



Lang with Lacan: The Power of the Gaze in *Moonfleet*

Background

In the 1970s, in Britain, the field of film studies was split by divisions and polemical oppositions. When *Movie* revived publication, after a lapse of some years, it set itself up explicitly against the constellation of theories, mostly imported from France, which were being promoted by *Screen* magazine. Prominent among these theories was Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though the writers on *Movie* made use of Freudian ideas in their interpretations, they were generally hostile to Lacan. This was spelt out in Andrew Britton's bad-tempered article 'The Ideology of *Screen*' (1978: 2-28). For a while, Robin Wood promoted the work of the American psychoanalyst Norman O. Brown as an alternative post-Freudian tradition to that of Lacan, more suited to his own sensibilities. But it cannot be said that this enthusiasm of his was very influential.

The adoption of the theories of Lacan for analysing cinema was by no means a random appropriation of fashionable and obscure ideas. Rather, it responded to an impasse which had been encountered in the appropriation of structuralist thinking to the field of film studies. This was most clear in the work of Christian Metz, the first important writer on the cinema to make use of Lacanian concepts. In his earlier semiotic theorising (published in English in the book *Film Language* [1974]) Metz had become aware that the analogy between film and language had severe limits. In particular, film lacked the 'double articulation' of human language, whereby meaningless syllables are formed into meaningful words, before those words are subsequently arranged in the framework of syntax. Furthermore, a single shot in a film (an image of a gun, say) can only be the equivalent of a sentence ('Here is a gun') and not of a single word ('Gun'). A semiotics of cinema based on linguistics, therefore, had less analytic power than its enthusiasts had at first supposed.

Lacan, influenced by the theories of his friend the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, had brought structuralism into the field of psychoanalysis. This allowed him to develop his theory of the Symbolic order, which radically modified Freud's concept of the Unconscious. But, for Lacan, there was a further dimension at work in human psychic life, which he called 'the Imaginary'. The French word 'Imaginaire' does not mean non-existent: rather, it refers to the field of images. For Lacan, our psyche is captivated by images. And, as Metz realised, images do not admit of any comprehensive structural / linguistic analysis.

'Captivated by images' might be a good description of the film viewer, and even more so of the cinéophile or film critic. Hence it was that, in a series of essays including 'The Imaginary Signifier' (1982: 1-87), Metz brought the Lacanian theory of the Imaginary into the field of film studies. Once established in this new domain, the relevance of these ideas produced a flourishing of psychoanalytic writings on the cinema.

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate something of the usefulness of these ideas even when explicating a film (in the manner associated with *Movie*) through the interplay of narrative and mise-en-scène. It would be presumptuous of me to hope to heal the splits between the influences of *Movie* and *Screen*. But, with the lapse of time, those polemics might now have less urgency and an eclecticism of approach be more acceptable.

Object a

Among Lacan's various theoretical concepts, one that has proved particularly fruitful in the analysis of film is 'object petit a', which he defines as the object provoking desire. So, what does this term mean, and why have film theorists been attracted by it?¹

A clear precursor of Lacan's concept is Alfred Hitchcock's notion of 'the MacGuffin'. 'The MacGuffin [is] the gimmick, if you will, or the papers the spies are after it doesn't matter what it is. And the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it's beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture the plans, documents or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me the narrator, they're of no importance whatever.' (Hitchcock in Truffaut 1967: 111-112)

Hitchcock goes on to declare that 'My best MacGuffin, and by that I mean the emptiest, the most non-existent, and the most absurd, is the one we used in *North by North-West* just government secrets!' (113). We never discover what these secrets are. The reel of microfilm containing them is the object around which the complex quest of that film evolves. The nature of this particular precious object (hidden for much of the film inside a statue) is irrelevant to the narrative's structure. A full transcript of the 'government secrets' on the microfilm would be utterly boring, but Cary Grant's improbable adventures as the microfilm is pursued are endlessly fascinating.

The insight which unites Hitchcock and Lacan is that an object which provokes desire (*object a*) can set in motion a succession of events whose trajectory is of more significance than the object itself. But Lacan's concept (unlike Hitchcock's) derives from Freud's theories about the object of a drive, and from the Freudian taxonomy of the drives (anal, oral, scopic, etc.). Hence Lacan's primary reference is to the typical 'object described by analytic theory: the mami, the faeces, the phallus (as an imaginary object) An unthinkable list unless we add, as I do, the phoneme, the gaze, the voice.' (2006: 693)

The voice conceived as *object a* has proved to be an inspirational idea for Michel Chion in his superb study *The Voice in Cinema* (1999: see especially 1 & 106). But the gaze as *object a* (a topic to which Lacan devotes an entire chapter of his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1979) has been an even more fruitful source for speculation on the cinema.

How can we fit together these two apparently separate ideas: *object a* as an actual object (a MacGuffin acquiring an aura through being desired) and *object a* as identified with something as impalpable as a gaze? By considering in some detail Fritz Lang's 1955 film *Moonfleet*, I hope to show how the enigmatic power of the gaze is intertwined with the pursuit of a desired object (a diamond). Through the interplay between these two elements, the film dramatises the formation of a young boy's psyche. Hence, its structure can be elucidated through Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Moonfleet

The lush beauty of the colour in *Moonfleet* sets it apart from the steely black and white of the urban films that surround it in Lang's oeuvre. Much of the film takes place at night, a black velvet background against which jewel-like colours glow with an inner fire. The impelling movement of the narrative itself becomes concentrated around an actual jewel, sought after and fought over for its vivid value. Only in *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (both 1959) does Lang use colour with a similarly intense degree of sensuality.

In Lang's work, which is characteristically informed by an icy mechanical precision, sensuality is usually confined to women (think of Joan Bennett in her glistening transparent raincoat at the start of *Scarlet Street* [1945]), but in *Moonfleet* the entire width of the CinemaScope screen is flooded with enticing, painterly compositions in which the blood of wounds will appear as rich warm red.



The film begins with moonlight shimmering on breaking waves. After the credits, the chaos of the sea is replaced by an open heathland at night, where a signpost stands like a gibbet against the painted studio sky. A solitary, wandering boy, seeing the sign, softly speaks the word on it as if uttering an incantation to call forth the events of the narrative: 'Moonfleet'.

This strange word has now appeared three times: first, as the film's title superimposed over the crashing sea, it names the narrative as a whole; second, carved on the wooden signpost together with the added specification '3 miles', it names a place, the locus of the story, which we have not yet reached; finally, spoken by the boy, it becomes the first word uttered in the film. He shapes its syllables with his own distinctive voice (Jon Whiteley's curious accent lengthening the 'o' and adding a concluding crispness to the 't'), taking possession of this primary and mysterious signifier.

Before very long we will discover a further instance of this word, in a letter the boy carries from his mother, who has sent him out into the world bearing the protective talisman of two names that she has written down: that of a place (Moonfleet) and that of a man (Jeremy Fox). His own name John Mohune, also carries its own enigmas to be resolved. Surrounded by these linguistic signifiers, the boy will attempt to find his place within their play.

The second voice to speak in the film addresses an insistent and threatening question to the boy: 'Where do you come from?'. To a viewer with psychoanalytic leanings this question might raise the mystery of a child's origin, one of those questions which, according to Freud, precipitate sexual curiosity (see Freud's essay 'On The Sexual Theories of Children', 1908).

Several of Lang's films directly solicit a psychoanalytic interpretation. Most notably, *The Woman in the Window* (1944) begins with the central character delivering a lecture on psychology. Prominent on the blackboard behind him is the name of Freud. The entire narrative of that film is eventually revealed, in its closing moments, to have been a dream. Dreams provided Freud with 'the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious' (as he states in Chapter VII, section E of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900). Hence the whole of *The Woman in the Window* designates itself as a systematic unfolding of the unconscious. Quite apart from actual dreams in Lang's films, his entire oeuvre has a quality which could be called 'dreamlike' – events often seem to transpire with a sense of inevitability whose logic remains elusive (cf. *Ministry of Fear* [1944], *Secret Beyond the Door* [1947], *House by the River* [1950]).

In an early scene of *Moonfleet*, John wakes from a frightening dream whose details he then recounts to Jeremy Fox (Stewart Granger). He is not seeking its interpretation, because John himself already knows the source of the nightmare's imagery: it reproduces a story his mother had told him, a story of the frustration of her own desire (a night when her lover was set upon by dogs). Hence the royal road to John's unconscious leads directly back to his mother's desire, implanted in him along with the signifiers he carries ('Mohune', 'Moonfleet', 'Jeremy Fox').

It was Lacan, rather than Freud, who proposed that all desire be understood as the Other's desire (rather than a private impulse originating within ourselves). Notably, the question of the boy's origin is addressed to him by the off-screen voice of one of the smugglers, rather than emerging from his own enquiring mind. We can correlate this with the reversal which takes place between Freud's theories and those of Lacan, whereby the unconscious is no longer envisaged as the private depths of the individual mind, but becomes (in one of Lacan's most frequently quoted slogans,) 'the discourse of the Other'. The unconscious, for Lacan, is an effect of language and exists solely through our relations with other people, whose verbally expressed understanding of ourselves we can neither fully control nor escape. The attempt to coincide with their image of us

forms our desires as the mirror image of theirs: our desires are given shape by the desire of the Other. This framework of thinking may help to guide us through the densely compacted web of *Moonfleet*. As with any theoretical framework, the purpose of introducing such concepts is to tease apart the intricately interwoven web of each film; to discern its principles of organisation; to explain how it resonates within the viewer's psyche; and to disentangle the implications of the diverse pleasures we derive from watching it.

Moonfleet's concentration of narrative incidents, shorn of all inessential details so that every scene, every shot, contributes to the development of interwoven storylines, is typical of Lang's American films, contributing to their abstract, diagrammatic quality. It also squeezes the signifying elements closer together, sparking unexpected connections (which often undermine the ostensible trajectory of the tale). Raymond Bellour noted that Lang

... works against genre, even in America, adopting but insidiously undermining the traditional rules. He incorporates both the principle and its destruction. What are *Frau im Mond*, *Rancho Notorious*, *Moonfleet*, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, *The Tiger of Eschnapur*, and *The Indian Tomb* in relation to science fiction, the Western, the adventure film, the thriller, and exotic romance but ventures in rank subversion? (1981: 36)

Although Bellour characterises *Moonfleet* as an adventure film, one aspect of its subversiveness lies in a sustained uncertainty as to its genre. Aware of this indeterminacy of genre, Lang himself described *Moonfleet* as 'a romantic story', explaining: 'If you would make a contemporary horror story, you would use a different atmosphere. But if there are ghosts (which there are in this because they think the smugglers are ghosts) and it plays in a churchyard and so on, you have to make it romantic' (Bogdanovich 1967: 98).

When John first arrives in *Moonfleet* he looks over the churchyard wall and his gaze meets the glowing eyes of a dark and threatening stone angel. This fearful gaze ignites



the dangerous symbolism of the returned look, whose elaboration I intend to trace through the course of the film. Of the statue's shadowy shape only its stretched-out hand can be seen clearly. John's glance is immediately distracted downwards, where he sees a living human hand reaching out from the edge of a tomb. The splayed fingers of this



hand on the tomb's stone rim belong to the iconography of the horror genre. John screams, turns to run, and immediately falls unconscious into a pool of blackness.

In a similar way, later in the film, John's initial approach to Mohune Manor continues these stylistic borrowings from horror films, with a slow forward tracking shot from his point of view as he approaches a gothic archway leading towards the gloomy mansion. Drawn towards the one lighted window, he peers inside. If the uncertainty of genre were to resolve itself in the direction of horror, some frightening scene might confront him. In fact, however, a tableau of exuberant sexuality meets his gaze.



Though the camera is not confined to the strict geometry of his point of view, this whole scene, presented to us as a sexual spectacle, recalls those primal scenes which, in Freud's case histories, imprint themselves on the uncomprehending awareness of an avidly gazing child. A beautiful gypsy dances for a rowdy group of drinkers, enticingly



teasing Fox (to the evident displeasure of his mistress). She climbs on the table to conclude her dance with a wild spin, her skirt lifting with her own momentum to reveal the lengthy extent of her bare legs. (The actress was, in fact, a dancer with the Ballet de Paris.) Finally she crouches down on the table in a pose of feline eroticism, and is similarly



poised, her hands pawing at Fox's shoulders, when John (discovered snooping outside) is brought into the room.

John's limited understanding of the situation is made plain when the drinkers laugh and mock at his referring to the gypsy as a 'lady', and when he answers their request for a 'bawdy song' with a childish ditty sung in his unbroken voice. His voyeuristic position at the window had resembled that of a film viewer: seeing without being seen. But the film's spectator is assumed to comprehend the sexual implications of this scene, and hence to recognise the immaturity of John's misapprehensions. This splitting of identification between the central character and the viewer resolves another ambiguity concerning the genre, or category, to which the film belongs: whether it is aimed at adults or at children. At this point, where the viewer's understanding exceeds that of John, it becomes an adult film. There are several subsequent scenes, in which John is not present, which also revolve around sexual flirtation.

In Freudian theory, primal scenes have the power to shape an undeveloped psyche precisely *because of* the child's lack of understanding of what he sees. Instead of being comprehended and assimilated by his knowledge, these vivid dramatic details remain as mysteries within his memory, ready to guide his later desires. As we will see later, it is indeed a lack of understanding on John's part (emphasised again by a distinction between the audience's knowledge and his own) that generates the profound effect of his final sight of Fox at the film's end. The power of such scenes lies in their potential future effect on the boy's mind. By contrast, in his initial encounter with the stone angel, the object of his sight had *returned* his gaze. The angel's glowing eyes had been the prelude to panic and anxiety.

As if to exorcise this first traumatic encounter, he later returns (with a lantern provided by the parson) to stand in front of the angel (deviating from his direct route across the churchyard). He carefully adjusts his position until his gaze precisely meets that of that of the statue - at which moment the ground gives way beneath him, plunging him into the vault beneath the church. Why should these meetings of eyes between boy and statue be so fraught with danger?

Lacan's discussion of the gaze, which has been so influential on the study of film, draws heavily on the phenomenological writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. 'Merleau-Ponty points to something that becomes central in Lacan's work: there is a preexisting gaze, a kind of staring at us by the outside world ... a blind gaze which is erased from the world. It is exactly in this way that the drive manifests itself in the scopic order' (Quinet 1995: 139). It is this blind gaze that John confronts in the series of statues he encounters in the film.²

Jean-Paul Sartre provided a famous example to elucidate the disturbing experience of being looked at. In *Being and Nothingness* (1966: 347-350) he describes a man on his knees in a hotel corridor, peering through a keyhole. The object of his curiosity (like the characters on a cinema screen) is unaware of being observed. But the man hears a sound in the corridor behind him, and is abruptly flooded with acute embarrassment. He has been seen in the act of seeing, caught in the field of an anonymous gaze. His action acquires (from outside himself) a meaning; his identity becomes fixed to a particular category: voyeur, pervert. The gaze of the world traps him, limiting the many possible meanings his action might otherwise have had.

Similarly it is the angel's gaze which traps John in the church vault, where he is surrounded by the coffins of his ancestors, each marked with the Y-shaped crest of the Mohune family. From the field of the Imaginary, in Lacan's



sense (the domain of images, and of the awareness of being oneself an image for another's gaze), he is plunged into the field of the Symbolic (typically represented by words and symbols). In Moonfleet's world of high adventure, there are codes to be deciphered, family crests marking ownership, and a plethora of written messages exchanged between characters and across generations. This Symbolic nexus elaborates the labyrinth constraining all the characters, demonstrating the degree of their subjection to the effects of signifiers (as Lacan expounded in his well-known analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (2006: 6-30)). At the same time, however, the Imaginary dimension entwines itself around the ineluctable path of these signifiers. And it is this dimension we can recognise through John's shifting relation to the gaze.

The blind gaze of the world buries him in a dead and fixed identity, uniting him with his ancestors whose coffins surround him. Clambering around in the vault, he dislodges the coffin of Red Beard, whose statue stands at the back of



the church above. During the parson's sermon denouncing the villagers' superstitious belief in Red Beard's ghost, John had repeatedly turned round to look at this statue. The editing of this scene insistently emphasises (in an almost comical manner) the eye-line match between the boy and the stern stone figure. Here is another statue that, troublingly, seems to return John's gaze.

Not only was Red Beard his ancestor, but his real name was the same as John's own. According to the parson's sermon he had 'sold his honour for a diamond of great price' and had subsequently died insane (like Dr Mabuse – the prototype for all Lang's criminals). It is John's fascination with this story which prompts him to turn round in his pew, looking away from the rational and authoritarian figure of the parson towards the grim stone statue at the other end of the church's narrow aisle. Already, in this early reference to the diamond, its significance is closely tied to the blind gaze of a statue. And it is among the bones in Red Beard's coffin that John finds the locket containing a parchment whose written text reveals (in ciphered form) the diamond's location.

Antonio Quinet notes that 'The gaze as *object a* or cause of desire can be represented [by] a glint in someone's eye, a reflection in someone's hair, a jewel which shines' (1995: 143). Lacan himself insisted that the function of the gaze 'may be fulfilled in fact by a crystal stopper, or



anything, so long as it shines' (1979: 273). In *Moonfleet* it is the diamond which takes on this role.

Consider once again Sartre's anecdote about the man in the corridor. His sensation of being observed was produced by hearing a sound. The gaze which afflicts him, causing his self-consciousness, is not the gaze of any particular person. It is a gaze adrift in the world, which can be signified (and temporarily located) by a sound as easily as by the carved images of statues' eyes which so disturb John. So, too, it can be signified and captured by a glistening object like a diamond.

This process resembles Freud's explanation of the formation of a phobia. A person suffering from a generalised anxiety may make an unconscious choice of a particular object which is then treated as if it were the cause of the anxiety. Avoiding the phobic object becomes a way of controlling the anxiety. In exactly the same way, if the effects of the gaze can be symbolised by the diamond, then possession of the diamond will enable John to control and constrain this anxiety-producing gaze. The diamond therefore becomes the desired object of his quest, and the MacGuffin of the film's narrative.

But Lang is not Hitchcock. It is by no means irrelevant that the object of the quest in *Moonfleet* is a diamond. Its beauty and value are visual: it provokes the desire to look. When John finally finds the jewel, he drops it into his hand from where its captured light shines onto his face like the beam from a film projector. And when the decadent aristocrats Lord and Lady Ashwood (George Sanders and Joan Greenwood) get their hands on it, they declare, 'I've never seen anything so ... so....' and 'It's the most remarkable ... the most remarkable' These fractured phrases render the jewel literally indescribable, escaping language as it dazzles the eyes. As an object of desire, it functions in the scopic field, and on the film screen, as a representation of the gaze. It glows like the eyes of the stone angel. But once John has possession of it, no further threatening statues appear in the film. He has gained control of the gaze.

When he first found Red Beard's locket, with the clue to the diamond's location, he heard footsteps approaching and concealed himself inside the cavity from where the coffin had fallen. He physically occupies the vacant resting place of his dead ancestor and namesake, from where he can once more watch without being seen.

The scene that follows (a confrontation between Fox and the rest of the smugglers) unfolds in front of him

exactly as it does for the hidden viewers in the cinema. He observes, learns, and understands. But his invisibility has a cost. When the smugglers leave, they close the vault behind them, trapping him inside. To hide his gaze within the place of an assigned identity (defined completely by ancestry and kinship) is to become trapped.

He calls out to the one person he thinks can save him: 'Mr Fox!'. And the scene immediately dissolves to Fox entering a door in a distant aristocratic house, as if John's invoking call had reached its target. Indeed Fox, after a flirtatious encounter with Lady Ashwood, eventually does hurry off to save him in response to a written note from one of the smugglers.

In J. Meade Falkner's 1898 novel, on which the film is loosely based, this is the point in the narrative when John is rescued from the vault by a middle-aged smuggler whose own son has been killed by the customs men. Coming under this man's protection, John acquires the status of a surrogate son for him. 'I think that my being with him did him good; for he felt that there was once more someone to love him, and his heart went out to me as to his son David' ([1898] 1995: 69). The film has completely replaced this character with Jeremy Fox, a quite different personality who has no equivalent in the book. As we shall see, Fox specifically resists adopting a paternal role in relation to John, though without refusing him his help and protection.

When he finds John, the boy has already been taken from the vault by the other smugglers, and is now held by them in the local inn. The scene that ensues is precisely defined in terms of the opposition of blindness and sight. When the magistrate arrives, he sees an apparently docile John sitting beside one of the smugglers, who claims that the boy 'sees through our rough ways to our kind hearts'. A reverse-angle shot shows the smuggler to be holding a knife against John's back. The magistrate, representative of the



law, is blind to the true situation. Though suspicious, he cannot see beyond the single viewpoint he is offered.

When Fox arrives, he quickly perceives all *three* of the perspectives (that of the boy, that of the smugglers, and that of the magistrate) and, drawing the boy towards him, defuses the danger, his verbal dexterity mildly mocking the magistrate. After the magistrate's departure, a battle for power ensues between Fox and the leader of the fermenting discontent among the smugglers. This is the only swordfight in the film, briefly suggesting its still indeterminate genre as 'swashbuckler'. Such a status, however, is immediately undercut. Though Fox gallantly throws a sword to his opponent, obeying the rules of fairness codified by Hollywood heroics, the smuggler contemptuously throws the sword away and grabs an enormous, long-handled halberd instead, whirling it around his head so that its fearful circuit fills the whole screen (the camera having retreated to a high angle as if to escape destruction). With deft skill, Fox disarms his rival, entangling him in a net and holding a knife to his throat.



Dashingly dressed in a crimson jacket and gold waistcoat, Fox has shown himself superior, in skill and agility, to the crude power of the smuggler's axe, just as his wit and understanding exceeds that of the magistrate. A dandy and a trickster, wily as the animal whose name he bears, Fox will later disguise himself in the costume of an army major. Far from representing patriarchal authority, he only ever adopts such a role, temporarily and ambiguously, in a mode of simulation.

His relation to John is not at all that of a father figure. It is possible that he may be John's natural father (having been the lover of John's mother), but this question remains undecided by the film. John's legal father has died long before the narrative begins. Hence Fox occupies the empty space of the father but without adopting the attribute of paternal authority. Throughout the film, John only ever refers to him as 'my friend', a counterpart rather than a patriarch.

The relationship to a counterpart belongs to the Imaginary dimension, unlike the relation of paternity, which is the basis of the Symbolic order. It is clear that our personalities evolve, in part, by reflecting the behaviour of our peers. In Lacan's theory, however, this is regarded as insufficient to produce maturity. The force of the Law must intervene in the nascent psyche. And this Law must be embodied in a paternal function, separating the child from too close an identification with others. Though this paternal function need not be fulfilled by the child's biological father (nor even by a biological male), Lacan's theory can be regarded as endorsing a patriarchal structure to society. Much of the feminist controversy about the work of Lacan has revolved around this question.³

Lang's film, on the other hand, gives to images a power greater than laws, and to imitation a more profound significance than obedience. Early in the film, Fox is amused by the boy's innocent adoption of an artificially adult way of speaking. 'The exercise was beneficial', says John, referring

to the hard, laborious work required of him to feed himself and his mother. Fox repeats this phrase, as a joke, after his fight with the smuggler. Finally, John himself uses the phrase again, in ironic citation, when they are about to set off in search of the diamond. Through hearing his own words echoed by Fox, he has gained access to the possibility of ironic detachment, an important step in the very particular process of growth towards maturity dramatised by the film. Fox's legacy to John is neither a name (certainly not Lacan's 'Name of the Father'), nor a status, but merely an image. His gift of this image, in parallel with the gift of the diamond, concludes the film.

The diamond is discovered concealed in a deep well, hidden behind a brick scratched with the Mohune symbol. For Lacan *object a* serves to link together the Imaginary and the Symbolic in a knot of desire. The well, illuminated by candlelight, forms a tunnel of light rather than darkness, the waters in its depths glittering like the sea in the film's opening shots. John's searching gaze, as he descends in the bucket, is mimicked by the wandering camera, which pans past a lighted candle before fixing on the marked stone. The diamond itself is the concentrated crystallisation of all this light.

In Falkner's original novel the diamond is a cursed stone, bringing ruin to all who possess it. No such negative connotations attend its flashing brilliance in the film, where it is the embodiment of light, cinema's essential source. Though the book, with its evocative descriptive prose, has a justifiable reputation as a literary classic, it provides the basis for only a proportion of the film's plot. The character of Jeremy Fox; the importance of statues; and the 'family romance' (to use Freud's phrase) of John's ancestry, are all features found only in the film, whose specific structure they help to define. When Fox determines to steal the diamond from John, he leaves a written note, confessing his crime, beneath another candle burning beside the sleeping boy. John will be left with only a flickering flame rather than the cold clear permanence of the glowing jewel. Fox flees to meet the coach of his criminal associates, Lord and Lady Ashwood.

In the sumptuous golden interior of the coach the provocative Lady Ashwood (wearing a coral pink dress and a hood of grey-green fur) is herself displayed like a diamond between the two men. When her husband refers to 'the three of us', Fox corrects him: 'The four of us – you've forgotten the diamond'. It is at this point that a troubled look begins to pass over his face. He has counted himself, along with his two associates, as belonging to the same category as the diamond: objects mobilised by the narrative rather than active subjects. Whether as Lady Ashwood's lover, or as her husband's partner in crime, his status would be quite different from that of John's 'friend'. Becoming an object in a pattern not of their own making is a familiar destiny for the protagonists of Lang's films. But in this, the most romantic of his movies, Fox retains a residual capacity for refusing this role. Perhaps not surprisingly, this choice results in his death.

In the altercation when he orders the carriage to turn back, he is run through by the sword of Lord Ashwood, whom he in turn shoots. The carriage itself careers off carrying only Lady Ashwood, whose scream accompanies its crash. Like his mistress Anna, killed on the beach by the soldiers she had in her jealousy summoned to capture him, another potential erotic partner for Fox has now been excluded from the narrative. Were Fox the film's central protagonist, sexual and financial success would inevitably await him at the end of the story's intricacies. But he

himself has now begun to recognise the nature of the narrative in which he is merely playing a part. For it is the story of the formation, through scenes and images, of a child's mind.

He returns to the boy. The candle has not yet burned down, and he can therefore bring back the diamond, and remove his written note. It is rare, in Lang's work, for a character's signifying trace to be revocable in this way. More usually, people inadvertently leave behind them revealing clues as to their identity wherever they go, like Edward G. Robinson in *The Woman in the Window*. John, for example, when he was hiding in the smuggler's lair, had left his hat on view to be found by one of the gang (who



fails to realise its significance).

As well as bringing the diamond back to the boy, Fox has a final gift for him: the image of himself sailing out to sea in a small boat, with the promise that he will return. The diamond, symbolising the gaze, passes finally and definitively to John. He watches Fox's departure through the ruined window of the small hut where he is sheltering. Exactly as when he was peeping through the window of Mohune manor, he shares the point of view of the film's spectator. But in both scenes the viewer's knowledge is wider than John's (understanding the sexuality of the earlier scene; knowing that Fox is dying in the later scene). The difference is that, in these closing moments of the film, Fox himself is aware of being watched. He returns neither John's wave nor his gaze, but (like a film director) deliberately constructs an impressive image to imprint on John's consciousness.

Such images, the very substance of cinema, are constitutive of the Imaginary. They help to form the range of possibilities through which we conceive of our lives, and in relation to which we build a sense of personal identity. By forgoing completely any paternal role (and hence any con-

trol over fixed Symbolic meanings), Fox has finally accepted his role as an image in John's evolving consciousness and become his counterpart and 'friend'.

Acutely aware of the importance of this image and of its place in the film's resolution, Lang had originally wanted to conclude the film at this point, and has complained about the imposition (by the producer) of a brief coda (see Bogdanovich 1967: 99). In my view Lang's judgment is at fault here. The densely compacted symbolism of the coda (filmed in a single shot) provides a profoundly satisfying resolution to the narrative, while at the same time emphasising the subversiveness of the storyline. To make this plain, I will need to trace another of the threads woven through the



film's tapestry.

Grace

If Fox has persistently evaded the role of patriarchal authority figure, that status has devolved all the more firmly onto the shoulders of the magistrate, who not only embodies the Law (with the power to hang people) but also has a niece (played by Donna Corcoran) who is the same age as John. He stands to her in a parental relation (for we learn nothing of her actual parents). John's first meeting with her, early in the film, follows his escape from a carriage which, at Fox's instigation, had attempted to take him away from Moonfleet. Struggling out of the coach at a bend in the road, John falls to the ground beside a gibbet from which hangs the corpse of a criminal.

He looks up at the swaying cadaver, but there is no reverse-angle cut to the man's dead eyes looking back. Indeed, the man's head and upper body are sliced off by the top of the film frame. John's earlier encounter with the gaze of the stone angel had led to an off-screen voice asking, 'Where do you come from?'. On this occasion, a sudden encounter with death is followed by another off-screen question: 'Boy, who are you?'. This is not a question of



kinship and origin, but of personal identity in the face of mortality. Whereas the earlier question was asked by a threatening smuggler, this new question is posed by a girl in a mauve dress seated on a white horse which seems to glow in the ethereal moonlight of Lang's studio set. We do not see her ride up to the boy, hence her resemblance to a visionary apparition. Her name is Grace (a word which means 'divine dispensation'). Though her uncle has the power of life and death over the inhabitants of the village, she herself leads John safely to Mohune Manor for the first time, where he slips into the grounds through the bars of the gate.

The second time he meets her she also appears out of nowhere and is standing immobile when she calls out to him. They are now inside the garden of the manor, in day-



light, and John has just lifted from the ground the head of a statue broken in the previous night's storm. Exactly at the moment when he looks into the statue's eyes (that dangerous confrontation with a gaze of stone), Grace calls to him and he turns his head round to see her (turning away from a statue, rather than towards one as he had in the church).

The severed head of the statue echoes the unseen head of the hanging corpse. It seems that whenever a head is cut



off, Grace appears. She now shows him a narrow crevice, hidden behind lush foliage, through which she had entered into the garden to be with him. The sexual symbolism of this is clear, and places her in an initiatory role, which she pursues by leading him to the ruined summer house, locus of illicit desire, which John already knows from his dreams. It was here that his mother's clandestine love affair with Fox had been interrupted by the savagery of the Mohune dogs.

When he woke from his dream of this attack by dogs, John had not asked Fox for its meaning. But Anna, pulling down Fox's shirt, had directly revealed the visible scars left by the dogs' attack. This is very far from being a symbolic interpretation of the dream. On the contrary, it is the mark of the Real, carved onto the living flesh of Fox's body. In Lacan's tripartite framework of thought (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) the Real is that which resists symbolisation. Devoid of all distortions and disguises, this dream's direct depiction of real events leaves no space for Fox to accede to symbolic paternity. His opposition to all paternal power



goes even further, however. During the fight on the beach he confronts and kills the magistrate.

It is against this background that the film's coda (another of the few scenes set in daylight) must be read. Professing his persisting faith that his 'friend' will one day return, John pushes open the gates of Mohune manor, so that he may physically enter into his inheritance. With him are Grace and the parson, the former showing no signs of distress at her uncle's recent death, the latter folding his arms benevolently round the two children as if performing a symbolic marriage.

It has often been said (e.g. by Raymond Bellour 1979: 88) that Hollywood narratives are complex mechanisms for the production of a (hetero)sexual couple, whose eventual formation typically ends the story. John and Grace, we are led to imagine, will live happily ever after in that indeterminate space beyond the end of the tale. But this cheerful outcome has only been possible, we inevitably remember, through the destruction of paternal authority (the murder of the magistrate) and the formation of John's psyche through a permanent link with a lost counterpart who is specifically not a father figure.⁴

This eradication of the paternal function from the growth of a boy and girl towards maturity and mutual love constitutes a divergence from the conservative elements to be found within Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. If those theories help to throw light on the underlying structure of Lang's film, that film itself (as a satisfying fantasy) overturns the more blatantly patriarchal elements to be found in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Reading Lang with Lacan offers possible new perspectives on each.

Peter Benson

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¹ To clear up one question: the 'a' stands for 'autre' ('other'). The 'a' is small to contrast with 'Autre', the Big Other, to which we are subject in the Symbolic order, and which is represented either by God or by one of His avatars. *Object a* embodies otherness, something we lack and which we imagine others have, hence its desirability.

² Slavoj Zizek has explained that the effect of the 'Scopic Drive, as opposed to the desire to see, is making oneself visible to the Other's gaze, which functions here as object a, best exemplified by the dead man's empty eye sockets: "The faces of the dead have but a gaze, and no more eyes"' (2008: xxxii). (The quotation Zizek uses is from the French filmmaker Jean Epstein.) In *Moonfleet*, the stone gaze of statues will function in a similar way.

³ A brief account of this controversy can be found in Elizabeth Wright's *Lacan and Postfeminism* (2000), which also gives a good beginner's introduction to Lacan's thought.

⁴ My interpretation here differs from that of Reynold Humphries who, in claiming an 'unconscious paternal link' (1989: 167) between Fox and John, does not give sufficient weight to Lacan's distinction between Symbolic and Imaginary relationships. The paternal would always be found in the Symbolic dimension, rather than the Imaginary field of images and counterparts.