

A Psychoanalytical Approach to the *Cremaster Cycle*

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Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* opens up a lot of interpretations for the viewer, with its seemingly ambiguous plot, odd characters, invented symbols, and excitingly strange scenes. I do not wish to make an attempt at interpretation; instead I wish to take a psychoanalytical approach to the films in order to explain the effects of its imagery on the viewer. To be more precise, I intend to use Laura Mulvey and Sigmund Freud in order to explain the psychoanalytical effects the *Cremaster Cycle* has on the heterosexual male viewer. This is not to say that only heterosexual males can be unconsciously affected by these films, it is just for the purposes of this paper that I choose to talk specifically about heterosexual male viewers. I intend to apply a psychoanalytical approach to the *Cremaster Cycle* in order to describe how the roles of the female characters ascend in power while simultaneously causing the ego of the male heterosexual viewer to descend.

I feel that Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" offers the best way of explaining Barney's use of film and the role of women as conflict to the heterosexual male viewer's ego. Laura Mulvey takes a psychoanalytic approach in order to explain how Hollywood narrative film is a purely male egocentric device, which she terms as "phallogentrism."¹ A distinction must first be made between what Mulvey terms as "cinema" and "alternative cinema." Cinema is applied to Hollywood films made in the 1930's thru the 1950's, such as Busby Berkeley films. These films embody phallogentrism in that the woman is always portrayed as the "signifier of the male

other.”ⁱⁱ Alternative cinema refers to films that challenge the phallocentrism of cinema, portraying women in a way not in opposition to men.

Is the *Cremaster Cycle* a phallogentric form of cinema? In order to answer this, Laura Mulvey’s ideas concerning film must be further explained. Cinema offers two pleasures for the viewer, fetishistic scopophilia and narcissism. Fetishistic scopophilia is the pleasure of looking, a sexual pleasure according to Freud in which people are associated as objects that the viewer is able to control as well as subject their gaze upon.ⁱⁱⁱ The male audience member is able to satisfy this pleasure in the comfort of the movie auditorium where he is able to set his eyes on the female body without feeling socially inappropriate. Close-ups and other film techniques present the female body in fragments, delivering the body as a set of easily controlled fetishistic elements. Freud considered the fetishistic control of the gaze upon fragments of the body as associated with castration anxiety.^{iv} The narcissistic aspect of film is explained by the viewers wish to identify himself with a human form on film. Everyone likes to hear that they look like a certain actor, and it is this wish to create identification with an actor on screen that increases the ego. The narcissistic aspect is purely male ego-orientated in that the male actors that the viewer is able to identify himself with are portrayed as in charge. Once the viewer identifies himself with the actor, his distance from the female object is decreased because of the actor’s presence in the film with her. When the male viewer is able to link his identity with the actor’s, he begins to feel in control of the situation in the film sense the male figure is always in control in cinema.

What roles do the main female characters in the *Cremaster Cycle* play, and how do they apply to Mulvey’s idea of the role of women Hollywood cinema? In *Cremaster 1*

Barney introduces us to Goodyear, a character reminiscent of the dancers in the Busby Berkeley film Gold Diggers (1935). Her stylized hair and flawless makeup combine with her slinky dress, which she wears in the passenger compartment of the blimp, and her theatrically feminine dress that she wears on the field to create an image of an unthreatening woman. It is as if she were a puppet dancing purely for the male viewer. The obvious absence of men in this film allows an uncompetitive gaze for the male viewer. *Cremaster I* at first appears to be a man's wet dream of a beautiful woman dancing for him upon a football field. The close-ups of her face refer to the fetishistic aspects of scopophilia, a reference that is further heightened by the actress Marti Domination's role as Goodyear, a performer known for her participation in the fetish events of New York's House of Domination.

Goodyear would fit perfectly into what Mulvey would describe as the woman's passive role in cinema if it weren't for her controlling the dancers' movements on the field. While she rides in the blimp, she hides under a table in a seemingly uncomfortable position as she plucks grapes from a hole through the top of the table. Swallowing each grape, they pass through her body only to emerge through the bottom of the bell-like figure on her shoe. As she moves the grapes, which are now on the floor underneath her, the dancers upon the field follow her design. She appears as a woman whose only function is to entertain the gaze of the heterosexual male viewer, but her god-like ability to control the movements of the dancers on the field means she has an active role in the narrative. The heterosexual male viewer's unconscious is confronted with a conflicting view of the female character, whose body signifies "erotic availability" but whose actions

suggest power normally reserved for male onlookers (those on screen and in the audience).

Cremaster 2 would step up the level of conflict in the heterosexual male viewer's unconscious with the relationship of Fay la Foe and Harry Houdini. Fay la Foe seduces Houdini in the last scene at the World Exposition Hall, an action that interrupts Houdini's efforts at metamorphosis. Houdini symbolizes Barney's idea of the athlete's desire of transforming his body through extreme discipline.^v According to Barney, in order for an athlete to reach his goal of transforming his body they must reject all desires including sex because "nothing can materialize or mutate unless it struggles against resistance in the process."^{vi} Houdini fails at resisting sexual desire and thus can not transform. He is not the male actor of Hollywood cinema because he allows the female to control the situation causing him to take on a passive role. Barney identifies himself with Houdini's own goal of metamorphosis, stating that "Houdini symbolized hermetic practices; he is the 'Character of Positive Restraint' who refuses differentiation, seeking instead to seal off and transform his body through extreme discipline."^{vii} Barney's unwillingness to let Houdini resist Fay la Foe's seduction implies a sense of the "alternative cinema" in that the male's power over situations can be challenged.

The destabilization of the male ego is further deepened in the second film through the relationship between Gary Gilmore and Nicole Baker. Gilmore's incompetence in bed, obvious by his irregularly small penis, is symbolized in the scene where he attempts to make a mountain landscape out of Vaseline and a string as he sits in his car at a gas station. In Freud's essay "On the Universal tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" he explains the inability of a man to perform sexually as affective to the man's

libido.^{viii} If the heterosexual male viewer identifies himself with Gary Gilmore, he must also identify himself with Gilmore's impotence, causing an attack on the viewer's ego. Thus, the heterosexual male viewer does not find an affirming relationship in *Cremaster 2*.

The apparent shift from a less threatening *Cremaster 1* to an "alternative cinematic" *Cremaster 2* establishes an empowerment of the feminine while simultaneously threatening the male's ego. *Cremaster 3* damages the male ego by causing castration anxiety to enter the unconscious of the male heterosexual viewer with the introduction of the Entered Apprentice's absent penis. The almost agonizing scene of the Entered Apprentice in the gynecological dentist's chair with his legs spread open to reveal an impacted sort of genital area as five men look on cannot help but create castration anxiety for the male viewer. What has the Entered Apprentice done to cause his sex to become ambiguous? Freud explains the anxiety a boy feels when he realizes that his mother does not have a penis, an anxiety that is sublimated in childhood. When the male viewer is presented with a man without a penis a new type of anxiety is developed. The phallus' absence means a man cannot successfully or socially. He cannot take the phallic role of the active male, forcing him to the same level as the passive female.

The role of the Entered Novitiate should also be discussed in terms of castration anxiety. She is presented in a passive role, as she wears a 1930's slinky dress in a small room with a cookie-cutter-like attachment to her heels, which she uses to cut wedges out of potatoes. Just as Goodyear could be considered a passive role at first glance, the heterosexual male viewer's gaze is excited by the Entered Novitiate's image yet the

cutting action follows the theme of castration anxiety. The actress playing the Entered Novitiate, Aimee Mullins, has prosthetic legs that can also symbolize the severing of the penis with the absence of the legs. She symbolizes lack, a threat to the male libido.

Aimee Mullins also plays a role in *The Order*, wearing leopard-like prosthetic legs while her body painted in leopard print. Her prosthetic legs again allude to castration anxiety. She challenges the Entered Apprentice, who must fight her in order to ascend the Guggenheim. The obvious female body form under the leopard body paint creates a constant reminder for the male viewer that the man is being challenged by a female. The lack of power the actor has in the situation causes the narcissistic identification the viewer developed to be degraded. The ego of the viewer is impeded as the actor loses his “masculinity” by failing to live up to the Hollywood cinema’s view of men.

The rest of the *Cremaster Cycle* after *Cremaster 3* reinforces the descending view of the male’s ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ascending view of the actress’ role. The Loughton Candidate in *Cremaster 4* is a satyr dressed in a nice white suit with his horns impacted. In mythology satyrs are associated to Bacchus, enjoying the leisurely life of sex and alcohol. The Loughton Candidate is unlike the mythological satyrs because he disassociates himself from them by dressing like a man, not drinking, and not involving himself in any sexual acts with the Faeries. He takes on a more passive role instead, dancing in a circle in a room as the floor slowly erodes under his feet while three Faeries watch on. The role of the male viewer and the actresses in Hollywood cinema switched; the Faeries are now the male viewer by setting their gaze upon the Loughton Candidate as he performs for them.

The Faeries create a conflicting presence for the male viewer with their muscular bodies yet feminine makeup and dresses. The allusion to transsexuals, with their feminine attributes and masculine physic, creates an uncomfortable combination for the heterosexual male viewer's unconsciousness. The scene of them at a picnic in giant dresses with the wind blowing up their skirts, allowing a somewhat provocative view of their underwear, satisfies the scopophilia pleasure behind cinema: the male viewer is allowed to satisfy their sexual urge of looking under actresses' skirts with the aid of fragmented close-ups. However, it must be remembered that female genitals are also the source of anxiety, functioning as the site or record of castration. The actresses are no longer thin and lean, but instead proudly display the stereotypically masculine characteristic of large muscles. The actor, on the other hand, appears thin and weak next to the Faeries as he entertains them.

Cremaster 4 also contains an undeniably phallic, or rather anti-phallic, scene towards the end. The Loughton Candidate fuels the motorbikes with his udder-like sexual organs as the film cuts back and forth to a fleshy pink surface with an even fleshier phallic pink ball being tied up and probed with thin wires and tools. The combination of these images upon the unconscious of the male viewer would decrease the libido immensely. As the viewer gazes upon the fetishistic close-ups of the udder-like sexual organs and testicle-like fleshy substance, he is hit with an allusion to castration anxiety. It is as if the severing of the fleshy balls is the cause of the Loughton Candidate's lacking. Barney's role as the feminized Loughton Candidate implies that he is allowing his own masculinity to be subjected to feminine characteristics, causing *Cremaster 4* to embody

the characteristics of “alternative cinema” because the male character no longer plays the phallic active role associated with cinema.

Cremaster 5 is the final stage for the decreasing male ego and the increasing female role. The Queen of Chain is interestingly enough played by Ursula Andress, an actress who would have embodied the role of femininity in Hollywood cinema because of her role as the original Bond Girl. I do not feel it is at all coincidental that Barney decided to have Ursula Andress play the role of Queen; an ultimate figure of power for any woman due to her ability to assert control over both sexes. Where as in the beginning of the *Cremaster Cycle* the actresses looked seemingly passive at first glance, the Queen of Chain immediately gives off an active presence with her authoritative demeanor and elaborate entrance into an elite box seat. From her box seat in the opera house, she watches her Diva perform on stage. The character’s title of “*her* Diva” signifies the Queen of Chain’s dominance and control over the male character. Such as the Faeries did in *Cremaster 4*, the Queen of Chain takes on the role of the male viewer by directing her gaze toward the Diva performing on stage. The Queen of Chain embodies the role of the male viewer more than the Faeries of *Cremaster 4* by being present in an auditorium, figured literally as a viewer. Also, the Queen of Chain never interacts with her Diva on stage, keeping intact the divider between the viewer and the actor, unlike the Faeries who repeatedly interact with the Loughton Candidate as he performs for them.

There are three men that serve the Queen of Chain: her Diva, her Magician, and her Giant. Her Magician and Giant do as much to the male viewer’s libido as her Diva does. The Giant wades in the Gellért Baths with the Füdór Sprites, nymphs with ambiguous sexual organs that are reminiscent of a squid’s tentacles. This beautiful scene

of many flowers and ribbons of various shapes and colors encompassing the Giant and the Füdör Sprites while they frolic in the baths is filled with castration images. Obviously the strange sexual organs of the Füdör Sprites would cause castration anxiety for the heterosexual male viewer's unconscious, so it is the Giant that I wish to discuss further.

As the Queen of Chain sings from her opera box, the Tears of Erich Weiss fall down her cheeks only to escape through anal-like holes around her feet. These tears touch the water of the Gellért Baths, introducing her Magician and the Füdör Sprites. The Queen's Menagerie of seven Jacobin pigeons are the next to enter the anal-like holes around her feet, and once inside the myth inspired world the Queen's Menagerie becomes attached to the Giant's penis by ribbons. Each of the seven birds is attached individually to a ribbon, whose ends braid around the Giant's penis in such a way to suggest a phallic maypole. The birds attempt to cause the penis to rise by flying overhead, yet they fail to overcome the destiny of the penis' descent. The combination of the feminine setting with the hermaphroditic nymphs and with the Giant's attempt to raise his penis affects the ego because it alludes to sexual impotence. The Giant is not able to raise his penis, even with the help of seven pigeons; stopping the growth of the libido because he is not able to satisfy sexual desires. The Giant's incompetence would not be comfortable for the male viewer's unconscious sense he is unconsciously trying to identify himself with one of the male characters in *Cremaster 5* yet so far neither the Giant nor the Diva was able to have a positive affect on the male libido.

The Queen of Chain's Magician causes castration anxiety for the male viewer in a less flamboyant way than her Diva and Giant. Her Magician symbolizes Harry Houdini, a character from *Cremaster 2* who symbolizes the failure of the male character to remain in

control. Barney identified himself with Houdini because they shared a common interest in metamorphosis and exposing the body to strenuous activity in order to transcend. The Magician in *Cremaster 5* symbolizes Barney's desire for metamorphosis in order to transcend the physical constraints of the body to create a self-enclosed system. Barney's role as the Magician implies a direct identification between Barney and the object of the Queen of Chain's gaze, as well as a direct identification between Barney as the viewer of the film and the actor. These direct identifications cause conflict for the phallogocentric male viewer because of Barney's role as creator of the *Cremaster Cycle* implies that he made a conscious effort for the death of the male ego, consciously allowing the active role of the male character to switch places with the passive role of the female character. The final scene of the Magician in chains leaping to his death off the Lánchíd Bridge symbolizes the death of the male ego. The name Queen of Chain implies the Queen has power over the chains that cover her Magician's body, creating her identity as an active and powerful person that kills the male ego. The male viewer is no longer able to feel pleasure in his identification with the male character on screen, causing these unconscious identifications to serve no other purpose other than decreasing the ego libido.

The Cremaster Cycle involves the metamorphosis of the role of women in a phallogocentric cinema, allowing the woman to transcend the passive in order to reach the powerful active role conventionally assigned to men. The metamorphosis of the female's role is not an independent act because of its unavoidable effects upon the male ego. When it comes to film, the libido can be satisfied by allowing the male viewer to exert a controlling gaze upon the female characters as objects of sexual stimulation. Cinema is also able to increase the ego by allowing the viewer to identify with the active male

character, a narcissistic act that allows the viewer to feel he has as much control over the situation on film as the active male character he relates to.

When the more phallogentric characteristics of *Cremaster 1* are replaced by the obvious characteristics of the “alternative cinema,” where the role of the man as the active presence and representation of power is challenged, the heterosexual male viewer’s ego is challenged. In *Cremaster 2* the ego is affected because Houdini is not able to assert control over the situation by allowing himself to be seduced by Fay la Foe. In *Cremaster 3* the ego is affected because of the Entered Apprentice’s lack of a penis and the active presence of the Entered Novitiate. In *Cremaster 4* the ego is affected because the libido can only be satisfied by the viewer controlling his gaze upon the masculine Faeries’ bodies, an image that could not satisfy a man’s desire without questioning his sexuality. In *Cremaster 5* the ego is affected because the Diva was the sexual object of the Queen on Chain’s gaze, the Giant was sexually incompetent, and the Magician killed himself. The male viewer constantly receives blows to his ego as the female characters transcend to more active roles, only to end with the Queen of Chain taking on the role of the male viewer.

¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press) 158.

² Mulvey, 159, “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.”

³ Mulvey, 160.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press) 16.

⁵ Spector, 11.

⁶ Spector, 4.

⁷ Spector, 11.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love,” in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press) 137-138