In its major iterations, psychoanalytic film theory has tended to read cinematic objects in one of two ways. As we know, the first wave, exemplified by the work of Laura Mulvey, treats film as an ideological apparatus, a pervasive means for the reproduction of hetero-patriarchal gender norms. In its later, more thoroughly Lacanian mode, psychoanalytic theory gleans from the cinema a means to illustrate, or encounter, what it deems to be the traumatic structure of subjectivity itself. Despite their differences, both approaches to the cinematic object share a common hermeneutics of suspicion: the cinematic object provides the means to unmask, display, or otherwise crystallize a problem more fundamental than what we immediately encounter in the film itself. Whether a film functions as the primary object for scrutiny, or provides instead a means of theoretical elaboration for other purposes, psychoanalytic theory appears most comfortable—perhaps unsurprisingly, given its clinical roots—when engaged in symptomatic readings. By reading for symptoms, the analytically inclined scholar may bring to consciousness (for the reader) previously unidentified, or misunderstood, cases of cultural malignancy. A symptomatic reading, then, carries with it a rhetorical force, the semblance of illumination and insight even when the diagnosis appears terminal, a revelation of ontological trauma beyond repair.
In what follows, I propose an alternative mode for psychoanalytic interpretation. To be clear, this essay does not provide a fully developed account of what psychoanalytic film theory should be. Instead, taking a cue from the time-travel films that serve as my primary examples, I ask, speculatively: What might psychoanalytic film theory be, or what might it become, in an alternate universe, one as equally attuned to the sublime as to the symptomatic? A sublime object, after all, is no less susceptible to interpretation than a symptom; at the same time, sublimation stands as one of the few concepts in psychoanalytic literature intended to describe psychic well-being—desire satisfied rather than repressed. Of course, to offer such a speculative alternative, as I do here, invites some predictable counter-critiques. Most immediately, in my emphasis on cinematic success in addition to failure, I may appear to fall for the lure of a utopian fantasy, the false but appealing notion that “happily ever” is something attainable rather than a marketing ploy or narrative strategy intended to keep us in our place. Is this not precisely the Hollywood fantasy of which psychoanalytic criticism originally worked so effectively, and in myriad ways, to disabuse us? My intention to read for the sublime does not seek to tell a happier story than the one told to us before in psychoanalytic precincts. Instead, I propose that Lacan’s account of ethics, from which I draw here, demands something closer to a pharmacological, rather than a symptomatic, reading of aesthetic objects.¹ Since sublimation, for Lacan, involves the elevation of an ordinary object to “the dignity of the Thing,” an act for which the subject can claim “no superior law” to justify the privilege she affords it, then there is similarly no sure means to determine the psychic significance of any object in relation to any subject. Indeed, perhaps one of the most radical, if under-acknowledged, findings of psychoanalytic practice is that any object may be repressive or enlivening, symptomatic or sublime, poison or cure, depending on how a subject perceives it and depending on the qualitative influence the object exerts on the subject’s life—as when, in a romantic breakup, the individual who previously garnered my love and affection becomes, with sometimes only a minimal change to the relationship, a despised antagonist. Indeed, the sublime object’s privileged status (How did I ever live without it?) may only be a hair’s breadth from becoming, retrospectively, a symptomatic lesion (How did I ever live with it?).
My intention in this essay is not to engage in a complete or comprehensive account of sublimation. Rather, I am interested in thinking about the interpretive problems sublimation poses for its spectators. As a form presumed to give material shape to unconscious content, the sublime object highlights the limit of psychoanalytic interpretation. If the subject is a profoundly singular being, as psychoanalytic critics regularly (and rightly) remind us, then the same holds true, I argue, for the meaningful and affective status of the privileged object. That is to say, the object of desire may very well appear on a subject’s horizon for external reasons, in what we would typically describe as instances of ideological interpellation, the cultural promotion of sameness, the valorization of commodities, and so on; or, the object of desire and its pursuit may demonstrate a subject’s active, ethical, and sublime demonstration of freedom. Rather than attempt to distinguish one kind of object from another, I simply mean to take seriously Lacan’s account of sublimation, which, I claim, provides us with no stable ground by which to judge the difference. Much like the time-travel films that compel viewers to see the same scene twice (or more) and thereby glean a different interpretation of the event each time—perhaps even leading us to qualify all interpretive judgments as a consequence—might we approach psychoanalytic criticism in a similar light?

The Cinematic Subject

Time-travel films often thematize the subjective nature of time. In the most philosophically rigorous cases, time-travel narratives may help us to see or encounter time differently, to detach briefly from our tendency to treat time as linear or teleological, and to recognize the impossibility of distinguishing the present in any clear or definite way from our images of the past or our expectations for the future. For Jacques Lacan, similarly, the analytic setting is attuned toward a related case of temporal undecidability. The patient who comes to analysis, Lacan notes in an early seminar, “is oriented according to a problematic which isn’t that of his actual experience, but that of his destiny, namely—what does his history signify?” As we well know, Lacan would seek to lead his patients (and students) to emphasize the function and structure of signification as an antidote to the false semblance of biographical determinism. The patient asks, “What does my history signify?” Lacan’s answer is usually understood to be, virtually anything. The
escape from psychic determinism, then, requires a certain shift from content to form. The patient may achieve the answer they seek by disabusing themselves of the question that led them to analysis in the first place. By foregoing further investigation into the meaning (content) of his or her life, the subject may substitute the debilitating neurotic question, which presumes an answer, for a more open ended, self-directed project of ongoing, formal, self-creating, *jouissance* beyond signification.

What interests me most about the time-travel films under consideration here, though, is not only their engagement with the temporal complexities of subjectivity. The films also invite us to consider the ethical implications that arise when characters attempt to do something new, that is, when a change in perspective raises the possibility for other material, social, or interpersonal changes as a consequence. A change in perspective, after all, does not necessarily ensure a change in material relations. In everyday life, a person who experiences a radical shift in their sense of self and their orientation toward their past, present, and future may not find their environment to be equally receptive to revision. Although it is precisely this conflict—between psychic agency and social environment—that I find to be usefully magnified in many time-travel films, psychoanalytic critics seem drawn to a different set of concerns on the few occasions they have turned their attention to time-travel. As we will see, critics have instead located in such films’ recursive storylines a formal structure homologous to the structure of subjectivity. That is, psychoanalytic thinkers draw from time-travel and its attendant paradoxes an exemplary means to illustrate the constitutive gaps, fissures, and ruptures in subjectivity, expressing little or no concern for how we might transform the identification of these problems into more productive outcomes.

The earliest and perhaps most influential example of such an analysis can be found in Constance Penley’s essay, “Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia.” As Penley argues there, the speculative scenarios typified by time-travel films entail the potential to dismantle our narcissistic self-images, much like Lacan’s approach to the analytic setting. Penley’s analysis focuses primarily on two films, *The Terminator* (Dir. James Cameron 1984) and *La Jetée* (Dir. Chris Marker 1963), both of which involve, respectively, a character who attempts to orchestrate his biological conception after the fact, and one who returns to a scene from his childhood
as an adult. These primal fantasies—the wish to return or gain control over one’s origin—Penley argues, illustrate and expose a constitutive gap at the core of subjectivity. It is precisely our self-alienation, our inability to access or change the past, that founds our psychic lives. The inevitable questions we pose about ourselves and our life’s meaning, and the failure to answer such questions sufficiently, provide our lives with a sense of purpose. Indeed, Penley’s complex and elusive argument may be clarified in advance if we keep in mind a key psychoanalytic assumption central to her argument.

In Penley’s treatment of it, the subject names, like an empty signifier, a being whose existence never coalesces into a coherent unity, despite the fact that we may nevertheless imagine ourselves to be exactly that—a whole being—if not at present then at least in a future yet to come. Awaiting future satisfactions, or, conversely, examining our biographical past in the hope of deciphering the presumed code constitutive of our identity keeps us adrift in our temporal dissociations. This drift is nothing other than another name for desire, the sense of lack that propels us in search of what seem to be missing; the gap in being whose implicit question desire seeks to answer, however, cannot be rectified—there is no object that will grant us the total satisfaction we seek. Accordingly, when time-travel films imagine settings where characters can escape the limits of time, they also risk exposing this very gap in being on which subjectivity is constructed; or, this is at least what Penley seeks to demonstrate.

For instance, when the protagonist (Davos Hanich) in La Jetée returns to Orly airport in the film’s final moments, seeking the woman whose face provided the memorable image with a force so powerful as to garner him the capacity to travel across time in the first place, he inhabits two places at once. In the climactic moment, he is both the child at the airport and the stranger whose violent death he witnessed at a child, unaware from the earlier vantage point that the person he took to be a stranger was in fact his future self. In the film, of course, there is a clear narrative explanation for the character’s death: the jailors who forced him to time-travel in the first place, hoping to use his ability to avoid a nuclear holocaust, have followed him to Orly so as to dispose of him now that they no longer require his services; his outsized power to travel across time cannot be left unchecked. Penley discounts this narrative explanation and instead treats the traumatic
conclusion as a formal necessity. The meeting between child and adult, the subject and its image, Penley maintains, would mean the complete dissolution of subjectivity as we know it. From this psychoanalytic perspective we may understand Penley’s forceful, if brief, interpretation of Marker’s film. “In the logic of the film,” Penley writes, “he has to die, because such a logic acknowledges the temporal impossibility of being in the same place as both adult and child. In La Jetée one cannot be and have been.”

Although Penley attributes the protagonist’s death in La Jetée to a particular logic inherent in the film, it seems more reasonable to say the logic derives elsewhere; namely, from Penley’s particular psychoanalytic commitments. Penley conceives of subjectivity, after Lacan, as constituted by an internal and irremediable difference. The subject emerges, becomes a self, only on the basis of a misrecognition, what Lacan identifies as the specular mistake of the “mirror stage”—I take the image of myself in the mirror to be the “real” me, the “I” whose idealized form may eventually become my own. The byproduct of this misrecognition is a perpetual case of self-alienation for which there can be no satisfactory reconciliation because I will never be in reality the form I took myself to be in the image. La Jetée engages this ontological rift and thematicizes it in a speculative narrative: the child (at Orly) is, in fact, the image he misrecognizes as an other. Taking this formal account of subjectivity to its logical, or paradoxical, conclusion, the character no longer exists, “cannot be and have been,” once the ideal and the phenomenological meet in person.

By her comparison, The Terminator engages similar conceptual terrain, but avoids such a radical conclusion by “working in the service of [. . .] a pleasure that depends on suppressing conflicts or contradictions.” In other words, Penley’s broader argument is to demonstrate how The Terminator touches on the radical quality of psychic life, only to turn its attention toward topics more amenable to mainstream media entertainment. James Cameron’s big-budget film includes a similar primal fantasy: John Connor, the leader of a resistance army fighting artificially-intelligent machines in the future, sends Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) into the past to protect John’s mother Sarah (Linda Hamilton) from a cyborg (Arnold Schwarzenegger) who also has traveled into the past to kill her (and by killing her dispatch in advance, before he is even born, John’s revolutionary role). Since Kyle’s
attempt to safeguard Sarah will also result in a one-night stand by which Sarah conceives John, the film’s temporal-paradox includes an Oedipal flair useful for Penley’s purposes. However, *The Terminator*, Penley finds, simplifies the philosophical and psychological problems that might emerge from this scenario, tempering its otherwise radical analytic potential. Specifically, the film departs from a direct account of subjective alienation in favor of a more generic allegory about technological failure. As Penley stresses, technical gadgets such as telephones, answering machines, and corded hair-dryers regularly impede characters’ agency in the narrative. Technology, in the film, serves at best as an unpredictable ally and at worst as a complete impediment to meaningful action. The many technical failures—what Penley terms the film’s *tech noir*—therefore function as symbolic substitutes for the more profound case of subjective alienation to which *The Terminator* merely nods. In other words, the cyborg who passes for a human and who travels to the past to disrupt the future *could* provide a powerful allegory for the unconscious, a similarly inhuman feature of subjectivity untouched by linear time. Yet the film, as Penley sees it, points in these more rigorous and interesting directions only to return us to more quotidian concerns: “If *The Terminator*’s primal-scene fantasy draws the spectator into the film’s paradoxical circle of cause and effect and its equally paradoxical realization of incestuous desire, its militant *everydayness* throws the spectator back out again, back to the technological future.”

We should notice in Penley’s distinction between *La Jetée* and *The Terminator* something more than a preference for experimental cinema over a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster. Penley’s argument hinges on two distinct economies of desire. In Penley’s reading of *The Terminator*, the examples of *tech noir* symbolize a profound case of existential angst: our subjection to the unconscious and to sexual difference. In other words, our inability to understand or control our unconscious motivations implies fundamental doubts about human agency. In *The Terminator*, the challenge to agency becomes located in technical devices (e.g., the phone on which Sarah attempts to call the police for help is out of order) falsely suggesting that our problems are empirical, open to eventual solution or repair, rather than constitutive and irredeemable. Read economically, desire in *The Terminator* is impeded in several moments by limited cases of lack, failure, or inhibition whose solutions are easy to imagine. A broken phone can be
fixed with a minimal expenditure of time, energy, or effort. In a narrative where desire crosses time and space, producing paradoxical loops (Sarah would not be impregnated and give birth to John if John did not, in the future, send Kyle into the past to save her) evocative of subjectivity’s own paradoxical, unconscious kernel, the film’s recourse to narrative resolution seems to Penley out of joint. By turning its attention to more quotidian cases of technical failures, the film shifts from the internal to the external, from the ontological to the empirical, thereby making *The Terminator* a more viable object for mass consumption. By contrast, *La Jetée* poses a threat to the consumerist reality principle, demonstrating the magnitude of force when a subject steps outside of time in order to encounter itself directly and without mediation. It may be hard to imagine what such an experience would look like in practice outside the domain of science fiction, and yet this is precisely Penley’s point. The experience of subjective destitution, a central idea in psychoanalytic criticism that Penley’s argument foreshadows, imagines exactly this kind of self-destruction when a being no longer alternates between drive and desire, the constitutive symbolic and the empirical symbol. 

In order to more precisely explain this distinction in Penley and later iterations of psychoanalytic theory, a brief return to Freud may be helpful. As I have already noted, Lacan conceives of subjectivity as constituted by symbolic deferral, a perpetual state of self-alienation within language and the discourse of the Other. This account of symbolization radicalizes Freud’s earlier treatment of subjective alienation, particularly Freud’s tendency to see symbols as symptoms of subjective anxiety rather than anxiety’s cause. To cite perhaps the most obvious example, Freud treats religion as an appearance of desire in a displaced form, a means by which human beings mitigate their sense of vulnerability in the face of nature or other forces beyond their control. Our symbolic projections onto nature, Freud reasons, are “a store of ideas [. . .] born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable.” Human life is frail and vulnerable in the face of natural forces, whether we have in mind the more dramatic events of natural disasters or the slow and steady march of mortality over time. Religion provides us with a symbolic network to ameliorate this sense of vulnerability, personifying natural forces in the figural form of gods. The gods may still retain ultimate control over human destiny, but they are at
least occasionally open to negotiation: “We can apply the same methods against these [gods] that we employ in our own society; we can try to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and by so influencing them, we may rob them of a part of their power.”

These anthropomorphic projections, then, even in cases where natural forces are reimagined in the form of a threatening or vengeful god, Freud finds, transform the contingencies of nature into a being, or beings, who can be reasoned with and occasionally pacified.

With this in mind, what Penley describes as *The Terminator*’s “militant everydayness” is nothing short of its symbolization of subjective alienation in metaphorical images and objects; like Freud’s account of religion, these substitute objects keep the traumatic experience of alienation at bay. Penley’s essay then goes a step further. Not only does the film illustrate a Freudian point about the pragmatic benefits (and attendant distractions) of symbolization; Penley seems to understand the ontological limitation of *The Terminator* as homologous to a similar limitation in Freud. As Penley writes elsewhere, Lacan’s return to Freud exposes and then crosses a limit in Freud’s thinking: “For Freud, the ego’s motives are dubious at best, but for Lacan the ego is fundamentally narcissistic, constituted as it is through the mirrored image of itself. Thus the ego is a trap, only ever an illusion, and a rather destructive one at that.”


With this in mind, I want to press on the theoretical hierarchy Penley establishes: Lacan over Freud, *La Jetée* over *The Terminator*. In order to maintain this distinction, I claim, Penley must engage in her own act of displacement by trading content for form, evidenced by her meager discussion of narrative. Particularly in her reading of *The Terminator*, Penley places primary emphasis on the narrative’s reliance on a formal Oedipal structure—indeed, her argument centers on this. It seems worth noting, however, how little the Oedipal structure contributes to the development of narrative conflict; though it sets the stage, it has little bearing on Sarah’s struggle for survival and growth as a character. (In contrast to later sequels in the franchise, the Oedipal child, John, does not even appear in the film and is only identified through dialogue.) Oddly
enough, given the subject matter, the structures on which Penley relies—the Freudian Oedipal and the Lacanian symbolic—seem oddly out of time, untouched by the variations that we normally attribute to embodied experience. If we consider, even briefly, how Sarah’s story begins and ends, I argue, we may begin to notice the film’s more rigorous attempt to bring together symbol and symbolic, alienation and its aftermath, in an economy of psychic alteration that neither achieves a fantasy of perfect balance nor a tragedy of entropic self-destruction.

After we have already been introduced to the time-traveling cyborg sent back in time to kill the “mother of the future,” we find Sarah in a rather quotidian setting: a bad day at work. Sarah toils as a waitress in a busy restaurant. On this day in particular, she appears beleaguered, accosted on all sides by impatient customers; even a young boy improbably spoons a large scoop of ice cream into her pocket when she is looking in another direction, a material expression of his dissatisfaction with her service.

A co-worker, in an attempt to console Sarah, offers an ironic commentary: “Look at it this way: in a hundred years, who’s going to care?” The rhetorical question, of course, is intended to allay Sarah’s exasperation in this moment by leading her to see the scene differently. That is to say, the co-worker encourages Sarah to detach herself from the present—to time-travel, in a certain manner of speaking. From a more distant vantage point, Sarah may thereby mediate the immediate by translating it into a different register, to
realize that what she feels now is fleeting, lacking significance, and unlikely to be remembered a century later. The comment, I claim, encourages Sarah to trade content for form and thereby take (at least psychic) control of the situation. (Given The Terminator’s apocalyptic narrative, no one present at the restaurant will exist to remember it anyway; all the customers will be likely incinerated in the coming nuclear war. The diegetic act of care between co-workers, then, functions also as an extra-diegetic joke for the audience who knows that the diner’s customers—including the ice cream wielding brat—soon will receive their just des(s)erts.

Yet the reward for such psychic detachment also entails certain risks as a consequence. The rhetorical gesture imagines a point so distant in the future (“In a hundred years . . .”) when precisely no one will exist anymore to care about, let alone remember, this moment, including Sarah. Not even Sarah’s child, whose conception, birth, and eventual leadership in the ‘war against the machines’ provides the film with its guiding conflict and moral stakes, is unlikely to be alive at such a distant date. We might say, then, that The Terminator begins where La Jetée ends: the speculative fantasy of time-travel produces a destitute subject when it presumes a being untouched by time, experience, or affective attachment. Though I may be taking the comment too literally, too seriously, the nihilism it entails nevertheless seems oddly reminiscent of exactly the kind of argument Penley promotes. A subject conceived in strictly formal terms, devoid at bottom of content, context, or inter-subjective affect, need not concern itself with such minor frustrations as Sarah experiences here. Yet this picture of freedom also assumes a being so divorced from experience that the alternative seems to offer little in psychic recompense. In short, Sarah’s co-worker, like significant strands of psychoanalytic criticism, offers a cure potentially more disturbing than the original ailment.

This early scene in The Terminator identifies, in terms quite similar to Penley’s, a central psychoanalytic paradox at the heart of speculative time-travel: once unmoored from our temporal limitations, we may very well lose all affective connection to the world. Without lack, not only would there be no reason to exist; existence as such would be no longer recognizable to us. At first glance, the film’s conclusion may appear to picture a conventional happy ending, another case of a Hollywood film that raises the specter of lack only to paint over the ontological gap with a rosier picture reminiscent
of Freud’s own account of religious displacement. Indeed, when we last see Sarah, she appears determined to face the challenges ahead in an apparent progression from conflict to resolution, passivity to activity, lack to fulfillment. However, I find in this concluding scene, instead, an example of sublime compromise—the projection of desire outward in order to reshape the world around her—and in a manner that further complicates Penley’s pessimistic interpretation of human-technological relations.

Following Kyle’s death and Sarah’s successful destruction of the cyborg, a visibly pregnant Sarah drives in a jeep away from the city, toward the mountains (presumably to avoid the impending nuclear apocalypse). Alone in the car, she speaks into a tape recorder, producing an oral diary intended for her unborn son.

However, Sarah identifies in the tapes an ambivalent mode of address: “What’s most difficult for me is trying to decide what to tell you and what not to. But I guess I have a while yet before you’re even old enough to understand these tapes. They’re more for me at this point, just so I can get it straight.” In a striking analytic fashion, the monologue illustrates a split in being: Sarah talks to herself as herself. In other words, no special effects or complex narrative structure are necessary to demonstrate the multiplicity of psychic being. Moreover, the simple act of self-care, one that draws from recent events to develop a new sense of ethical purpose, is helpfully mediated, not impeded, by a technical recording device. Sarah sublimates her desire in a new direction, neither nostalgically trapped in the past nor
expectant for a distant future. Taking the past and future into account, but also engaged in an act of immanent questioning (“trying to decide what to tell you”), Sarah’s reorientation involves a litany of other objects: road, vehicle, tape recorder, the image of her unborn child, and so on.

Sublimation, as Hans Loewald defines it, “brings together what had become separate [. . .] it brings external and material reality within the compass of psychic reality, and psychic reality within the sweep of external reality. In its most developed form in creative work it culminates in celebration.”

Indeed, the concluding scene demonstrates a celebration of ambivalence, neither a fantasmatic ideal nor an unavoidable tragedy but a road of difficulty ahead for which Sarah now braces herself appropriately.

Moreover, this new network of symbolic meaning, rather than distracting from the contingency of fate or natural forces, à la Freud’s view of religious fantasy, provides the means by which Sarah weathers the storm into which she confidently drives.

Through this reading of *The Terminator*, I do not intend to supplant Penley’s interpretation with the claim to a superior one. Instead, in offering this alternative reading I intend to take seriously the role of *alternation* in psychoanalytic interpretation as such. If subjectivity is constituted by difference, then it seems reasonable to suggest, correlativelly, that one’s perspective and experience of the world should be similarly productive of difference. As Mari Ruti puts it, the “inconsistency of the signifier” that inhabits us “is merely the flip side of its creativity, of its continuous capacity
to generate new significations." By extension, the symbols we project into the world are not necessarily displacements distracting us from a truth too traumatic to bear; our capacity for symbolic creativity may also carve out new paths and similarly new desires to propel us down them.

Nevertheless, psychoanalytic film criticism regularly valorizes lack as an end in itself and appears resistant to naming, with any specificity, what an encounter with lack might produce as a positive consequence. The fear, it would seem, is that to chart a path back from lack would merely lead to the production of a new fantasy to replace the old, that any proposition other than one ensconced in our founding and irrevocable experience of lack would lead inevitably to another trap, another case of mediated desire rather than unmediated drive. I do not take issue with this argument as such, grounded as it is in a key feature of Lacanian theory, but I do worry that affording such privilege to lack may lead to a similar, and unnecessary, overvaluation of form at the expense of content. To cite one prominent and contemporary example, Todd McGowan locates in atemporal cinema a Lacanian ethics of the drive comparable to Penley’s earlier reading of La Jetée. In close readings of films such as Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Dir. Michel Gondry 2004), Memento (Dir. Christopher Nolan 2000), and 21 Grams (Dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu 2003), McGowan emphasizes the films’ depiction of characters who encounter the absent core of their being; he similarly lauds the atemporal mode for its capacity to put viewers in touch with the repetition of this loss, in contrast to the more traditional cinematic techniques that proceed, teleologically, from beginning to end, from conflict to resolution. “The ethical thrust of temporal cinema,” McGowan writes

stems from its investment in the repetition of the drive at the expense of temporality. The drive houses the subject’s ethical being because it provides constant contact with loss and absence, a contact that forms the basis of our relation with others. What we have in common is what we don’t have rather than anything we do. Though their experiences differ infinitely, all subjects share a basis in loss. Even though a fundamental loss isolates us within our subjectivity, it also provides the only possible basis for connection. Loss is our common constitutive event. The repetition of the drive continually reacquaints us with this event and thus facilitates an ethical relationship to others in which the subject is obligated through the shared structuring of loss.
McGowan’s stunning reading of atemporal cinema, here, maintains a commitment to the concept of alienation, and its concomitant loss, necessary for any theorist who takes Lacan seriously, as McGowan surely does. Where my argument differs, then, is in my attempt to conceive desire in economic as well as structural terms. I mean the term economy here in the strict sense of input and output, specifically, how a shift in desire’s direction involves a reorientation of energy and attention that might have been directed elsewhere. Such a shift, moreover, requires neither a state of utter nihilism (“In a hundred years, who’s going to care?”) nor a mistaken fantasy of fulfillment to come. What it does require, however, is greater care and attention, I argue, to the relation between subject position, which may change radically over time, and our ethical pursuits, which sometimes, but not always, attempt to adhere to more persistent aims resistant to change.

In other words, I do not doubt McGowan’s claim that ethical action, according to Lacan, requires “contact with loss and absence;” what I doubt is that the ethical requires “constant contact with loss and absence.” To experience loss so completely, as the protagonist in *La Jetée* certainly does, would lead inexorably to the dissolution of the individual, an utterly abject state of non-being. Sublimation, to be sure, means living without a supportive moral structure, one which will assure me of the value or significance of my action, and this absence speaks directly to the ethical quality of sublimation itself—it is a desirous act for which I am solely responsible. However, precisely because sublimation projects into the world, giving back in a different form what it has been given by the world, it seems reasonable to suggest that sublimation describes a case where desire changes the world, no matter how minimally. In other words, even if I subtract myself from my typical investment in the Other (the normative social order) in favor of ethical freedom, such a subtraction necessarily requires some addition as a consequence. Sublimation receives and responds, depositing into the world new content for the subject (and anyone else) to behold and reckon with—content begets form begets content, and so on. This very alternating movement between form and content, pain and joy, experience and interpretation, the social and the singular, describes more completely, I claim, the risk and reward of ethical sublimation. Indeed, this is the creative power Ruti attributes to the lack in our being;
sublimation entails the potential, when freed from social, ideological, and narcissistic constraints, to produce endless differences.

In my alternative to Penley’s reading of *The Terminator*, I have privileged the film’s narrative progression, reading its seemingly happy, Hollywood ending as less tidy than we might otherwise presume it to be. The shift in Sarah’s subject position transforms the previously inhibiting technological gadgets—what Penley identifies as the film’s cultural symptoms—into the very means by which she expresses and enacts her desire differently. In this essay’s conclusion, I briefly consider a more recent case of time-travel in cinema, *Arrival* (Dir. Denis Villeneuve 2016). The film presents us with another character who can transcend time and who faces a fundamental ethical problem: should she give birth to a child despite her foreknowledge of the child’s untimely death? Her affirmative response, I argue, admits the fragile alternation between pain and pleasure, loss and gain, constitutive of desire in its sublime interaction with the world in which it finds itself. Before offering this additional reading, however, I want to linger with the concept of sublimation a bit longer. If the sublime object exemplifies a case of desire mediated but unrepressed, then what role does the medium play in the message it tells? If sublimation allows us to locate a modicum of creative agency capable of changing, rather than merely identifying, the circumstantial contexts in which our lives are enmeshed, then might we also direct this creative capacity toward psychoanalytic concepts themselves, reading them anew and in light of the contexts in which they similarly are formed?

**Desire in Context**

Sublimation gives new life to old desire. In Freud’s classic (and notoriously underdeveloped) definition of the term, sublimation describes an instance of libido “directing itself toward an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction.” If the sublime object exemplifies a case of desire mediated but unrepressed, then what role does the medium play in the message it tells? If sublimation allows us to locate a modicum of creative agency capable of changing, rather than merely identifying, the circumstantial contexts in which our lives are enmeshed, then might we also direct this creative capacity toward psychoanalytic concepts themselves, reading them anew and in light of the contexts in which they similarly are formed?
rather than traumatic, for the subject who enacts it. A symptom, by contrast, is a psychosomatic symbol of unconscious repression that restricts a subject’s capacity to act differently in the present because of an unhealthy attachment to the past. But whereas a symptom is a sign of external influence on the mind manifested in the body, sublimation is more typically described as moving in different temporal and spatial directions—from the past to the future; from the internal to the external. Sublimation, then, discovers in the outer world the raw material for symbolizing desire—enacting desire elsewhere, putting desire to work, marshalling desire so as to influence, even modestly, the environment in which the subject finds herself.\textsuperscript{18}

Lacan would further emphasize how sublimation demonstrates an act by which desire manages to express itself in its singularity. To illustrate this point, Lacan makes recourse to several examples and analogies throughout \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, including, most famously, Antigone’s radical commitment to Polynices at the cost of her own life. On the specific topic of the sublime in the aesthetic domain, though, Lacan’s most striking example is surely his description of a private collection of matchboxes arranged by his friend Jacques Prévert. Through the example Lacan emphasizes the peculiarity of sublimation, how it locates satisfaction in unexpected places and things:

It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at the time; it was perhaps the only kind of collection possible. Only the match boxes appeared as follows: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to the door.\textsuperscript{19}

A key point of emphasis to be drawn from Lacan’s anecdotal account is the peculiarity, or the singularity, of the desire it expresses; how a subject’s desire may demonstrate itself in the most mundane objects—hundreds, if not thousands, of matchboxes in this case. As Ruti puts it, on the occasion when desire escapes the quotidian and touches the ethical, it “makes the sublime appear in the most commonplace of objects.”\textsuperscript{20}

It is important to note, however, that Lacan describes this example of sublimation \textit{in media res}. We learn nothing about what comes before (say, his friend’s particular biography) nor what becomes of the collection in the
aftermath of Lacan’s encounter with it. There is good reason for such lacunae. Lacan is intent to show throughout the seminar that such an act of sublime creativity will resist any attempt to explain the cause behind its emergence. To ask such questions as Why these matchboxes? or Why this particular arrangement? would miss the point the example is supposed to make. Nothing grounds the artistic production other than the peculiarity of the subject itself, hence Lacan’s attempt in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to disconnect ethics from its more typical with norms, rules, or laws and to reconceive it as a mode aesthetic creativity.

However, it is worth noting the economy of desire operative in this example. As Lacan notes in passing—and only to pass on immediately to the display itself—the objects themselves entail no significant value and likewise require no great expenditure of resources to obtain them—“It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at the time.” Again, the objects’ easy affordability, for Lacan, speaks to desire’s inherent flexibility; that is, desire’s ability to take shape, and give shape, in virtually any circumstances. Simply put, desire may produce art anywhere. Nevertheless, we might notice how the material circumstances nevertheless shape, inform, or otherwise direct the performance of creative agency. The easy access to the object provides the very means by which the subject (Prévert) here expresses himself, makes a mark on the world, and thereby displays his profound idiosyncrasy. Context does not determine desire, but it certainly seems relevant to desire’s material appearance.

To return to one of our earlier cinematic examples, Sarah’s capacity for sublimation in *The Terminator* demonstrates a similar relation between internal desire and external context. In contrast to the difficult day at work, where she struggles to respond actively to the excess demands made upon her by impatien customers, the concluding scene places her in relative isolation; alone in her vehicle, where she can afford the time and energy to consider the road ahead, Sarah thereby reorganizes the surrounding space and objects to her own particular ends. In this manner, the film offers a helpful reminder how, in Kelly Oliver’s terms, the *subject position* in which any person finds herself contributes significantly to that person’s capacity for self-expression. In her reading of Frantz Fanon in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, Oliver explains how violent and systematic oppression, though never determining absolutely its victims, nevertheless erects barriers
that delimit those subjects’ opportunity for creative action. This requires us, Oliver argues, to distinguish two separate forms of subjective alienation. At the most fundamental level, we are captured at once in language and in our mortal bodies. The transition from existential alienation to sublime activity—the end of analysis—Oliver notes, is more difficult for some than others. Many people cannot afford to engage in analysis, for instance; plenty of people may not have easy access to disposable commodities like match boxes, let alone the available time and energy to install them with such care and precision as to generate a stunning piece of domestic art.

To maintain the distinction between subjectivity and subject position, after Oliver, does not require us to make a fundamental revision of Lacan’s ethics of sublimation. It may impel us to distinguish, though, more carefully between the clinical practice of psychoanalysis and the application of psychoanalytic concepts to cinematic objects. Lacan’s account of sublimation, as well as his ethical maxim that the subject must “not give ground to desire,” invokes perhaps the most difficult challenge faced in the analytic setting as Lacan conceived it, both for the analysand and the analyst. The latter must refuse, at all costs, the temptation to provide the patient with easy answers and false promises likely to ingratiate them toward their patient and thereby stoke the analyst’s narcissism at the cost of the patient’s path toward psychic independence. The radical quality of Freud’s staging of the analytic environment, as Christopher Bollas has argued, was not to discipline the patient under the guise of the analyst’s authoritative gaze. Instead, the give-and-take between patient and analyst, the alternation between unfettered expression (the patient’s stream of consciousness), on the one hand, and sober interpretations on the other, illustrates, exemplifies, and materializes in the analytic mise-en-scène the very alternation of a vibrant subjective life. That is, the fundamental gift of analysis is nothing more than the patient’s newfound capacity to take charge of this alternating structure herself after the analysis reaches its conclusion. The analytic “cure” does not mean the subject finally achieves satisfaction or finally embodies the image she has projected for herself. Rather, the subject incorporates lack into what had previously been a fantasy intent to imagine a life without lack. I propose, then, that we conceive of lack not so much as a constant absence but rather the very tenuousness alternation between what we experience and what we think we know about our
experiences—the ongoing variation between experience (subject position) and my own reactions or interpretations of that experience (subjectivity).\textsuperscript{23} How might such an account of psychic and social alternations direct our cinematic attention differently, especially toward similar cases of psychic variation in narrative and character development?

**Living with Loss**

*Arrival* offers a particularly illuminating example for the kind of variable mode of interpretation I have proposed here. Moreover, the film’s narrative also involves a severely difficult ethical decision. In the film, Louise (Amy Adams) is an academic linguist called upon by the U.S. government to communicate with aliens whose arrival on the planet has prompted global panic. Before Louise can engage in her work with the aliens, however, she first must engage in a seemingly simpler act of translation—to teach a military mind to think like a linguist. Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker), who functions as Louise’s immediate superior, criticizes her for taking too long to communicate to the visitors the questions demanded by the U.S. government: Why are the aliens here and what are their intentions? These questions belie a fundamental passivity—the expectation that the aliens must be either friends or enemies—and the corresponding desire to decide quickly whether an intergalactic battle is at hand. Louise responds, in a pedagogical fashion appropriate to her role as a university professor, by teaching Weber to think from a different perspective, to see the scene differently, to pose a different set of questions.
Louise explicates the complexity involved in what Weber believes to be a simple question, writing it on the board, “What is your purpose on Earth?” She then proceeds to divide the sentence into its grammatical and rhetorical parts:

First, we need to make sure they understand what a question is—the nature of a request for information along with a response. Then we need to clarify the difference between a specific “you” and a collective “you,” because we don’t want to know why “Joe Alien” is here, we want to know why they all landed. And ‘purpose’ requires an understanding of intent. We need to find out: do they make conscious choices or is their motivation so instinctive that they don’t understand a “Why?” question at all. And biggest of all, we need to have enough vocabulary with them that we understand their answer.

By saying, as I have, that Louise teaches Weber how to think like a linguist, I do not mean to say Louise teaches the military commander to be a linguist. Indeed, what matters most in their interaction is Louise’s attempt to maintain the professional freedom necessary to succeed at her task. Thus, what she requires is not Weber’s complete understanding but rather his appreciation and respect for what he does not immediately understand. The sequence explicitly addresses the complexities of language, particularly the cascading dynamics involved in developing a means for communication between two species who share minimal points of common reference. Yet this is more than an academic lesson. What the lesson produces, as a practical byproduct, is a transfer of authority in Louise’s direction. Louise not only demonstrates for Weber the enormous burden and difficulty of her job; she also dramatizes her particular expertise in the matter. She thereby invites her counterpart into a different temporal register, one more humble when seen in light of the unpredictable task ahead, less inclined to demand immediate answers. In other words, before Louise can experience the flexible and creative power inherent in subjectivity—which she will—she must first establish a social position amenable to the task.

Louise eventually learns the alien language. Her growing facility with the language also garners her the capacity to see across time. This atemporal shift in her being contributes to her capacity to solve the emerging global crisis and thereby bring the story’s central conflict to a successful resolution. It also demands a corresponding shift in perspective on the audience’s part concerning the more personal aspects of the narrative. In the film’s opening scenes, we encounter a montage of Louise with her daughter, Hannah
(Jadyn Malone, Abigail Pniowsky, Julia Scarlett Dan); the loosely connected scenes move quickly from the child’s birth to brief moments during early childhood and preteen years, concluding abruptly with a diagnosis of a terminal disease and the child’s death. Throughout the remainder of the film, we continue to encounter exchanges between Louise and Hannah in what appear to be flashbacks. Only in the film’s final act do both the audience and Louise realize that these scenes demonstrate flash-forwards—Louise’s growing capacity to see into her own future, including the child she will bear and who will die an untimely death. She will decide, nevertheless, to remain consistent to the image of her life as she has foreseen it; she will bear Hannah into the world, knowing her daughter will live a tragically brief life.

Both Louise’s decision and the atemporal structure of the narrative invite us as viewers to contemplate and experience the variable dynamics that such an impossible situation might produce. In the early montage sequence described above, for instance, we see Louise and Hannah as they play together in the yard outside their home.
From the jubilant playfulness by which the scene begins, the sequence cuts to a shot of Louise sitting while Hannah continues to play by herself. Louise’s expression is oddly subdued, a relatively rapid transition to a more serious affect, especially by comparison to the earlier act of play. On first viewing, it is easy to miss the significance this shot seems to impart. By the
film’s conclusion, realizing retrospectively that Louise knows her time with Hannah is terribly short, perhaps this shot indicates the idea’s reemergence for Louise in this moment, an expectation of loss that colors the otherwise happy experience. The projected loss of the child’s impending death surely never escapes the character’s knowledge, but as the scene’s structure demonstrates when we read it retroactively (as it seems to encourage us to do), the knowledge of loss does not diminish, at least not entirely, and certainly not in every moment, the joy of raising her daughter for the limited time she has. In contrast to other examples of sublimation, and much more so than an act of suicidal defiance or an aesthetic arrangement of inert objects, Arrival presents us with a case of sublimation fully attuned to the profound difficulty and joy when our ethical commitment to pursue our desire involves those very beings we cherish most, whose very existence, over which we have minimal control, provides us with the most powerful and ongoing experiences of loss and gain. In contrast, then, to a psychoanalytic ethics committed to an irredeemable experience of lack, the ethical sublime draws our attention to the day-to-day, moment-to-moment experiences of difference, the alternation between the loss I cannot overcome and those occasional moments of joy that nevertheless make life worth living.

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Suggested citation:

Influence

Notes

1 Bernard Stiegler has consistently promoted what he terms pharmacological (derived from Jacques Derrida) mode of philosophical speculation. For Stiegler, a pharmacology is a necessary means for reading and responding to the current state of technology and global capitalism. Stiegler has also recently turned to psychoanalytic theory, particularly the notion of sublimation, which he proposes as psychic alternative to the equally psychic lures of neo-liberalism, specifically asking how we might translate the drive of consumerism into alternative, humanistic rather than mechanistic, desires. See Bernard Stiegler, What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

2 More than any other works on sublimation, Mari Ruti’s pragmatic view of the subject has been most influential on my approach in this essay. See Mari Ruti, The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). I have developed, elsewhere, a separate account of sublimation in the context of cinematic analysis in a text even more centrally focused on Ruti’s scholarship. There, I also distinguish both Ruti’s and my account of the sublime object in contrast to Slavoj Žižek’s influential account in The Sublime Object of Ideology. Put succinctly, I would simply say that we should take seriously how, in Žižek’s discussions of sublimation there, he has in mind, specifically, the sublime objects of ideology, not necessarily the explicitly enlivening objects on which Lacan anchors his ethics within the analytic setting. See Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 1989), and Scott Krzych, “Circumstantial Sublimation and Steven Soderbergh’s Ordinary Objects,” Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (July 2017): 1-18.


5 Ibid., 70.

6 Ibid., 71, emphasis added.

7 Though space does not allow for a discussion of Teresa Brennan’s work, it is worth acknowledging how central Brennan is to the development of this essay’s argument. Throughout her career, Brennan regularly returned to both Freud and Lacan, as well as other psychoanalytic thinkers, calling for an account of subjectivity more sensitive to the economic give-and-take of desire, whether this involves the introjection of others’ affects, at the individual level, or the projection of desire in the material world, particularly at the collective level of global capitalism. See especially Teresa Brennan,

8 For a more complete discussion, and critique, of subjective destitution, especially as it has been developed in the psychoanalytic writings of Slavoj Žižek and Lee Edelman, see Ruti, The Singularity of Being, 63-78.


10 Ibid., 17.

11 No stranger to speculation, Freud engages his own time machine later in the same text as he wonders what might occur if we could reverse time and subtract the cultural fantasies imposed on children before they even have a chance to explore the world for themselves. What new kind of human being might emerge as a consequence? Absent the moralistic laws of religion, not to mention the broader, enculturated hang-ups about sexuality, might a new being, one unlike any we have ever seen before, emerge as a consequence? Though Freud toys with the idea that science could function as a universal means for enframing the world, he similarly supposes that one fantasy (religion) will likely to be replaced by another; there may be no living without illusions of some sort or another. In hoping for a subject, let alone an entire society, who could return to childlike innocence, unencumbered by repressive forces, Freud admits to “chasing an illusion” of his own. Ibid., 48.


14 Ruti, 114.

15 Most relevant to this essay, David Wittenberg has offered an incisive psychoanalytic interpretation of Back to the Future (Dir. Robert Zemeckis 1984). Though Wittenberg remains similarly invested in a formal account of the film, particularly the films reflexive portrayal of subjective-spectatorial vision, his reading, though similar in many respects to Penley’s essay on time-travel, develops the relation between the structure of cinema, on the one hand, and the structure of subjectivity, significantly further. David Wittenberg, Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narration (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 178-203.


18 Freud elsewhere describes the occasional capacity of a subject to change their
environment to better suit the particularity of their desire in a manner relevant to
my argument in this essay: “It is also possible to intervene in the external world by
changing it, and to establish in it intentionally the conditions which make satisfaction
possible. This activity then becomes the ego’s highest function.” Though he does not
use the term sublimation in this passage, the language nevertheless seems to invoke
the concept. Sigmund Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an


20 Ruti, 131.

21 The emphasis on the aesthetic object’s (seeming) existence outside of time speaks
directly to Lacan’s stated intervention in ethical philosophy throughout the seminar:
first, his critique of moral philosophies that presume the possibility of a normative
progression from childhood to adulthood, and, second, his qualification of object
relations theories developed by Melanie Klein and her followers, which tend to
conceive of the maternal object in strictly imaginary terms, failing to account for the
intersubjective tensions and confusions involved even in a child’s earliest
relationships. The collection of match boxes, then, provides a perfect illustration for
Lacan’s idea that sublimation “raises an ordinary object to the dignity of the Thing,”
and that such an act necessarily resists interpretation or normative judgement—even
for the person engaged in its production. A properly ethical act, then, explains
nothing to the observer of the subject’s past, present, or future, nor does it provide
the observer with anything that could be generalized into a “superior law” applicable

22 Kelly Oliver, The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Theory of
Oppression (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).


24 Though my interest in this essay is to reconsider typical psychoanalytic approaches
to language and affect in cinema, there would certainly be good reason to bring
Heidegger’s account of language into this discussion as well. As Mark Wrathall has
argued, Heidegger’s account of language includes a similar appreciation for the
experiential value of language, separate from matters of comprehensive
understanding. Or, to put it differently, a comprehensive understanding requires an
experiential background. As Wrathal puts it,

What is crucial to Heidegger’s account is not the speaker’s ability or inability to determine the
extension of her terms, or even to see what is entailed by her utterances. Rather, Heidegger sees
both these kinds of failings on the speaker’s part as derived from her lack of experience with
the objects, and the situations in which the objects are typically found. That lack of experience,
and the corresponding lack of sensibility that such experience fosters, is the real source of idle
conversation.

Mari Ruti’s recent and ongoing interventions in psychoanalytic theory have informed many features of my argument here. In addition to other citations of her work above, a passage from her forthcoming book, *Distillations*, is worth quoting at length for how it resonates with my reading of *Arrival*: “In a recent classroom discussion, after one student—understandably frustrated by the bleakness for the Lacanian vision—asked by Lacan’s ontology of constitutive lack is a valid way to characterize subjectivity, I explained the matter as follows: when, during a run in a beautiful area of Cap Cod, I turn a corner and suddenly the ocean opens in front of me, turquoise and turbulent, feel exhilarated but also sad because I know that I will not always be around to witness this stunning scene; I feel a sting of loss even as I feel pure joy.” Mari Ruti, *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (New York: Bloomsbury, Forthcoming), 100.