Unveiling *L'objet petit a* in Anaïs Nin's "The Veiled Woman":
A Lacanian Reading of Femininity in Erotica

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Abstract: The similarities between the works of French-born Cuban writer Anaïs Nin and French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan suggest a novel avenue to interpret Erotica as a literary genre. I hypothesize that by reading Nin through Lacan—more specifically by applying the Lacanian gaze as an instance of objet petit a to Nin's short story "The Veiled Woman"—we subversively perceive Nin's female characters as the more active and dominant agents, thus reconsidering themes such as power, femininity, and sexuality in Erotica. Analyzing the gaze as a thematic agent in Nin's erotica can also provide new insight into psychoanalysis that encompasses a wider range of subjects. Possible gaps that this paper hopes to bridge include the overlooked and misunderstood value of psychoanalytic theories in literary criticism as well as Lacan's own elusive seminars and repeatedly remodeled theories. I attempt to put forth possible explanations for and reconsiderations of Lacan's gaze as exemplified in "The Veiled Woman."

"The sexual life is usually enveloped in many layers, for all of us – poets, writers, artists. It is a veiled woman, half-dreamed."

– Anaïs Nin, *Little Birds*

Despite its marginalization within literary criticism, psychoanalysis offers a powerful framework for analyzing erotic literature, as it uncovers the psychological and symbolic dimensions underlying sexual fantasies and imagery. More specifically, erotic texts have historically been written for male consumption, which begs a critical reexamination of how gendered dynamics shape both the production and reception of such texts especially when it comes to erotica written by female authors. This raises important questions about whose desires are being represented, whose voices are marginalized, and how female-authored erotica—such as that of Anaïs Nin—challenges or reconfigures dominant narratives of sexuality. The similarities between the works of French-born Cuban writer Anaïs Nin and French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan suggest a novel avenue to interpret Erotica as a literary genre.

Frappier-Mazur (1988) characterizes erotica authored by women and minorities as forming a "marginal canon," a view that mirrors the broader neglect of Nin's writing. This marginalization is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural biases of a literary canon that remains both arbitrary and inherently patriarchal (Hakim, 2010; Patthey-Chavez et al., 1996; Pulis, 1994). Nin's exclusion from the canon can largely be attributed to the core focus of her work (Pulis, 1994). Nin herself acknowledged the unconventional origins of her erotic writing in the preface to *Little Birds*, her second posthumously published collection of erotica. She recounts how, alongside Henry Miller, she was hired to produce erotic content for an anonymous private collector, a task she described as "writing pornography for a dollar a day" (Nin, 1979). What began as a financial necessity in the 1940s evolved into a groundbreaking literary career, positioning Nin as a pioneering voice in female erotica (Salvatore, 2011).

At first glance, the female figures in Nin's stories may appear homogeneous—highly sexualized, passive, objectified, and almost caricature-like (Nalbantian, 1997, p. xiii–xvii). Yet beneath these surfaces, Nin continues to refine her craft, weaving her narratives with poetic language and subtle references to philosophy, culture, and psychoanalytic theory. As a result, her works transcend conventional pornography, offering richly layered portrayals of femininity and sexuality that challenge the norms of 20th-century Western discourse (Hakim, 2010). Through a psychoanalytic lens, erotica can be interpreted as a reflection of unconscious desires, anxieties, and internal conflicts. This approach also sheds light on how such fantasies are shaped by personal experiences and the broader social and cultural environment.

The paper introduces the role of the eye and Lacan's gaze as a mechanism to interpret Nin's short story "The Veiled Woman." Through identifying the subject's encounter with the gaze and the consequences thereafter, I argue that Nin's Erotica subverts the deep-rooted phallocentrism that saturates the genre. In bridging gaps between psychoanalysis and literature, the paper aims to use Lacanian psychoanalysis to reclaim the inherent power in femininity expressed in Nin's works. I posit that such a reassessment elucidates importance in Nin's Erotica otherwise neglected.

On the Gaze in *Stade du miroir* (the Mirror Stage)

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan complicated his theory of the gaze throughout his clinical career and seminars (Rabaté, 2014; Scott, 2015). Lacan originally conceived the notion of the gaze as a counterpart to his other notable theory, *Stade du miroir*[1]. The gaze in the mirror stage refers to the moment of recognition infants experience when staring into a mirror and seeing that first image of an autonomous being (Gallop, 1983). This led to Lacan's original conclusion that the relationship between the focal point of the eye and the mirror was the subject's "gaze" of elusive mastery and control (McGowan, 2007). Not only do infants recognize themselves in the image, what is more significant about the mirror stage is the false sense of mastery that comes with this recognition (Lacan, 1949). The infant, according to Lacan (1949), begins constructing

[1] Translates to "the mirror stage" in English

an ideal version of its ego at this moment. Lacan speculates that the infant who sees itself in the mirror begins associating certain attributes to its body even when the infant has not yet developed full mobility or motor independence. This tendency marks the earliest sign of narcissism and initiates the subject's entry into the Imaginary Order, the first register of the Lacanian Triad. The Imaginary is characterized by identification with images and illusions of wholeness, where the ego begins to form through misrecognition—a foundational moment in which the infant sees an idealized, unified image of itself that conceals its actual fragmentation and dependency. This misrecognition shapes the subject's relationship to both itself and others, grounding its future desires in illusion and idealization (Lacan, 1966). The Imaginary Order, in short, represents a narcissistic and false completeness of one's "Ideal-I," or ideal ego. This ideal then becomes asymptotic—approachable, but never reachable—in the subject's later development. When an infant recognizes the image in the mirror as the ideal-I, the subject (i.e., the infant) becomes fragmented. The subject's bodily reality (one that is fractured and not yet full-formed) deviates from this model image in the mirror (one that is complete, the "Ideal-I").

The mirror stage, as theorized by Lacan, marks the moment when the subject forms a libidinal attachment to their own body image. In this phase, the reflection in the mirror becomes the ideal ego—a fantasized, coherent image situated within the Imaginary register (Canellopoulos, 2010). This foundational moment of subjectivity arises from a misrecognition, as the mirrored image offers a false sense of unity that the fragmented, material body cannot truly embody. The resulting dissonance between the ideal ego and the physical self which begins a cycle of identification, gaze, and narcissism.

A similar dynamic is observed by feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey, who applies Lacanian theory—particularly the gaze—to the analysis of classical narrative cinema in critiquing specific camera angles, mise-en-scene, and other visual elements that derive from scopophilia, the pleasure in looking at another person who is oblivious to the spectatorship as an erotic object. Mulvey interrogates how femininity is constructed and consumed in mainstream film, proposing that cinema is structured by scopophilic drives and patriarchal ideology (Mulvey, 1973). Central to her argument is the idea of woman as "lacking"—a subject defined by the absence of the phallus. According to Mulvey, phallocentrism organizes cinematic pleasure by positioning the female body as the object of both visual desire and narrative control: "It is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence; it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies" (Mulvey, 1973).

Just as the infant misrecognizes its reflection as a complete version of itself, the (primarily male) spectator is invited to identify with this phallocentric structure. The gaze directed at the eroticized female body on screen serves a dual function: it both objectifies the woman and reaffirms the male viewer's imagined mastery through identification with the camera's perspective. Mulvey further argues that the female figure is haunted by a "maternal memory" that exists only in relation to castration and can never transcend it—thus reinforcing the dominance of the male gaze and the marginalization of female subjectivity in film.

This parallax—between the gaze and the objet petit a—ultimately extends into the subject's entry into the Symbolic Order (Lacan, 1966). The Symbolic, comprising structures such as language, law, culture, and social norms, represents the collective framework that governs desire and behavior. In the context of erotica, the Symbolic Order functions as both a constraint and a field of expression: it defines what is permissible, taboo, or unspeakable in the articulation of sexual desire. While the Imaginary is concerned with self-image and the illusions of wholeness, the Symbolic imposes societal codes that regulate identity, gender roles, and sexuality. Erotica, then, becomes a unique literary space where the tension between these two registers plays out—where private fantasies intersect with the public rules of representation. In this sense, Nin's Erotica exposes desire as a site of entanglement in which the subject is destabilized through contradicting cultural and linguistic systems that structure our reality.

In a broader context beyond the specialized field of psychoanalysis, a "gaze theory" coalesced in mainstream media studies (Smelik, 1998). Mulvey's essay relates the effects of spectatorship with the amalgamation of each individual's background—such as gender, class,

race, social class— resembling the Lacanian Symbolic. Contemporary scholarship[2] indicates the gaze theory continues to gain traction in academic disciplines such as critical race theory, feminist theory, film theory, and art critique. Despite her controversial interpretation of Lacan, Mulvey shifted the orientation of film studies to include concepts from both Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist theories (Mcgowan, 2003).

The Gaze as *Objet Petit a* and Desire

However, scholars have argued that Mulvey's seminal essay—though foundational to feminist film theory—misinterprets Lacan's concept of the gaze as derived from the Stade du miroir (Manlove, 2007; McGowan, 2003; Smelik, 1998). Mulvey applies Freudian and Lacanian terms such as "scopophilic instinct" and "the gaze" in a literal and visual sense, aligning them with a gendered dynamic of viewer and object in cinema. Yet this reading, rooted in the mirror stage, overlooks Lacan's later theoretical revisions, which reposition the gaze not as an active, controlling look but as something far more unsettling. In Lacan's mature theory, the gaze is not what the subject exerts, but rather an intrusive moment when the object of desire appears to return the look—an uncanny encounter that disrupts the illusion of mastery. Within the erotic register, this reformulation is particularly significant: the gaze becomes a site of vulnerability, where the subject is caught in a moment of exposure and fascination, confronted by the objet petit a—that elusive, seductive kernel that sparks desire precisely because it can never be fully possessed or understood (McGowan, 2003; Scott, 2015; Žižek, 1989). In this light, the erotic experience is not simply visual pleasure but a destabilizing interplay between fantasy, lack, and the gaze that looks back.

Lacan alludes to Hans Hobein's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors* to better illustrate the concept of the gaze. Upon one's first glance at the painting, one sees the two ambassadors standing in luxurious textiles and delicate instruments. Yet the seemingly glorious sight soon betrays an uncanniness as one notices an indistinguishable mass, uncoordinated with the rest of the painting, in the foreground. The mass flirts with decipherability before it "humiliates the viewers" (Scott, 2015), unraveling itself, when viewed from the side, as a skull staring back at its audience. The angled skull becomes visible only through the viewers' skewed vision: it quietly retreats as a pale, inaccessible shadow as soon as the viewers look straight at the painting. Some scholars interpret this intentional distortion as a memento mori (Bowie, 1987, p. 150), yet to Lacan, one is simultaneously enveloped by the painting the moment one perceives the gaze: the subject is absolved from subjectivity. Between the eye and the gaze "there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure" (Lacan, 1994, p. 102). The painting's anamorphism also exemplifies the subject's encounter with *objet petit a* (Scott, 2015). Not only does this gaze exemplify the unattainable object-cause of desire, it furthermore embodies Lacan's third register in the Borromean knot—the Real.

The Encounter with the Real

The third register of the Lacanian-Borromean knot—the Real—disturbs the Imaginary-Symbolic through small eruptions of the "uncanny." The Real, in short, disrupts the subject's notions acquired through images and signifiers about itself and the world (Žižek, 1992). The Real is, as Joël Dor (1998), describes, a "shattering enigma," disrupting the otherwise smooth functioning of the other two registers. As Lacan points out, one's relation to the Real is always in discordance— "what I look at is never what I wish to see [... the] moment of losing the gaze is the initial moment of seeing" (Lacan, 1997, p. 103). The moment one perceives the skull in Holbein's painting is the closest encounter one has with the Real (Scott, 2015). Lacan describes encounters with the Real as traumatic and eruptive as it disrupts one's subjectivity constructed upon the Imaginary-Symbolic (McGowan, 2003). The gaze reveals itself to the subject, subverts the subject's false sense of autonomy, and, in that instance, obliterates subjectivity. English-speaking Lacanians popularized a paronomasia to illustrate this phenomenon: "The gaze is, in other words, irretrievably lost to the eye and *'I'* of the subject" (Scott, 2015). Not only is the

[2] Manlove (2007) claims that "Mulvey's essay might well be considered a historical document by many in feminist film theory and film studies, and her ideas about the pleasurable and controlling aspects of vision have been highly influential in several academic disciplines."

gaze obscured in the field of vision (in that one does not instantly recognize the gaze upon first glances; the "eye"), it is moreover lost to the subject ("I"). Similarly, Nin's erotica despite its apparent conformity to its genre, remains particularly transgressive and surreal. Nin stages encounters with the Real by disrupting the viewer's symbolic understanding of desire and subjectivity. When erotic imagery bypasses mere visual pleasure and provokes discomfort, fascination, or a disquieting sense of exposure, it gestures toward the Real. The viewer is no longer a sovereign voyeur but becomes the object of an enigmatic gaze, like in Holbein's painting, that returns from the image, threatening to undo the boundaries of the self.

Lacan characterizes this objective gaze also as an instance of *objet petit a*—the cause of desire. *Objet petit a* is not to be confused with the object *of* one's desire; rather, it is what sustains the process of desiring (Dean, 2005). In order for desire to sustain its existence, the cause of desire must be seemingly at-reach but perpetually absent from the subject. Because the Lacanian gaze is an object (McGowan, 2003)—one that involves not the active agency of the subject, but the instance where the object looks back at the subject—the subject can never truly possess such a gaze. The gaze therefore springs from an objective, rather than subjective, point of view. In Mulvey's—as well as numerous other scholars'—contentions, the gaze is simply an action done by the spectator (Manlove, 2007). Todd Mcgowan (2003) provides an insightful look into Lacan's gaze in *Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes*. Mcgowan argues that the "loss of the gaze as an object is at once the moment of its emergence – the subject can never truly 'satisfy' their desire through obtaining the object [...] the gaze would cease to be the gaze once recognized by the subject" (p. 29). In other words, because both the gaze and the *objet petit a* are unattainable objects, there exists no possibility for the subject to ever possess the gaze, let alone utilizing it in certain ways as exemplified in Mulvey's argument.

It is in the register of the Real where one finds the unconscious and desire (Felluga, 2011). Yet according to Lacan, individuals escape the Real through constructing a fantasy-reality—one that is shaped by the Imaginary-Symbolic Orders. One's desire therefore relies on lack. When one eventually reaches the supposed "heart" of desire, one discovers that it is merely a misrecognition of fullness, of completeness—and upon this realization the cycle of desire ensues. Arriving too close to *objet petit a* threatens to uncover the inherent lack necessary to sustain desire, which is why in spite of *objet petit a*'s lure—the gaze in Hobein's painting is always there, beckoning the viewers to notice it—the subject cannot recognize it within the rigid networks of the Imaginary-Symbolic (McGowan, 2016). Yet when the subject does encounter the gaze, the seemingly stable matrix of "reality" becomes distorted (the viewers witness the skull's gaze only when looking askew). Similarly, just as how one easily traverses the registers of the Imaginary-Symbolic but not the Real, the subject can maintain a stable relationship to the network of objects but not to the gaze.

Lacan's gaze places significant emphasis on the subject's lack and desire. This contrasts with Mulvey's (1975) argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Whereas Mulvey contends that pleasure dictates erotic expressions in art, Lacan sees the cause of desire—and more importantly, the void of desire—as the driving force behind the subject's action. In light of Lacan's theories, one can then analyze Nin's Erotica in an object[3]-centered perspective and reconsider subjectivity in Nin's Erotica.

Although Lacanian theory has gained popularity in various academic disciplines, McGowan (2003) argues that "Lacan's conception of the gaze has been almost completely absent from the world of film theory and film studies" (p. 5). Aside from gaps existing in the peer-reviewed literature, Lacan's own elusive seminars and theories is a gap in itself. Scholars have contended that the four seminars from "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend and fully understand. Martin Jay claims that "the gaze is a … cryptic assertion," and concludes his explication: "it is impossible to summarize Lacan's complicated dialectic of the eye and the gaze in any simple formula" (Jay, 1993, p. 362). Likewise, Michel Thévoz (1996)—a Swiss author and the curator of the Cantonal Fine Arts Museum of Lausanne from 1960 to 1975—argues to take Lacan's first seminar on the gaze as the

[3] as in objet petit a

primary reference point for the Mirror Stage. Certain challenges involved in interpreting Lacan's elusive notion of the gaze. Taking into account the complexities and nuances of Lacan's theories, the paper therefore does not seek to assert a novel, definite reading of Lacan, but rather to utilize existing interpretations as a method to reassess Nin's Erotica, thus contending the intertextuality between Nin's Erotica and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The strikingly frequent appearance of words relating to seeing, sight, and vision in "The Veiled Woman" invites a close examination of the gaze as a central thematic thread and theoretical element. allows us to closely examine the gaze as a thematic concept within the story. Drawing on Lacan's theory, the gaze is not merely an action performed by a spectator, but rather a disruptive encounter in which the subject is made aware of being seen—what Lacan identifies as the moment when the object returns the gaze (Krishner, 2005). This understanding of the gaze underpins my analytical approach, which draws from Lacanian psychoanalysis while also critiquing the simplifications often made by traditional Lacanian film theorists. Rather than treating the gaze as a stable mechanism of power or voyeurism, I examine how "The Veiled Woman" stages moments of visual disorientation and reflexivity that align more closely with Lacan's notion of the gaze as an encounter with the Real. To illustrate the gaze as an *objet petit a*, I identified the point in which the veiled woman, who embodies the Real, gazes back at the subject George, the male protagonist whose actions we follow as readers. Towards the climax of the story, Nin (1986, p. 84) leaves a paragraph solely to the line:

"She looked at him."

Here Nin makes the gaze abruptly, violently apparent. Just as the instantaneous obliteration of subjectivity when the skull gazes back at its viewers, the emotion erupted within George (and by extension, us as the readers) as the veiled woman (as *objet petit a*) looks back him is one that strikingly resembles the "traumatic encounter with the Real" (McGowan, 2007). The veiled woman—who remains passive and object-like—beckons the subject, George, to advance towards the void of desire. Through Nin's minimalist syntactical usage, the veiled woman serves as a paradigm of the Lacanian gaze—one's encounter with the gaze can be as simple and serendipitous as is. Furthermore, George's reaction to this instance is not pleasure, but doubt. Like *objet petit a*, the veiled woman does not "satisfy" George's desire. Her gaze brings the subject into the objective realm and disrupts the Symbolic order's illusive network of safety. George "became obsessed with the idea that all the women who invited him to their houses are hiding a spectator" (Nin, 1986, p. 86). The denouement of the story also strikes at the heart of Lacan's philosophy on desire. Desire, according to Lacan, is the remnants from the infant stage— "by its infantile origins as the remainder when satisfaction of physiological needs is subtracted from the child's demands for its mother's attention" (Krishner, 2005, p. 2).

George, like many others that find themselves trapped in the loop of desiring, eventually reaches what Lacan calls *Jouissance*. It is what a subject seeks in repetition beyond the possible gratification of physical needs. *Jouissance*, despite its literal meaning in French, which translates to "enjoyment," is different from pleasure or satisfaction. Lacan differentiates *Jouissance* and pleasure: whereas one experiences pleasure when a need is fulfilled (and thus a reduction of tension), one experiences *Jouissance* when excessively engaging in actions that fulfill a need. For instance, pleasure derives from consuming an adequate amount of food to reduce hunger; *Jouissance* arises when one obsessively devours food to a point where physical discomfort becomes evident. *Jouissance* therefore lies beyond the pleasure principles and is taken as "superabundant vitality" (Canellopoulos, 2010).

In Seminar X, Lacan distinguishes between drive and desire—whereas drive is only a particular representation of desire, desire encompasses the entirety of desiring. All drives are partial and incomplete. Desire, in other words, is an independent, autonomous slippage. As drive shifts from one object to another, desire remains whole and present. Drives are the manifestation of desire, and because of this, the subject can never be fully satisfied upon a fulfillment of a drive.

The path of the drive forms around *objet petit a* (denoted by "a"). The elliptical orbit suggests the perpetual desiring of *objet petit a*. As Žižek (2007) explains in his book *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, the space of the drive is a "paradoxical, curved

space: the object is not a positive entity existing in space… but a certain curvature of the space itself which causes us to make a bend precisely when we want to get directly at the object." Once again, Kirshner (2011) points out that even Lacan himself leaves the essence of desire unanswered—the *objet petit a* is a hypothetical cause that drives individuals to circle around such an "object" devoid of any concrete form or substance. And when the object is at a moment closest to *objet petit a*, it swings right back around the curved path of desire (Žižek, 2007). As aforementioned, the actual object of desire does not equate the cause of one's desire. And through the networks of the Imaginary and Symbolic, subjects find temporary fulfillment to their drives and indulge in fleeting pleasures (McGowan, 2007). Yet the instance one acquires the object *of* desire (whether a materialistic fulfillment or a temporary satisfaction), one loses the desire to desire—and the cycle ensues (Felluga, 2011; McGowan, 2003). Likewise, the moment where George confronts the veiled woman's gaze, his experience of their intercourse shifts from pleasurable to disorienting. In an attempt to make the analogy more lucid: when George (the subject) discovers—though not consciously—that his constant search for "an interesting event… or an interesting women" (Nin, 1986, p. 52) is not fulfilled by his encounter with the Veiled Woman (gaze as an *objet petit a*), he becomes distraught and is driven to a point of obsession beyond physical pleasure (Jouissance).

The veiled woman disrupts the cycle of desire by revealing that there is no ultimate secret behind the objet petit a. In doing so, she invites the reader to reconsider themes of power, sexuality, and femininity within Nin's erotica. While a Mulveyan reading might reduce "The Veiled Woman" to a pornographic spectacle crafted for the male gaze, a Lacanian approach opens up multiple interpretive paths, revealing how the Imaginary and Symbolic registers are distorted, reconfigured, and ultimately transformed. This reading encourages a deeper exploration of power, desire, and female sexuality as they emerge in more abstract and implicit forms. As Lacan asserted in Seminar XII (1964–65), "The unconscious is structured like a language." From this perspective, applying psychoanalysis to literature becomes not only valid but essential—particularly in marginalized genres such as female-authored erotica. The goal of this research is not to undermine Mulvey's foundational contributions to feminist and film theory, but rather to extend the ongoing dialogue at the intersection of psychoanalysis, art, and eroticism.

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