Amour and Love: On the Invention of the Concept of Love in Cinema

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Preface

“Then what is involved in love?” asks Jacques Lacan.¹ We return to and begin with Love. The infatuation of the moving image with Love. From Thomas Edison’s eighteen seconds of frontal bodily affection of The Kiss (1896), to its sacrifice in Michael Curtiz’s Casablanca (1942), disintegration in Jean-Luc Godard’s Contempt (1963), spiritualization in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982), or desiring in Ang Lee’s Lust, Caution (2007). With Michael Haneke’s Amour (2012) and Gaspar Noé’s Love (2015) we encounter the question and impossibility of its cinematic rendering — a short-circuit that interrogates and circumvents cinema’s persistent
impulse for imaginary abstraction, where every primal fantasy is eventually subjugated to the metonymy of language.

Thus, rather than approach the films on the level of their purported meaning, we propose a reading that appeals to what the films do, the way they work, perform, function, and inhabit the representational field. That is, rather than approach Amour and Love on the basis of their negative difference, we would like to frame our discussion as a ‘spot the difference’ puzzle, in an attempt to articulate the two possible images of love that they present. In the spirit of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s experimentation with Franz Kafka’s rhizomatic texts, our concern lies with, what we term, the films’ syntax of closed spaces, of open and closed windows and doors, long hallways and narrow alleyways.

Can Amour and Love be interrogated on the ground of their image, on the ground of its potentiality to affect an encounter that negates cinema’s anthropocentric impulse? Ridding ourselves of the subject involves an act of self-inflicted aggression, by means of which space assumes the role of a lead protagonist while the characters portrayed become secondary to the “story.” Location, says Lacan, bears a certain relation to interpretation to the extent that geography, or, we add, architecture, render that which is said as “always already interpreted.” This notion challenges mainstream cinema’s tendency to be regulated by the anthropocentric organization of space around a subject, evoking identificatory, narrowly transferential reading that, in turn, brings about a de-ontologization of the theoretical study of cinema. For, the persistence of the subject, which does not exist beyond his own phantasm, is sustained by the blocking of the free flow of energy, thus being referred to by Deleuze as the “centre of indetermination.”

In that respect, classical cinema, much like the aspiration of human culture for organization and consistency, can be conceptualized, in Norbert Wiener’s terms, as anti-entropic. As such, the cinematic enunciation of this inherent human tendency functions as, what we term, a foreclosure of contingency. Yet, in the case of Amour and Love this function does not manifest itself at the level of the syntax of the text, but that of the diegetic implosion of its spatial coordinates. Hence, it is through the attentiveness to the architectural intra-diegetic enunciation that we seek to articulate the concept of love in these films. This reading of the films proposes a path for further development of the ontological theory of cinema, one which moves beyond the subject and subjectivity.

Love as Claustrophobia

The dialectics of closed spaces along with an ascetic minimalism of long static shots stage a conception of love as claustrophobia, a concept which transgresses the apparent contrast between Amour and Love on the level of representation. The fundamental impasse of love is epitomized in the Lacanian maxim “there is no sexual rapport” which can be re-visited in terms of architecture. The incest taboo and the uncanny unconscious status of the womb reduce love to forbidden rooms of being, like that of the parents whose moans and groans from behind the closed doors leave a deep mark on the child’s incipient phantasm. “A couple”, says Jean-Luc Nancy,
“forbids itself from coupling in a way other than refusing it.” Oxymoronically, as Nancy points out, the ontology of relations consists in that “relations are not something that is, rather they take place between someone who is.” In other words, while love takes place it does not fill it. This is yet another way of approaching the un-representability of love.

Claustrophobia, does not refer to an immanent quality of a given space but to the affect of the subject. Hence, claustrophobic spaces are those spaces which subjectivity created for itself in order to preserve its own castrated structure. As a part of this symptomatic projective process, the Space with capital S undergoes geometrization, anthropomorphization and privatization. The syntax of architectural spaces is the syntax of the unconscious, or, to paraphrase the well-known but outdated Lacanian dictum, architecture is structured like the unconscious. It is the speech though, whose role as noise in the interaction between the body and the space, which is explicit in both films.

In Amour and Love speech is staged as self-referential, functioning as a manifestation of Lacan’s contention that there is no sexual rapport. That is, speech is produced for the sake of jouissance. Thus, we encounter the recurrence of questions that foreground the deadlock of the absence of sexual rapport: “Can I do something for you?” “where does it hurt?” “where are you?” “what will become of us?” The self-circularity of these questions, questions which their repetitive, that is, symptomatic, masochistic appeal to the Other, have no answers, designates the empty space within language - the Lacanian ubiquitous hole. This repetitiveness has to do with two basic aspects, one being that the Other does not exist, a fact revealed by the rhetorical nature of these questions, while the second relates to the hole as a pre-condition for the architecture. Language and subjectivity reveal a discontent with the hole, with the unrepresentable, with the fact of their own castratedness. This castratedness, in turn, has to be covered, blurred-over, fenced-off, the doors and windows are to be shut, the outer space is to be channeled. From a soundtrack populated by the self-referentiality of speech, a different dimension emerges, one which can be accessed by way of the image. The grammar of closed windows and doors, narrow hallways and alleys, suffocating night clubs, restrooms, and bathrooms, lends itself to the production of the films’ inner rhythm which foregrounds the limits of the body as a closed space and of love as claustrophobia.

It is precisely this rhythm, which according to Andrei Tarkovsky, assumes the “dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image.” Editing, he writes, cannot determine rhythm, “[I]t is rhythm, and not editing […] that is the main formative element of cinema.” In Amour and Love rhythm is generated by the urban architectural containers of jouissance, which prevent it from spilling over the walls. Therefore, it spills-over within them, producing physical decay and mental self-destruction. Entropy, thus, takes back what belongs to it, namely, the human body which hides from the race of the species behind the walls of love.
Love (Body) as a Closed Space

Architecture is secondary to the body but the language of space is not foreign to it. This recognition leads Jacques-Alain Miller to deal with what he terms the *eroticism of space*. Miller defines the compulsive neurotic as one for whom the hindrance of the object of love lies in a cage in which he lives. The compulsive, says Miller, moves together with his cage. The compulsive core of every subject, his symptom, is thus closely linked to the grammar of space, to restrictions and self-restrictions that start from the body itself, which as Lacan points out, comes to the world too early, unable to survive on its own, unlike other animals.

As the anti-entropic development proceeds, the communication breakdown between the drive and the cage of the body is further exacerbated. There is space, the space of the apartment - there is ‘him’ and ‘her’ who can only populate, be present here at any given now. Each one limited to being himself or herself. The limits of subjectivity, of the body, are diegetically inscribed into the fabric of the texts. In *Amour* there is the stroke, in *Love* there is the unexpected pregnancy. The gap between destinies is presented as a violent eruption — whether the body is dying or denied the creation of life. Any extreme turn in the function of the body hinders the fluid movement of the self-referentiality of language. The element of surprise — a stroke, a pregnancy — repositions the symbolic in relation to the real, or to put it more bluntly, puts the symbolic in place!

In *Love*, we encounter an incessant attempt to break through the limits of the body through sex, through a *becoming-animal*. In *Amour*, the limits of the body are transgressed by deterioration. The state of being stuck within the physical walls condenses time whose entropic work is to deteriorate organic substances, be it through psychic or physical decay. In both cases the man, caught in and tortured by language, as Lacan puts it, desperately ties himself up in Möbius knots in an attempt to find his origin, to strike roots, to find his place and to save himself from the contingency of movement.

Spatialization of Time and/or Spaces that Endure

As a part of her matrixial theory project, Bracha Ettinger proposes what can be called the possibility of identification with the Lacanian *extimité*, or *extimacy*, the dynamic ontological reversibility of interiority and exteriority. Their relativity is in fact inscribed in our very psychic structure, as what is exterior for the fetus, namely the womb, turns for him inside out, both at the real and the symbolic level, the latter in a form of repression. The identification with this reversibility implies what Ettinger calls *subject as space of carriance*, or *subject-womb-space*, that is, subject as becoming-space- and-movement. “Under the matrixial viewspan,” says Ettinger, “[t]he emergence of space as subject-carrier is different from the emergence of a subject-image in a space, crystallized into object of representation.” The transgression of the impasse of love, thus, lies in identification with entropy, meaning de-binarization of life and death, blooming and withering, pleasure and pain, interiority and exteriority.

If the lead protagonist is figured as space then we are talking about a different kind of love — not a love that takes place between two subjects, between someone who *is*, apropos Nancy. The ontological solution, as we
see it, lies in differentiating between relation and love. Thus, the fact that there is no sexual relation does not
mean that there is no love. Following Ettinger, love is necessarily *trans-subjective*. Love is not a property of
the cage of the body but the Space with capital S. Love is the intimacy of Being itself.

This observation is theorized in Deleuze’s conceptualization of Ozu’s cinema as the object of everyday banality
in which everything is ordinary, even death: the images of a still pond, an empty room, a gust of wind, a tree
top, a laundry line, the rail tracks, are manifestly aware that “[i]t is man who upsets the regularity of series, the
continuity of the universe.” Ozu’s films, enunciate this philosophical wisdom with the static images of space
and place, and the ephemeral presence of what is destined to pass. The minimalist strokes of his audiovisual
signs transcend the ethical charge for narrativization by the intimation of a new ethical relation, one which
foregrounds the natural and the ecological. When taken in the context of Ozu’s sensibility, it becomes evident
that the violent eruptions staged by Haneke and Noé at the symbolic core of *Amour* and *Love* spell out the
questions: is illness an obtrusive bursting or an ordinary occurrence? Is pregnancy a destructive eruption or a
life extending itself?

The cinema of “…pure optical and sound situations,” which, as Deleuze contends, become established in
“any-space-whatever,” is a cinema of seeing. Both Haneke and Noé reduce their explorative study of love to
the repetitive audiovisual depiction of bodily actions — bodies that live and pulsate with passions, bodies that
decay and cave-in with indignity. The enactment of these actions, much like Ozu’s enunciation of everyday
banality, “…is precisely the representation of that which endures, through the succession of changing states.”
The space of the apartment, of its empty hallways and rooms, of its landscape paintings and changing spatial
configurations, become direct images of time — “…the unchanging form of that which changes.” It is here
that seeing refers to the capacity of cinema to make time and thought perceptible.

After all, *Amour* does not end with Anne and Georges leaving the apartment, but with the apartment itself,
which undergoes a visual transformation. Eva steps into a sun washed apartment, the double doors connecting
adjoining rooms are wide open, the space of the apartment is revealed in a new light. Eva’s walk through the
rooms marks the open flow of an energy that has been released. In the final shot, taken from the perspective of
the hallway, Eva is staged as a detail, an object among other objects that populate the space of the apartment —
a final image that grounds the presence of spaces that endure. At the end of *Love*, the fetus-like bodily
convergence of the body and bodies in a bathtub filled with water blurs the boundaries, overrides and
overcomes the gulf between inside and outside, the singular and the plural. The red color that overflows the
screen sweeps the father, the child, the lover and the space as setting of the scene, into the totality of Space
with the capital S.

*Featured image : Greg LeSar, the crack inside your heart is me (Acrylic on canvas, 45x33cm, 2018)*
Footnotes


2. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3. A descriptive approach, which attends to the seen, much like Deleuze and Guattari’s preferred method of inquiry, is an open-ended presupposition-less exploration of textual events, affects, and becoming. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari lay out their approach to an experimentation with the totality of Kafka’s texts with the following: “How can we enter into Kafka’s work? This work is a rhizome, a burrow. The castle has multiple entrances whose rules of usage and whose locations aren’t very well known. The hotel in Amerika has innumerable main doors and side doors that innumerable guards watch over; it even has entrances and exits without doors… Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation.” Therein, their experimentation with Kafka’s work does not consist of a search for archetypes that appear throughout his writing and which can be said to characterize the writer’s imaginary. A search for archetypes, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is a search for a textuality that works by assimilation, thematization and homogenization, whereas their method is strictly concerned with a rupturing that produces heterogeneous lines of escape. Furthermore, they do not look for free associations that call for an interpretation that reduces the saying to the said; neither do they seek to map out the work’s signifying structure: “We believe only in a Kafka politics that is neither imaginary nor symbolic…We believe only in a Kafka experimentation that is without interpretation or significance and rests only on tests of experience” (Kafka 7)  

3. David Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 87. In Rodowick’s elaboration on Gilles Deleuze’s conceptualization of the centre of indetermination, perception is described as “an interval opened on one side as sensation and closed on the other side as action. What falls in between is action, or what has not been transformed as either an image or action.” This in-betweenness Rodowick further explicates, is a state or a quality which “fits any living entity, no matter how simple or complex” (our emphasis).  


5. Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 62-66. In Deleuze’s treatise of the movement-image he writes: “All things considered, movement-images divide into three sorts of images when they are related to a centre of indetermination as to a special image: perception-images, action-images and affection-images.” The center of indetermination, a complex range of events (assemblage), which opens up between the action-image and the perception-image, is recurrently
circumvented by the representational impulse, for in perception “…there is never anything else or anything more than there is in the thing: on the contrary, there is ‘less’.”

6. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Da Capo Press, 1988), 32. Wiener refers to living organisms, such as humans, as those which can “exemplify locally anti-entropic processes.” Yet, these are not to be mistaken as isolated systems, the point he clarifies in the chapter Progress and Entropy (28-47). In other words, human culture as an anti-entropic event is a discursive tool which helps to deal with it (with ourselves) within the very narrow boundaries of our spoken and written history (that which we speak of and write for ourselves). It is not an ontological given.


11. Wiener, *The Human*, 12. In Wiener’s observation: “As entropy increases, the universe, and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to move from the least to the most probable state, from a state of organization and differentiation in which distinctions and forms exist, to a state of chaos and sameness.”


17. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 17.

18. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 17.