsed my every action tirelessly. I studied what Faustine says, her questions and answers; I often insert an appropriate sentence, so she appears to be answering me. I do not always follow her; I know her movements so well that I usually walk ahead. I hope
that, generally, we give the impression of being inseparable, of understanding each other so well that we have no need of speaking.\textsuperscript{20} (101)

This elaborate detailing of the fugitive’s performance reveals the truth of the fantasy seduction—not only the fugitive’s but Morel’s as well: the seduction only \textit{exists as the recording}. Outside of the recording, no romance occurs between the fugitive and Faustine; and, in a certain sense, the seduction of Faustine recorded by Morel did not happen either—both in the sense that Morel contrived the conditions of the seduction for the purposes of the recording and that Faustine finally rejects Morel’s advances, leaving the invention ultimately to persist as a recording of a \textit{failed seduction}.

\section*{A Self-Duplicating Machine}

“A recluse can make machines or invest his visions with reality only imperfectly, by writing about them or depicting them to others who are more fortunate than he”\textsuperscript{21} (80): the fugitive refers, at this point, to both Morel and himself, acknowledging machine-making as the issue of an address, and writing as a variety of machine-making; in doing so, he renders his project together with Morel’s. Morel’s machinic fantasy cannot become complete in itself; rather, it takes on the status of an aesthetic object remaining critically open to an other who must fill out its form and grant its status as a reality. We can understand, in this sense, the lived

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\textsuperscript{20} “Han quedado grabados siete días. Representé bien: un espectador desprevenido puede imaginar que no soy un intruso. Esto es el resultado natural de una laboriosa preparación: quince días de continuos ensayos y estudios. Infatigablemente, he repetido cada uno de mis actos. Estudié lo que dice Faustine, sus preguntas y respuestas; muchas veces intercalo con habilidad alguna frase; parece que Faustine me contesta. No siempre la sigo; conozco sus movimientos y suelo caminar adelante. Espero que, en general, demos la impresión de ser amigos inseparables, de entendernos sin necesidad de hablar” (122-3).

\textsuperscript{21} “Un hombre solitario no puede hacer máquinas ni fijar visions, salvo en la forma trunca de escribirlas o dibujarlas, para otros, más afortunados” (98).
\end{flushright}
fantasy as a form of address to an other while recognizing, of course, that Morel and the fugitive make up their own audiences; “I performed well,” the fugitive writes, indicating his position as both performer and spectator. Here the ego reveals its status as an alienated object, at a remove from the subject, and capable of becoming embedded in a material form. The ego’s address is directed at the subject, but as we have seen in the case of the identification between the fugitive and Morel, the place of the subject in the fantasy persists in relation to this materialized egoic drama and, to this extent, becomes exchangeable. In short, a recluse needs an other to whom he can address his fantasy vision, and that other can be, but is not necessarily, himself; there remains the possibility of someone wandering into the relation between subject and ego, as the fugitive does with Morel’s recording.

This admission by the fugitive regarding the situation of the recluse comes immediately after the his description of a habit he has developed of sleeping on a mat beside Faustine’s bed; as he writes, “It touches me to have her so close to me, and yet so unaware of this habit of sleeping together that we are acquiring”²² (79).

²² “me conmuevo mirándola descansar tan ajena de la costumbre de dormir juntos que vamos teniendo” (97).
Fig. 1 The fugitive and Faustine “sleeping together”

The scene is rendered in one of the illustrations by Norah Borges that accompanied the first edition of *The Invention of Morel*. The line that marks the edge of Faustine’s bed also bisects the image between the strata of the fugitive and Faustine, materializing the mediatic division that separates the two; to borrow a Deleuzian phrase that will figure into the discussion of *Last Year at Marienbad* in the next section, the fugitive and Faustine occupy different “sheets of time” that coexist simultaneously, and the fugitive, looking upward, is uniquely afforded the capacity to gaze across the boundary of separation. In a novel that is, in many ways, a prolonged meditation on the phenomenology of images, the appearance of illustrations in the text demands that the reader consider them together with the total recording machine’s metaphysical principle—a
principle that is cogently expressed in an annotation by the fictional editor of the fugitive’s manuscript:

He [the fugitive] neglected to explain one thing, the most incredible of all: the coexistence, in one space, of an object and its whole image. This fact suggests the possibility that the world is made up exclusively of sensations.23 (99)

The logic of the total recording machine is such that the distinction between the object and its copy does not obtain; as such, the positioning of the viewer in relation to the illustration of the fugitive and Faustine “sleeping together”—an act that does not exist for Faustine—is realized in the act of viewing as a gaze across the division of time. The viewer is, in this sense, in the place of the fugitive as subject, alienated in relation to the material image of the ego while investing the image with reality. The position of spectation towards the illustration is also a position of projection—a new “reality” emerges from the bringing together of disparate elements in the perceptive act.

This projective position, which is especially apparent in the viewer’s relation to the illustration, refracts a truth back onto the text as a whole—the truth of the text’s status as fantasy surface addressed to an other. This is what readers of The Invention of Morel have often missed: the point of textual access becomes a site for the performative reiteration of the machinery of the “seduction” itself. To this degree, I argue, the novel allegorizes its own reading; it stages a performative subjectivity that, in fact, belongs neither to Morel nor the fugitive but rather circulates as the memorial technology of the novel itself. The form of the novel is organized such that the reader comes to inhabit a position vis-à-vis the fugitive that restages the fugitive’s own

23 “Queda el más incredible: la coincidencia, en un mismo espacio, de un objeto y su imagen total. Este hecho sugiere la posibilidad de que el mundo está constituido, exclusivamente, por sensaciones” (120).
relation to Morel; that is to say, no one other than the reader can be understood to “invest [the fugitive’s] visions with reality.”

The fugitive makes clear his own intentions to graft his diary onto the machinery of Morel’s invention: “If one day the images should fail, it would be wrong to suppose that I have destroyed them. On the contrary, my aim is to save them by writing this diary.”24 (80). This expression of the fugitive’s aim acts as a reiteration of Morel’s own self-justification: both men profess their projects’ aims to be purely preservative, belying the production of fantasy that inheres in the act of preservation. The form of the novel is, therefore, organized such that the reader comes to inhabit a position vis-à-vis the fugitive that restages the fugitive’s own relation to Morel. By referring to the diary that constitutes the form of the novel, the fugitive transmutes the logic that obtains in his own relations to the total images to the relation between reader and text. The pages of the novel, the surfaces of inscription in The Invention of Morel, are thus not mute transmitters of sensory impressions—Lacan’s “neutral” surface of consciousness; rather, they constitute a theater of fantasy.

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24 “Sería pérfido suponer —si un día llegaran a faltar las imágenes— que yo las he destruido. Al contrario: mi propósito es salvarlas, con este informe” (98).
2. The Invention of Marienbad

In 1951 following the translation of *The Invention of Morel* into French, Alain Robbe-Grillet, a rather unknown novelist at the time, published a review of the novel in Georges Bataille’s journal *Critique*; a short little essay, Robbe-Grillet’s review offers a summary of *The Invention of Morel*’s plot with a slight criticism on the grounds of a certain “dryness [sécheresse],” a slightly humorous reproach coming from an author who would notoriously devote several pages of his 1957 novel *Jalousie* to the meticulous enumeration of banana trees; nonetheless, he ultimately concludes that the novel’s elaboration of the concept of a “passé modifiable” could, by itself, redeem its merit.²⁵

This concept of a “modifiable past” quite obviously figures into Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay for *Last Year at Marienbad*; As Robbe-Grillet writes in the introduction to the published screenplay, “[X] offers [A] a past, a future, and freedom[...] she seems to accept the identity the stranger offers her, and agrees to go with him toward something, something unnamed, something other” (11). On the one hand, a “modifiable past” is, of course, redolent of the re-organization of time that Lacan grants the “emergence” of the symbolic; on the other hand, the “modifiable past” as a destabilizing fantasy, as we have already seen with *The Invention of Morel*, exceeds the register of the symbolic. As such, we look to these works to provide a critical space for the imagination of extra-linguistic processes of subjectivation. Perhaps because of *The Invention of Morel*’s alleged inspirational role for *Last Year at Marienbad*, a relation that will be the object of the last section of this paper, we can recognize many critical entryways into *Last

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*Year at Marienbad* that resemble those from our discussion of *The Invention of Morel*: namely, (1) an Oedipal structure of relations, and (2) a certain formal reflexivity.

Many commentators have noticed the structure of the triangular relation within the film as an Oedipal one—an unsurprising thematic to be associated with Robbe-Grillet who had self-consciously covered such territory in his previous novel *The Erasers*, published in 1953.\(^{26}\) One of the reasons why the Oedipal reading of this relation among X, A, and M continues to be compelling is its assertion that the subjectivity at stake in the film is not, as it would appear, the female character A but instead that of the “seducer,” X. While the stakes of the “modifiable past” are quite evident for existence of A—and quite a lot of the film’s critical commentary has focused on her conflicted and suspended status as a subject—what has been less commented upon, however, is the equally suspended status of X as he attempts to gain control over the technics that control the past.

In a 1961 interview, Alain Resnias stated, “One can never know, in effect, if one projects one’s own fantasies onto the other or whether one is inflicted with the fantasies of one’s partner.”\(^{27}\) Resnais’ comment becomes all the more provocative if we understand the “partner” of X to be M, as opposed to A, and the terms of the “partnership” appear as a refused identification that results in the desire for A; the contested element of the Oedipal struggle becomes, in this sense, dominion over the fantasy of “last year.” X’s passion for (and violence toward) A will be read to this degree as a redirection of this refused identification with M, a contest which—much like the relation between Morel and the fugitive—is not figured as the


Lacanian struggle over the occupation of the primary location of the signifier (the Name-of-the-Father), but rather control over what I will call the cinematic apparatus as the technology of memory and image-making—that is, the technology of filmic production itself, the condition of Marienbad’s own existence.

The term “cinematic apparatus” has been used widely in film studies to refer to the systems and conditions of cinematic production—it can refer to everything from the techniques of filming and editing to the material manipulation of film technology. The most famous application of this terminology comes from Jean-Louis Baudry’s 1974 essay, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus”; Baudry argues that the stitching-together of a film constitutes an ideological distortion of the conditions of its production, resulting in a “sort of psychic apparatus of substitution, corresponding to the model defined by the dominant ideology” (354). This notion of the cinematic apparatus’s ideological role will not be emphasized here, but it brings up the relevant point that the labor of the cinematic apparatus is addressed to the subject and doubles, to a certain extent, the stitching-together of the subject itself.

In this analysis, the term “cinematic apparatus” will not apply to something that is obscured by the film and that the critic must recover; rather, Last Year at Marienbad presents the singular case of a film in which the cinematic apparatus casts a shadow upon the image of the film itself. This movement is quite different than the case of The Invention of Morel, in which we saw the explicit elaboration of a machinery (the total recording machine) whose self-reproducing iterations brought the machinery outward to the formal level to structure of the act of reading; in contrast, the cinematic apparatus of Last Year at Marienbad starts off as a formal and technical relation that invades the field of the film itself. There are, by way of example, two transitional scenes in the film where a solitary member of the foregrounded couple (first X, then A) appears
to be attempting to escape from the framing of the image itself—X in the long hotel corridor, A in the garden; it is not clear what or whom they are escaping from; their anxieties register, therefore, on the ontological level—anxiety over their status as image. These scenes, I argue, allows us to perceive the cinematic apparatus itself as the field of elements (production, recording, spectation) engaged in containing the figures within the image. This detectable presence of the cinematic apparatus is what I understand to be the film’s formal reflexivity.

The Image of Speech

To return to the Oedipal triangle in the foreground of the film, the seduction appears as the attempt by X to persuade A that they did indeed meet the previous year and become lovers. X repeatedly uses his speech to offer A a narrative of their past together and repeatedly admonishes A for not remembering him. Recalling Lacan’s description of the “emergence” of language, X offers A an identity that “extend[s] itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself.” Indeed, Last Year in Marienbad has often been interpreted as a tribute to the creativity of speech and language; Emma Wilson, for one, writes that Marienbad is “about the disturbing action and contact that can be created through language” (Alain Resnais 71).

However, in Marienbad, the re-ordering of time is a property that inheres in the cinematic apparatus itself and in fact anticipates and subverts speech; in other words, X’s speech—his narration of the previous year’s encounter—can only provisionally direct the cinematic apparatus which, upon the intrusions of M into the various scenes of seduction, appears to resist and exceed its own instrumentalization. My contention, as such, is that X’s stitching-together of a past offered to A as a continuum of identity is something more than an allegorical treatment of filmic editing; the intervention of the cinematic apparatus as a technology of memory is fully complicit
and indeed *necessary* for the emergence of subjectivity. The Oedipal drama of subjectivation here is loosed from its Lacanian moorings in the symbolic field of language and the mediating and primary place of the paternal signifier is replaced in this formulation with the technical projection of memory. In other words, if M appears as the father in the Oedipal triangle, it is not because he presents a meaningful stoppage in the chain of signification that guarantees subjectivity through language; rather, he is the doubled figure of the orchestrator of the fantasy itself, the specular double of the originator of the cinematic apparatus—a place that remains crucially empty in the real. As becomes clear in his repeated games of *nim* with X, M appears to control the game; it is, however, not M himself, but the cinematic apparatus for which he stands that organizes the layered projections of memory that will promote or disrupt the seduction.

We might dwell for a moment on one particular scene to better explore this triadic relation, one that appears to me as a condensation of the film in miniature, much in the same way that the stage play that opens the film contains its dramatic elaboration therein: this scene occurs immediately following X’s second loss to M in the game of *nim*—indeed with the voiceover of X’s address to A intruding upon his game scene with M: during an encounter on the stairwell, X describes to A the occasion of one of their allegedly previous encounters, supposedly having occurred the previous year “*dans les jardins de Frederiksbad*.” As X narrates the scene, his speech seems to take on a directorial purview: “You were alone, apart. You were leaning at a slight angle against a stone balustrade on which your hand was resting, your arm half extended…”28 (61). His speech thus appears to assemble not only the scenario but composes A’s posture; as Robbe-Grillet specifies in his screenplay, A appears in the scene at first with her arms at her sides (“*alors qu’elle avait les deux bras le long du corps*”), she then corrects (“*rectifie*”)

28 “Vous étiez seule, à l’écart. Vous teniez, un peu de biais, contre une balustrade de pierre, sur laquelle votre main était posée, le bras à demi étendu…”
her posture to accord with X’s description of her with her arm half-extended (70). X himself remains unseen at this stage of the scene that he describes; when he narrates to A, “You were turned toward me, now”\textsuperscript{29} she turns, in fact, to face the camera itself which advances slowly toward her in the position of X (62). The camera then turns with X’s attention to the statue of a man and woman dressed in classical garb accompanied by a dog that stands adjacent to them. According to X, both X and A had offered interpretations of the actions preserved in the statue, arriving at a slight disagreement of interpretation that, nonetheless, according to X, “n’était pas incompatible.”

X’s persuasion of A that they indeed met the previous year at Marienbad (or Frederiksbad, in this case) reveals in this scene momentarily its mediation by the cinematic apparatus. Robbe-Grillet expresses this quite transparently:

There is no last year, and Marienbad is no longer to be found on any map. This past, too, has no reality beyond the moment it is evoked with sufficient force; and when it finally triumphs, it has merely become the present, as if it had never ceased to be so. (12)

X, in this sense, creates this moment of the previous year through the act of its narration; however, this ability to actualize a fantasy perspective, to render it both present and sensible, is, for Robbe-Grillet, not inherent in X’s speech, but rather, is the unique property of cinema:

No doubt the cinema is the preordained means of expression of a story of this kind. The essential characteristic of the image is its presentness. Whereas literature has a whole gamut of tenses which makes it possible to narrate events in relation to each other, one might say that on the screen verbs are always in the present tense...by its nature, what we

\textsuperscript{29} “Vous étiez tournée vers moi, maintenant”
see on the screen *is in the act of happening*, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it.

This cinematic property—the “presentness” of the image—is also the condition of X’s seduction of A: in order to persuade her that they did indeed meet the previous year, he must invent for her the moment “with sufficient force.” We are, in other words, in the universe of *Morel*, where the referent (or copy) is simultaneous and indistinguishable from its object. In *Morel*, this is a metaphysical condition of the total recording machine; in *Marienbad*, X is able to create this force because the occluded cinematic gaze acts in accordance with his intentions—indeed it appears identical to X insofar as it assumes and projects his fantasy perspective. To this end, the screenplay directs the camera to be placed, “at the distance and height of a man’s eye,” a man which we can assume to be X. The cinematic apparatus is already displaced here from it’s the conventions of reproduction to a functionality of production; it *produces* its own objects and their histories; it mobilizes the “modifiable past” that Robbe-Grillet discovered in *The Invention of Morel*.

X’s fantasy narration is quickly dispelled, however, upon the intrusion of M into the scene. By this time, the cinematic apparatus has returned X and A to the gallery of the hotel, and they are looking at a representation of the hotel itself with the statue in the foreground. A’s attention is drawn away from the persuasive speech of X, and her gaze is directed again towards the camera, but it is M this time who has entered the scene in the camera’s position. M’s immediate empirical explanation of the statue subverts the fantasy interpretations of A and X: the statue depicts, according to M, Charles III and his wife taking an oath before a trial for treason: the classical garb, he says, is pure convention. A rapid take of A standing alone against the balustrade is followed by a long take of X advancing down the hotel’s corridor as the camera
retreats in front of him. M’s intrusion has thus dislodged the cinematic apparatus from its instrumentalization in the seduction fantasy of X, and X himself appears now to be trapped in its framing. Now silent, his speech no longer controls the parameters of the image—indeed, he himself now presents as the subject in question.

X’s seduction of A—his directing towards “something other”—appears as his attempt to create not only a coherent identity and history for A, but also, and primarily, to delineate a subjective position for himself as seducer. X’s actions toward A here can be read as a reproduction of Morel’s actions toward Faustine: X, through his speech and its ability to provisionally control the cinematic apparatus, constructs a fantasy in which he himself participates. As such, his actions in the film ask to be read as attempts to break out of the movements and rituals inscribed in the atmosphere of the hotel. The interpretation that he offers to A of the statue, “They could just as well be you and me,” characterizes this stasis; the ambiguity of the actions preserved in the statue is precisely the ambiguity of X’s status in the hotel. His speech appears to him capable of ascribing a history for A just as he ascribes a history for the statues; but this speech is itself fraught with anxiety over its own direction.

The relationship between word and image in Last Year at Marienbad has long been a subject of critical discussion, due principally to the film’s status as collaboration between director and novelist that it represents. This interchange between script and screen is one level on which the relation (antagonism, perhaps) between language and image is borne out; internal to the film, however, this interchange is staged as an encounter between speech and scene. Within the dimensions of the film, X’s speech is the only faculty available to him, and he deploys it upon A as an instrument for the actualization of fantasy. But insofar as his speech remains circumscribed by the cinematic apparatus it is subject to the irreducible “presentness” of the
image: the cinematic apparatus subverts X’s intentions by revealing what Deleuze refers to as the “pre-existence” of language:

Sense as past of language is the form of its pre-existence, that which we place ourselves in at once in order to understand images of sentences, to distinguish the images of words and even phonemes that we hear. It is therefore organized in coexisting circles, sheets, or regions, between which we choose according to actual auditory signs which are grasped in a confused way. (Cinema 2 99)

Last Year at Marienbad is especially attuned to this pre-existence of language, as it is addressed, according to Robbe-Grillet, “exclusively to [the spectator’s] sensibility.” X’s speech, thereby, finds itself out of step amid this sensory exposure. Vaughan points out the paradox that arises when X attempts to direct A’s composure in a scene supposedly set in the previous year:

[X’s] voice-over describes how she was standing, and in the image we can see her attempt to accommodate his description. That is: A, in an image that is coded to be set in the past, responds directly to the speech act that is attributed to the present. (131)

The arrival of M and his undermining of X’s fantasy then manifests an inherent incapacity of X’s speech. M, in other words, comes to stand in for the ever-observant presence of the cinematic apparatus, its transformation of words into images of words, and sentences into images of sentences.

Indeed, M is represented throughout both the film and the screenplay as a mechanical figure. His prowess and persistence at the game of nim is the most overt demonstration of this mechanicity: it is a game, as he says, he “can lose,” but he “always wins.”30 On one level, the game serves as a reminder to X of the degree to which his pursuit of A (indeed his very desire)
might be a mere channeling of M’s desire and his seduction only a recapitulation of a pre-existing fantasy of M; indeed, to some degree, the game of nim allegorizes the competition in pursuit of A—every move by X becomes subsequently recast in the context of a pre-determined plan of M. At the same time, as Gulney points out, the “strategy” for the game of nim involves...

…translating whole numbers into binary notation, the basis of all electronic computation; as long as the sum of each pile of objects expressed in binary notation is even, then it is impossible to win in the following move...M therefore calculates almost instantaneously, using binary numbers, exactly like a computer; his artificial, machine-like behaviour (displayed most prominently in his uncannily quick and infallible play) is a kind of ‘reverse Turing Test’, emphasizing technology’s indifference to human concerns.

The “reverse Turing test” that Gulney calls upon would be intended to determine from a set of human “outputs” whether the human was actually masking an artificial intelligence. The description of M in Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay would provide evidence for this test in the positive: “there is a kind of precision in his gestures, as if each step were calculated” (131-2).

I take this reading of M as an instance of technicity to disrupt the stable coordination of the Oedipal drama in the film as a relation among discrete subjects. To the degree that M, in the case of a “reverse Turing test,” does not stand in for himself so much as a constructed psychology, he remains a specular double of the cinematic apparatus. Much in the way that Morel’s presence in the recorded fantasy on the island signals to the fugitive the destabilizing truth that the origin of the fantasy is located elsewhere, so M acts as a persistent reminder to X that he too is constructed to the extent that he remains an image. Again, the Lacanian progression of the Oedipal drama through the symbolic cannot fully describe this confrontation: the contested
place is not the primary position of signification (the paternal signifier) but the locus of desire that structures the fantasy and makes it *proper* to the subject.

**The Painted-On Gaze**

This simultaneity of desiring gazes is rendered in perhaps the most well-known shot of the film: the image of the garden, where the characters cast shadows but the trees and statues do not. The image presents a disjunction between the mise-en-scene and the characters that inhabit it; to borrow Deleuze’s term, they exist on different “sheets of time,” as if the images of the characters were superimposed onto a pre-existing landscape. Indeed, the paradoxical image was achieved by preserving the shadows of the characters with paint at an earlier moment, and then waiting until the sun was directly above the trees and statues to capture the footage; the shadows thus represent a holdover from a prior moment, an image that continues to circulate among later images.
Fig. 2 The painted-on shadows of *Marienbad*

We can use this image to understand the fractured status of A in the film as another register of the simultaneity of disparate but overlapping gazes. M is the “invisible photographer” that represents the mediation of the image of A, and his presence in the film is the remainder of the cinematic apparatus projected onto the object itself; it is “painted onto” its object. The gaze of X upon A arrives thereafter to contain and remediate this presence of M; his speech, as we have seen, attempts unsuccessfully to negate this relation.

Zizek has attempted to take this disquieting presence of the other in film as origin of the image and determine it within the Lacanian subordination of the imaginary to the symbolic:

Firstly, the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it.

Then, this full immersion is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such: what I see is only a part, and I do not master what I see. I am in a passive position, the
show is run by the Absent One (or, rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back.

What then follows is a complementary shot which renders the place from which the Absent One is looking, allocating this place to its fictional owner, one of the protagonists. In short, one passes thereby from imaginary to symbolic, to a sign: the second shot does not simply follow the first one, it is signified by it. (*The Fright of Real Tears 32*)

For Zizek, following Lacan, the place of the “Other” is the one-who-signifies; while this place is perpetually unfilled, it can be temporarily “allocated” to a *signifying* subject. But in *Marienbad*, we see no such shots: the perspective is never fixed to the position of any character but rather remains suspended and non-localized. In this sense, M does not stand in for the “absent cause” of the one “who manipulates images behind my back,” but rather the “present cause” of the subject immersed in his own fantasy. It is for this reason that M’s presence agitates X: he does not figure the absent locus of signification but only the fact that *another’s desire is present* in the field of the image.

This self-awareness of *Last Year at Marienbad* has long been noted by the film’s critics: Hunter Vaughan recently called the film a “reflexive experiment in film form,” before aptly expressing the stakes of such reflexivity:

The film dismantles the coded division between subject-functions, constructing a reflexive parallelism that implicates in the immanent field the signifying processes between person and person, between character and text, and between text and spectator. As Merleau-Ponty might say, it shows how we show—to others, and to ourselves. (*Where Film Meets Philosophy* 127)
Vaughan reads the self-referential gestures within *Last Year at Marienbad* as an attempt, through the jamming of the diegetic conventions of filmic code, to address the revelation of subjectivities themselves. Film affords a privileged site for this project for the way that it stages the “fluctuation of positions” among character, spectator, and image (128). Vaughan’s “immanent field” is a useful parallel to what I will refer to as the cinematic apparatus in play within *Last Year at Marienbad*: this “immanent field” owes much to the Deleuzian concept of the “plane of immanence,” but ultimately testifies to “the site of intersection for many voices and gazes, both diegetic and extradiegetic…distributed and organized according to sets of formal relations” (4).

In a similar sense, I identify the cinematic apparatus within *Last Year at Marienbad* to be the productive relation among recording, editing, and spectation that casts a shadow upon the image itself. The scenes in *Last Year at Marienbad* where either X or A appear to be attempting to escape from the framing of the image itself—X in the long hotel corridor, A in the garden—allows us to conceptualize the cinematic apparatus as all the elements engaged in containing them within the image.

The Deleuzian connotation here also acts as a reminder of Deleuze’s marked influence on the recent criticism on *Last Year at Marienbad*, due to the film’s status as a central reference in Deleuze’s *Cinema-2: The Time Image*. Here, Deleuze argues that the three characters of the film (X, A, and M) exist within different strata of time: “[W]hat X lives in a present of past, A lives in a present of future, so that the difference exudes or assumes a present of present (the third, the husband), all implicated in each other” (101). When Deleuze subsequently traces this differential arrangement to the level of *Last Year at Marienbad*’s creators, however, the third position disappears:
For Resnais conceived *Last Year*... like his other films, in the form of sheets or regions of past, while Robbe-Grillet sees time in the form of points of present. If *Last Year*... could be divided, the man X might be said to be closer to Resnais, and the woman A closer to Robbe-Grillet. The man basically tries to envelop the woman with continuous sheets of which the present is the narrowest, like the advance of a wave, whilst the woman, at times wary, at times stiff, at times almost convinced, jumps from one bloc to another, continually crossing an abyss between two points, two simultaneous presents. (104)

If we follow the speculation that Deleuze lays out here but does not fully develop, X forms the “sheets of time” that Deleuze associates with Resnais, A jumps around in an “indeterminacy of the ‘quantum’ type” that he associates with Robbe-Grillet, we are left to fill in what, on the level of the production of the film itself, who or what is associated with M, the husband, in the “present of the present” (120).

It is in response to this problem that the film asks to be read as an index onto its own production; indeed, there is a sense in which the story of *Last Year at Marienbad* exceeds its own conscription to the dimensions of the film. We have seen already in *The Invention of Morel* the self-duplicating machinery embedded within the text that expands to encompass the dimensions of textual access itself; and *Last Year at Marienbad* mobilizes a parallel apparatus: as Robbe-Grillet claims, the film is the simple story “a persuasion,” but the persuasive mechanism is the very cinematic apparatus. X’s attempt at a seduction of A requires the cinematic apparatus to not only recall the past—the “last year”—but *screen it into existence*. The cinematic apparatus is, we should be clear, not only the camera, nor even the system of director- and editorship; it, rather, comprises these elements together with the act of spectation as a productive relation—one that,
to some degree, participates in the construction of the “last year.” This relation is “the present of present,” the constitutive apparatus of observation.
Coda: The Insistence of Louise Brooks, or, the De-Individualized Sinthome

In the process of determining how A would be styled for Last Year at Marienbad, one particular model was insisted upon by Resnais: he allegedly wanted Delphine Seyrig’s makeup to resemble that of Louise Brooks from Pandora’s Box, a 1929 film directed by Georg Pabst. Resnais showed Pandora’s Box to his actors to serve as a reference for the style he envisioned, and he even considered dropping Seyrig from the role after she cut her hair in such a way that would prevent her from adopting Brooks’ characteristic “bob”-style cut for the film.\(^{31}\)

In a 1995 interview with an Argentine magazine, Film, Bioy confirms to interviewer Sergio Wolf that the figure of Faustine of The Invention of Morel was similarly modeled on Louise Brooks:

QUESTION: You said that the inspiration for La invención de Morel came to you, at least partially, from the vanishing of Louise Brooks from the movies. What happened with you and Louise Brooks?

ADOLFO BIOY CASARES: I was deeply in love with her. I didn’t have any luck, because she disappeared quickly. She went to Europe, she made a film with Pabst, and then I didn’t like her so much as when she was in Hollywood. And then, she vanished too early from the movies.

QUESTION: Could she be seen as one of the characters in La invención de Morel?

ADOLFO BIOY CASARES: Yes, she would be Faustine.\(^{32}\)

\(^{31}\) This use of Brooks as model is revealed in the interview with Resnais included in the Criterion Collection release of Last Year at Marienbad. It is also Phil Powrie in The Cinema of France. London: Wallflower Press, 2006.

From an interview with Rivette and Labarthe in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, we know that Resnais was not directly familiar with Bioy’s modeling of Faustine on Louise Brooks; nonetheless, in his depiction of A, who herself comes to repeat the figure of Faustine—Resnais settles upon Louise Brooks as his desired model. The modeling of both A and Faustine on the image of Louise Brooks suggests that both works are, to some extent, elaborations of a fundamental fantasy of cinema—that is, the fantasy of existing alongside, perhaps in the same “sheet of time,” as the desired image while, paradoxically, preserving its status as image. Both Resnais and Bioy wanted to incorporate Brooks into their own aesthetic elaborations: thus, when Resnais adapts Louise Brooks to the figure of A, it results in a translation of makeup and haircut, an adaptation of Louise Brooks as style. Thus, the aesthetic elaboration of the fantasy testifies only to the impossibility of its realization: to fall in love with Louise Brooks is to fall in with a style, and the style has no essence other than a masquerade which turns on the very separation of image-spectator.

A in *Last Year at Marienbad* and Faustine in *The Invention of Morel* are restricted in their presence to the role of masquerade that reflects the masculine desires directed at them; in the Lacanian elaboration of the phallic drama (read by Butler as a gendered articulation of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic) these female characters are the phallus and act as the site of the male requisition to have the phallus that is the condition of their masculine identity. As Butler maintains, however, the project of criticism is to affirm this drama as a site of loss and foreclosure of gender as much as a realization of it; a melancholic remainder, nonetheless, persists as an excessive element internal to this law (indeed produced by this law) without belonging to it (Gender Trouble 59-77). Both *Morel* and *Marienbad* provide further sites to recognize this drama as operative along coordinates that cannot be reduced to conventional
understandings of either language or discourse; that is to say, the machinery manifest in Morel and Marienbad is not an emergent property of the subjects’ implication in language, but rather, through the actualization of fantasy, a regulation of the perceptive and corporeal relations of the individuals within their environments. The ego machine is, therefore, also a fantasy-machine, and the elaboration of the ego proceeds according to the imposition of the drama of fantasy onto reality, suspending their distinction.

We have, finally, to recognize that the Morel-Marienbad production, a staggered re-production of fantasy, arises from the practice of Resnais as cinematographer realizing a material to which he remains unusually foreign. By the time of Last Year at Marienbad’s production, Resnais had self-consciously distanced himself among the filmmakers of the New Wave from the auteur model of directorship that had emerged from the film criticism of the Cahiers du Cinéma, articulated by François Truffaut in particular. Truffaut, in an essay published in the journal 1954, had championed filmmakers that created films according to their personal vision and denigrated the works of “scenarists” who adapted novels, lamenting, “A film is no longer made in France that the authors do not believe they are re-making Madame Bovary.” Alain Resnais rejected both this label of auteur and its designated style of directorship, persistently collaborating with practitioners of the nouveau roman—the other major French post-war art movement—Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jean Cayrol, who wrote the scripts for Hiroshima, My Love, Last Year at Marienbad, and Muriel, or the Time of Return, respectively. In these films, Resnais credited himself as réalisateur—acknowledging his submission to the dictates of another’s text, the very practice that Truffaut had so disparaged. He quite readily
admitted, “It’s not that I consider myself as someone who has a message to deliver to the world. And it’s difficult even for myself to consider myself as an auteur.”

We can, in this sense, understand Resnais’ filmmaking practice during this period as the negotiated actualization of a pre-existing relation. He indeed appears to have sought out this internal distance from his own projects and cultivated his self-ascribed role as réalisateur. His internal distance from Last Year at Marienbad is perhaps most evident in the interview by Labarthe and Rivette of Cahiers du Cinéma that Resnais gave alongside Robbe-Grillet shortly after the film’s release in 1961; when the interviewers suggest the possible influence of The Invention of Morel, a novel by Adolfo Bioy Casares published in Argentina in 1941, Robbe-Grillet contends that he is “not surprised” by the alleged connection and refers to The Invention of Morel as “an astonishing book”; Resnais, meanwhile, maintains that he has not read the book, replying, “I’m not the person to speak of this, as I don’t know the book.”

We have again arrived at a triangulated relation, but this one is at the center of Last Year at Marienbad’s production: Resnais’ collaboration with Robbe-Grillet is mediated by the obscure presence of a third—in this case, the allegedly inspirational text of The Invention of Morel. Moreover, unfamiliar with the text itself, the character of this mediation cannot but appear to Resnais as enigmatic, something upon which he cannot speak. He does not know to what extent his collaboration with Robbe-Grillet has in actual fact been a collaboration with this

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33 "Il ne faut donc pas me considérer comme quelqu'un qui aurait un message à délivrer au monde, et il m'est difficile moi-même de me considérer comme un auteur." http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/cinema/cinema-alain-resnais-il-m-est-difficile-moi-meme-de-me-considérer-comme-un-auteur_1167138.html

obscure third. Resnais’ role as réalisateur here takes on the possible actualization of an obscure object, a repetition of this unknown text and its scene of fantasy.

This repetition—one that takes place across several decades and continents, and includes the intervention of texts and cinematic technology—troubles the traditional conscription of repetition to the idiosyncratic effusions of a singular unconscious. The model of singular idiosyncrasy is how Zizek reads the Lacanian sinthome into the figure of the auteur:

The auteur theory of Hitchcock has taught us to pay attention to the continuum of motifs, visual and others, which persist from one film to another irrespective of the changed narrative context - 'the woman who knows too much'; 'the person who is suspended from another's hand'; 'the glass full of white drink', etc… How, then, are we to interpret such extended motifs?... The right balance is attained when we conceive them as sinthoms in the Lacanian sense: as a signifier's constellation (formula) which fixes a certain core of enjoyment, like mannerisms in painting — characteristic details which persist and repeat themselves without implying a common meaning (this insistence offers, perhaps, a clue to what Freud meant by the 'compulsion to repeat').

(Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Lacan... 125-6)

The auteur theory allows for Zizek to make this circumscription of the Hitchcockian film as the Hitchcockian sinthome; in short, the auteur theory quickly fixes the repetitions of filmic production to the unconscious of the auteur. With Resnais as anti-auteur, or as réalisateur, we cannot move from the filmic texture of Last Year at Marienbad to a singular unconscious that determines its “core of enjoyment.” Due to the triangulated relation of its production, outlined above, we have to comprehend a distributed field across which repetitions occur and for which a
logic must be adduced other than the struggle of a singular subject against his or her own inscription in the symbolic.

This repetitious action—which Zizek identifies in Hitchcock as a manifestation of the sinthome—we might more properly read in the case of the production of Morel and Marienbad as a compulsive repetition of fantasy that doubles the fantasies elaborated in the works themselves. This fantasy, as we have seen, is repeated across both works on both the narrative and formal level: an immense machinery has been recognized as operating towards the perpetuation of this fantasy and its persistence through the aesthetics of both novel and film. Moreover, across this machinery, a sequence of subjects coincide to recapitulate its egoic drama, including the reader of The Invention of Morel and the viewer of Last Year in Marienbad. As such, against the critical gesture that would reify The Invention of Morel as an extra-textual referent to Last Year at Marienbad, we can conceive of a relation between the two works that is congruent to the dramas depicted therein: the production of fantasy involves the commitment of the ego to a material form, a form that then has its own circulation. Rather than determine the relation between Morel and Marienbad according to the conventions of allusion or inspiration, one is compelled to recognize the repetition of fantasy as an effect of the ego overrunning the subject and opening indefinitely onto an ‘other’ that might re-engage its imaginary relation. To read Morel in Marienbad is, thus, to track the fantasy of the “impossible love” for an image playing out through a self-duplicating machinery that has something of the “supra-individual” status of the Lacanian symbolic, but manifests itself in the form of a scene that repeats across a distributed aesthetic production.


