Popular films sometimes feature female characters who confront the limitations of individual subjectivity in Western cultures. This thesis reviews and synthesizes a few of the competing interpretations of Lacanian psychoanalysis and reinterprets some of his work by noting its overlap with the nondualistic metaphysical traditions that he refers to in it. These reinterpretations provide a way to understand both Lacan and these popular films more clearly and completely. The thesis concludes with an application of this theoretical synthesis to two popular films: Thelma & Louise and The Piano. Both films depict female characters struggling with the limitations of individual subjectivity, the feeling of lack, and the relationship of these issues to gender in their cultures. Ultimately, The Piano more successfully conveys the situation of a symbol-using human who identifies as a woman, though neither film can yet portray a happy ending for such a person.
THEMES OF AWAKENING IN MAINSTREAM FILMS:
FEMALE SUBJECTS AND THE LACANIAN SYMBOLIC

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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction................................................................................1
Chapter 2: Useful Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory..................................14
Chapter 3: Toward an Explicitly Nondualistic Lacanian Theory ..............21
Chapter 4: Nondualistic Lacanian Theory Applied ...................................37
Appendix: Film Synopses..........................................................................57
Works Cited ...............................................................................................58
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Any inaccuracies or overenthusiastic statements in this thesis are, of course, the author’s responsibility alone.
“What is essential here is the presence of the spirit of dialogue, which is in short, the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of common meaning.”
—David Bohm, *Science, Order, and Creativity*

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Films produced and distributed by major Hollywood studios generally present characters with stable identities that change gradually and in response to outside forces. In so doing, these films reinforce Western viewers’ hegemonic ontology of a separate, stable self. However, some of these films explore these issues in a way that offers viewers a chance to question their assumptions about their own subjectivity. A few even do so in a way that centralizes female subjectivity and all of the cultural and historical particularities that go along with it. Two films that initially brought my attention to these possibilities in popular narrative cinema1 are *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *The Piano* (1993).

Lacanian psychoanalysis, long used in feminist film theory, is one system that can provide a framework for interpreting these films. There already exists quite a body of critical work on these films, some of which uses one or another strand of psychoanalytic theory. My own textual analyses of these films have initiated a rereading of Lacan that is explicitly nondualistic, challenging hegemonic Western ideas of the individual subject. The focus of this thesis, then, is on the interplay between these films as texts and the bodies of psychoanalytic and nondualistic theories. I make no claims about the intentions of the films’ creators, nor about the conscious interpretations of the multitude of viewers. However, all viewers have underlying “theories” or assumptions about subjectivity that they draw upon to make sense of a narrative. *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano* are two films that are useful to analyze for this study because they are difficult to understand and interpret through hegemonic Western ontology, and thus they offer viewers the opportunity to re-evaluate and shift their “common-sense” assumptions about subjectivity, relations between subjects, and the nature of reality in general.2

This thesis will draw on interpretations of Lacan not widely applied in feminist film theory in the past in order to expose the ways in which both Lacanian theory and some mainstream American films can be interpreted as resting upon assumptions that are more in line with Eastern metaphysics—specifically ontologies, ways of thinking about existence—than their Western counterparts. It is Western European philosophy and

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1 Quite popular, in fact. These two films have had quite a bit of cultural impact, both engendering public discussion and critical acclaim (*Thelma & Louise* more of the former and *The Piano* more of the latter). Neither had tremendous box-office revenue ($40-45 million, according to boxofficemojo.com), but real viewership is difficult to ascertain because of VHS/DVD rentals and television screenings. Both generated a large number of scholarly articles and book chapters (for *The Piano*, an edited volume) and more than the usual share of popular press articles (for *Thelma & Louise*, the cover of *Time*). They both were (and still are, on DVD and VHS) marketed as belonging to familiar genres, the screwball comedy/buddy adventure and the romance, garnering a wider audience than would films publicized as avant garde or explicitly “about” nonhegemonic female subjectivity.

2 Whether or not this has happened already is not a part of my investigation here; my hope is that this thesis and similar critical interventions can draw attention to the alternative metaphysics that films like these—and more recent examples—offer viewers.
Judeo-Christian religion that have tended to dominate Westerners’ everyday, commonsense understandings of the world and its inhabitants (and therefore, even more importantly, how its inhabitants should act toward one another). This thesis suggests that Lacanian psychological theories can be interpreted as resting upon distinctly non-Western assumptions about reality and existence, and so too can some films.

Many interpretations of Freud and Lacan take as a given that full entry into and participation in the symbolic order is the goal for any character (and any person’s psychoanalytic treatment). These interpretations, in line with our hegemonic Western ideas of the subject, emphasize individuation (particularly separation from the mother, who is often demonized in Western films for being overbearing or enveloping) and an ontology in which the subject is separate from all other living beings. Much of Buddhist and Upanishadic ontology, on the other hand, posits that supposedly “individual” subjects are actually merged; the separation is an illusion that humans constantly attempt to maintain (see, for example, The Upanishads 1987: 188-190; Dhammapada 1995: 97). This thesis will not argue that Lacan or the writers and directors of the analyzed films have intentionally based their texts on Buddhist or Upanishadic metaphysics, as it does not seek to historically document the intentions or source materials of Lacan nor those of the filmmakers. It, instead, recuperates Lacanian theory by interpreting it through the lens of these Eastern metaphysics, and then applies this hybrid theory to specific films to expand their currently circulated interpretations.3

To read these films as many critics do, with traditional Lacanian film theory, or as many viewers do, with hegemonic Western metaphysics, requires ignoring and denying much of the films. Regardless of whether the readings I propose are considered within the films’ polysemantic structures or against the grain and oppositional, I think it important to contribute to the meanings circulating around them and around other popular films because these films shed light on new ways that individual Western subjects can think about themselves. Alternative ontologies can be seen in films, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, in other threads of poststructuralist thought, including feminist and queer poststructuralism, and far earlier in Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhist and Upanishadic texts4.

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3 I am aware of recent academic controversies surrounding the use of psychoanalysis to interpret Hindu gods in the works of scholars such as Paul Courtright, Jeffrey Kripal, and Wendy Doniger (see, for example, Amy Braverman 2004), and of course the concerns raised by Edward Said (1978). To be clear, I am not attempting to modify, revise, or reinterpret Eastern philosophy, religion, or history through a Western lens, nor to reify the division between the two. Instead, I am looking for ways in which nondualistic metaphysics, which is set forth much earlier and more frequently in Asian oral and written texts than in European ones, can help explain the unadmitted underpinnings of poststructuralist work like Lacan’s. I am also exploring the ways that nondualistic metaphysics is entering popular films, such as The Piano, which tend to be financed and created by people raised with a primarily Eurocentric education and Judeo-Christian background, in which nondualism is not the dominant view of reality.

4 Beyond the scope of this thesis, but fascinating in itself, are the other influential fields that prime Westerners today for nondualistic metaphysics, such as ecology and quantum physics. The educational and popular dissemination of these fields’ ideas provides many people today with contact with the idea that things usually seen as distinct and discrete are, in fact, not separate if viewed through the frameworks of these fields.
Research Questions

This thesis asks questions that are both theoretical, looking directly at Lacan’s work and some of his students’ work and reinterpretating it, and also applied, analyzing specific films using this reinterpretation. First, on a theoretical level, I wish to ask several questions: How does Lacanian psychoanalysis deal with the question of female subjectivity? At what point do processes of female subjectivity and male subjectivity part ways? How does Lacanian theory view an effort to exist outside the symbolic order? Is it possible, and does Lacanian theory value this effort? Is it possible without physical death and/or madness? What relationship do Lacan’s ideas have with Buddhist and Upanishadic concepts of the subject?

On the applied level, can Lacanian psychoanalysis fully account for the narratives in films about women’s struggles with subjectivity? In particular, can it account for a reading of Thelma & Louise and The Piano that sees their protagonists as seeking an existence beyond that of a subject in a patriarchal symbolic order? How are female characters who attempt to move outside or beyond patriarchal control represented in mainstream film? How do these characters and narratives exemplify and/or show the limitations of psychoanalytic theories used in film criticism? What precipitates their awakening, their ability to come to a more accurate, fuller awareness of the nature of reality? What characterizes the awakening and/or the attempt? How do they do it? How do the characters fare in the endings of the film narratives? My analysis of these two films is motivated by a set of questions that could be applied to other films, as well.

Furthermore, do films like Thelma & Louise and The Piano, along with the public and private discussions of their meanings, help the existing social order thrive, or do they encourage people to encode and decode signs at the edges of their meanings, pushing us further beyond what we already know? When the meanings of these films become the center of public discussion, do they become a challenge to hegemonic ideas of subjecthood and gender relations?

These two films can reveal for the viewer a major problem with an overwhelming number of stories in our culture. These are stories about men attempting to fill a lack in women. However, if we look closely, we see that this is a lack that the men themselves have created. This is the same story that Lacan tells about the formation of the subject. Each of us enters the symbolic order, which attempts to fill the very lack that it creates. For example, The Piano and Thelma & Louise make it clearer than most mainstream films that lack is created by the phallus itself (the signifier, in a patriarchal symbolic order, of the symbolic order), which then attempts to replace what has been taken away. Throughout the films, patriarchal, symbolic-order elements—violence (in the form of guns) and romantic love (in the form of men)—try to stand in for something the symbolic order itself has taken away.

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5 Note that the marketing of the films highlights these elements of violence and romance. Thelma & Louise was marketed as a buddy adventure film and the DVD and VHS covers continue to do so, using images of the road and an L.A. Daily News blurb that says, “A high-energy, high-octane joy ride!” The Piano’s DVD and VHS covers market the film as a romance by showing Ada and Baines in a smiling embrace and featuring a blurb from Roger Ebert: “One of the most enchanting, startlingly original love stories ever filmed.”
This description is greatly simplified for the purposes of introducing my analyses: the women, as subjects, do indeed feel some lack already as the film begins, just as the child in Lacan’s theory already feels some lack in the Imaginary order because of the “specular I,” as will be explained in the next section. However, the symbolic order intensifies this lack, and the male characters project their own lack onto the women and the child even as they claim to be ameliorating it. More importantly, the men in these films and the symbolic order itself disavow any lack inherent in themselves. This interpretation of Lacanian processes will be developed in more depth in Chapter 2.

**Literature Review**

Before this thesis begins to answer these questions in a new way, I will review basic Lacanian theories of subjectivity and previous applications of Freud and Lacan to feminist film analyses. Lacan’s mirror stage and Oedipal stage offer one way to explain the development of the subject that differs from Freud’s biology-based explanations. Lacan hypothesizes that upon birth, a child does not differentiate between herself and her mother, nor between herself and any other thing. As the mirror stage begins, the child identifies with her mirror image (the imago), which is more whole and more complete than her own sensory experience of her body. She begins to develop an ego through this imago, even before language acquisition or the development of a sense of separation from others (Lacan 2002: 4). She begins to conceive of her own body as unified, but when she sees the mother, the image, or the child, she wants to again merge with it and identify with it completely in a kind of dual unity. This is the order of the Imaginary. In this order, the “specular I” is formed (well before the “social I” is formed and the symbolic order is entered). As this sense of separation from other things continues, eventually the child becomes aware of the possibility of absence. She begins to recognize that sometimes the mother (and other “things”) are missing.

The mirror is a central feature in this stage of Lacan’s theory as the child develops the imago, whose apparent coherence is a myth. The child “assumes” the image (Lacan 2002: 4)—she uses visual inferences to come to the idea that the image is her, and she takes it on (assumes it) as an identity. The child who identifies with her mirror image is mis-identifying, and this misrecognition splits the child’s identity in two—on the one side, there are the fragmentary sensory experiences the child has of her own body and the world around it; on the other side, there is this smooth, coherent “ideal-I” in the mirror, “the model and basis” for her future identifications (Rose 1982: 30). As Rose notes, Lacan includes more than just mirrors in this process, and more than just sight as a sensory basis for it. Any object that “reflects” takes part in this process, whether it reflects sight, sound, or touch (ibid.). Already, then, the child is split by her sense of I, since the imago is an imaginary ideal-I that is more stable and more able than the child, who feels fragmented and turbulent. The imago seems total, complete, and permanent,

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6 Both Freud and Lacan develop their ideas of the subject based on the male child, and then attempt to account for the female child’s sense of subjecthood and sexuality afterward, generally considering it to be much more complicated and fraught with difficulty than that of the male. In this paper, I examine films that focus on women and consider the use of psychoanalytic theory for analysis and criticism of these films, and thus I refer primarily to female subjects, particularly when the theories could refer to either. My reasons for eliminating separate, gendered descriptions of these early stages will be made explicit in Chapter 2.
but it is also “alienating” (Lacan 2002: 6), because the child (and later, the adult) will never fully be it, or be as stable and powerful as it is, yet will always try and fail. Already, a sense of lack arises: I am not enough. I (here, inside) am not as much as I (there, in the reflection) am.

The mirror stage ends with the Oedipal stage, when a third element intervenes in the Imaginary dual unity of child/mother or child/image. This third element is most often conceptualized as the name-of-the-father, who represents the symbolic order. The term “name-of-the-father” emphasizes the fact that this position need not be filled by a biological father; it can be filled by any authority figure. The child, who formerly felt unified with the image and the mother (in fact, with anything that might be called “other,” but most often with the mother, leading to the Lacanian shorthand “(m)other”), now fully recognizes a gap between herself and these others, and sees them to be separate from her. Her “social I” is formed. This separation, furthered by the intervention of this authority figure who represents the symbolic order (which can be shorthanded as capitalized “Other”) allows—and, in a way, requires—the child to take up a place in the symbolic order and learn language. The child throws in her lot with the symbolic in hope of being able to regain those lost (and potentially lose-able) objects. (The act of signification itself can be called “Other,” as it is used in the attempt to return the object—primarily the (m)other—to the subject, and the authority figure embodies this act of signification.) The symbolic order, in the form of language, law, and social rules, attempts to assuage the feeling of lack created by the very separation it intensifies and requires.

All symbolic language acquired and used by the child will refer to Imaginary concepts, not to Real experience, for, as Rose notes, the mirror stage provides “the moment when the subject is located in an order outside itself to which it will henceforth refer” when using language (1982: 31). Language, then, is quite far removed from actual experience—it only refers to the images and concepts we develop at the level of the Imaginary. Grosz agrees that language does not refer to the Real and has no place in it (1990: 99). The Real, as a theorized Lacanian order or register, is experienced directly by the pre-symbolic and pre-imaginary infant, whose experience is of lacking nothing (thus having no need for symbols or language) and of not being a subject separate from others. The role of the Real beyond this initial stage, however, is interpreted in disparate ways by Lacanian-influenced writers, probably more so than the functions of the other registers. More specific interpretations of Lacan’s development of the subject will be discussed in detail later, after reviewing how basic concepts from psychoanalysis have been applied in film theory.

Feminist film theory has been appropriating Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for the past three decades. In Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” article ([1975] 1999), she uses psychoanalysis to explain how classical Hollywood cinema creates the position of the male spectator. Mulvey appropriates the theories of psychoanalysis because she sees that they can be useful in describing the entire film apparatus: the production system, the resulting texts, and the way in which the spectator’s options are circumscribed by the text (perhaps, even, how the spectator as subject is created by those texts). Mulvey sees psychoanalysis to be a theoretical framework that has been used to justify and maintain patriarchal structures, so she uses it to expose these structures, in the hope that once they are clearly seen, alternatives can be created.
In seeking to explain the allure of films and the limits they impose on any feminist attempt to enjoy them or create others like them, Mulvey delineates two kinds of pleasures according to a Freudian dichotomy of scopophilia and narcissism. Through narcissism, the spectator identifies with the active subject position: the male protagonist. This identification is with an ideal ego, one that actually has more power and more mastery than the spectator does. Through scopophilia, the spectator takes pleasure in looking at others as objects, and Mulvey brings attention to the positioning of passive females as “objects” in the film. This scopophilic pleasure may be voyeuristic, one that enjoys investigating, demystifying, ascertaining guilt, and then punishing or saving a female, or it may be fetishistic, focusing on a part of the female as a phallic substitute. These female objects, the women on screen, have less power and mastery than the spectator; following Freudian terminology, they are castrated, and it is this fear of castration that compels the spectator to objectify them and assuage his fears. If this is done voyeuristically, then the spectator seeks out a reason—some justification—for why they are castrated and takes pleasure in this investigation and judgment. If it is done fetishistically, then the spectator disavows their castration by figuring them, or some part of them, as a phallus. (Unfortunately, being the phallus is not the same thing as having the phallus.)

Mulvey’s analysis emphasizes the way in which a classical Hollywood film text positions the spectator either to identify with the male protagonist (and be able to fit into the configuration described above, taking pleasure in a position of power) or to identify with the women in the film masochistically—that is, taking pleasure in being manipulated as an object. Mulvey’s expressed hope was that feminists would make films that would avoid these kinds of visual pleasure and develop new ways of using film. She later added to these ideas, in her “Afterthoughts” article ([1981] 1999), by making it clear that female spectators do not automatically have to identify masochistically with the female characters: they can identify with the man on screen as “transvestites,” through a trans-sex identification, a process that is familiar to women, according to Freud, because all women start out in a “masculine” position before renouncing the active role to claim femininity.

Mulvey’s interpretations of psychoanalytic concepts rest on the Freudian idea that the development of subjectivity in males and females is significantly different from a young age, and thus it is only women who are coded as castrated in films. She also focuses on films that feature male heroes in classical Hollywood narratives. Mainstream films of the following decades have only slowly changed and certainly do still rest upon visual pleasure, but the avant-garde feminist filmmaking that Mulvey encouraged has, indeed, paved the way for some changes in mainstream films. I will provide interpretations of two of these films that emphasize how we might see them as resting on very different assumptions from the films Mulvey studied in the 1970s.

Mary Ann Doane ([1982] 1999) takes the problem of spectatorship a step further when she claims that not only do women have the option of transvestism to identify with the man on screen, but they also have the option of masquerade, creating a distance between themselves and the women on screen, masquerading as a woman rather than identifying (with an identity that is too close to be symbolic) and being forced into masochism. She describes masquerade as “the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack” (139). She takes
her term from Joan Riviere’s analysis (1929) of a woman who has made an intellectual presentation and then seeks to disguise her “masculine” competencies by displaying a “feminine” mask, flirting with her male colleagues. In Doane’s formulation, this process of retaining a distance from the femininity behind which one masquerades can be used by a character in a film or by a spectator of a film. She provides a description of a female gaze that is neither transvestite nor masochistic. However, note that her concept of masquerade depends upon a Freudian assumption that male and female subject formations are different from the very beginning, and that somehow females never experience lack or loss in the way that males do. This thesis will disagree with this understanding of the formation of the subject and the acquisition of language, and instead explain how both males and females experience lack and split subjectivity, although this plays out differently socially.

Doane is more interested in appreciating existing mainstream films, particularly those that feature women prominently and draw female audiences, than developing a new kind of feminist film. While Mulvey warned that transvestism was only a temporary solution, and not one that could ever offer serious ways to change patriarchy, Doane suggests that masquerade can account for many women’s pleasure and is a significant way to make new meaning from films that are patriarchally produced. Doane’s project would seem a bit closer to that of this thesis, focusing as it does on mainstream films; however, she too chooses to focus exclusively on gender as a determinant for who is portrayed as lacking and punishable in films. This focus is important for the development of feminist film theory, but this thesis seeks to examine other factors and examine, more generally, the basis for subjectivity in the chosen films and the ways in which the characters in the films may be seen as attempting to escape the binds of the gendered processes that both Mulvey and Doane describe.

Teresa de Lauretis (1984) offers a more complicated analysis of the spectator than Mulvey or Doane does. She stresses that as a person watches a film, subject positioning is a process that is fluid and ongoing. She writes that it is not even possible for someone to identify completely with that which is objectified—the process of identifying is active; thus, any attempt to identify with an inactive object will be split. A female spectator engages in a double identification, both with the active protagonist who moves through the narrative and the space of the film and with the passive object, the obstacle in his path, which is so often a human female. She must, to some extent, identify with the subject, because it is this identification that enables the spectator’s gaze at all, the process of identification. And what she identifies with is the image on screen, particularly woman-as-image. Thus, de Lauretis sees this double identification as simultaneous, unlike Mulvey’s oscillating transvestism. De Lauretis’ contributions build upon previous feminist scholarship to provide a more nuanced way to apply psychoanalytic theory to mainstream films.

Carol Clover (1992) takes this a step further to point out, in her study of slasher films, that this cross-gender identification can occur as male spectators identify with active female subjects—the Final Girls. She notes, however, that they are only female physically, since they have many “masculine traits” (e.g., boyish names and interests), and their narrative goal is to castrate the monster killer (another bisexual figure) and appropriate the phallus themselves. Thus the Final Girl successfully negotiates the Oedipal stage (something the killer fails to do), becoming fully a psychological “man” by
the end. However, this recurring character does, Clover asserts, blur gender lines, revealing that both characters and spectators can cross these boundaries. Since these films are mostly made by and for men, they tell us much more about men’s fears and desires than about women’s. Barbara Creed (1993) agrees with this, as her own use of psychoanalysis to analyze horror concentrates on the fear of the monstrous feminine, a concept that sometimes describes the monster itself and sometimes describes the place it dwells. Clover’s and Creed’s work emphasizes the many ways that the projection of lack onto women plays out in our culture, making women something to be feared in many stories, ostensibly because of that lack (in Freudian terms, because of that castration). In Clover’s work in particular, the heroine is seeking full entry into the symbolic via the Oedipal stage. This thesis will instead focus on the effort of female characters to actively seek something other than a life within the symbolic.

Kaja Silverman’s (1988) work uses Lacan in a more recuperative way than the feminist film theorists discussed thus far, most of whom seem to rely more on other branches of Freudian theory than on a close reading of Lacan. This allows her to get away from concepts that rely on biology and focus more on the symbolic level. She argues that film itself, in its effort to pretend to be real, constantly confronts the spectator with lack. This happens because, of course, film is a symbolic system, a language, and as such, every part of it—each signer—has meaning through its difference from the other signifiers. Within this system, there is no place for referents, no place for the Real. Classical films try so hard to seem realistic, to make the spectator forget that they’re watching a film, and yet the spectator is repeatedly confronted with the reminder of this loss, of a time when s/he had access to the Real directly, or access to the intermediary Imaginary time when s/he saw an ideal ego who was more perfect than s/he felt, and still had access to the fullness and plenitude of the mother (27). Spectators, confronted with this loss, this lack, wish to put it elsewhere. The spectator does not want to accept that this lack is an intrinsic part of having become a subject, that the subject is created through the very process of losing the sense of oneness with the (m)other, and if the lack were ever “made good,” if the other were ever incorporated again, the subject herself would cease to exist as a separate subject. So, not wanting to confront the lack created by subjecthood, the spectator projects it onto someone/something else. Silverman rightly emphasizes that this is much more of a problem for those who feel more secure and stable as subjects, such as men (e.g., 18, 27, 41).

Silverman sees the woman on screen as the object that comes to represent for the spectator all that is lacking—not only in women, but also in men and in film itself. She notes that this placement of the lack of women is “naturalized,” since it seems to be about sex and biology, but really, it’s about their lack of power, especially symbolic power (31). Women are not as secure in their subject positions, unable to look and unable to speak—that is, unable to move freely in the symbolic and use it—particularly in representations and as signifiers (for example, the many female characters in films who are gazed upon and maneuvered around, rather than doing the gazing and moving). As signifiers, women accumulate further lack; the lack that all subjects have by virtue of being subjects is projected onto them (31-32).

This route seems especially fruitful to me. It is in analyses like Silverman’s that we can begin to see the ways in which more than just sex or gender are involved in spectatorship and subject identification. While many women who identify as white and
heterosexual have a problematic relationship to what they see in mainstream films, so do some men, and this relationship is even further complicated for women whose identities comprise additional markers of “difference” within patriarchy. Silverman’s analysis of spectatorship opens the door to seeing how other groups may have lack projected upon them, as well. She makes it possible to consider how Lacan’s process of subject formation can lead to the projection of lack onto not only women, but also people of color and the working class.

Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2001) analyzes both Hollywood films and historical events using Lacanian theory, and his analyses also take into account how lack is projected onto characters and groups marked not only by gender, but also by race/ethnicity and class. This broader view of Lacan’s mechanisms of subjectivity in film and in individual development will be useful for this thesis’ analysis of *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano*.

However, Silverman’s and Žižek’s uses of Lacan are not the only way that his work may be understood and applied. Lacan’s theories as widely understood have certain limitations for feminist film analysis. The most obvious is that while Lacan describes the objectification and subjection of women in the symbolic order, he offers no way out of it. He, in effect, substitutes language for Freud’s biology, but often writes as though language were just as immutable as biology. Rose notes that although he appears to be critical of the order he describes in his early work, he is actually quite “complicit” with it (1982: 45). She sees his later work as moving away from this complicity, though she notes that he remains “implicated” in it (56).

This thesis acknowledges that much of Lacan’s work does seem pessimistic about any alternatives or further developments in human subjectivity, but it will also examine some of his ambiguous statements that suggest there may be something beyond the split subject of the symbolic. Julia Kristeva’s (2002) work is helpful in this effort, as she tends to focus more on that which applies pressure to the symbolic—her term for this is the *semiotic*—and can be seen bursting forth in some forms of experience. Her terminology, however, forms its own framework, no longer adhering to Lacan’s as directly as Silverman’s and Žižek’s do.

Kristeva (2002) thinks that the semiotic—the pressure of the non-symbolic—can be felt or heard most clearly when it breaks through the symbolic in the poetry and wordplay of avant-garde literature, in part because of its marginalization. Kristeva’s semiotic encompasses Lacan’s Real and Imaginary orders, but is not temporally restricted to them. The semiotic element is that which discharges bodily “drives” in nonlinguistic ways—that is, not through syntactical or grammatical formulations, but through rhythm, tones, and disruptions in speech (Kristeva 2002: 32-36)—even once the subject is in the Lacanian symbolic order.

Kristeva’s use of the term *symbolic* is firmly associated with the patriarchal, masculine law of the father, as it is in Lacan. Elizabeth Grosz interprets Kristeva’s semiotic as a “feminine and maternally structured space,” as do other critics (1990: 160). However, Toril Moi rebuts this interpretation, citing Kristeva theorizing the semiotic as neither masculine nor feminine. The mother, with whom the child identifies in the semiotic, is not distinguished as feminine or masculine until the child enters the symbolic (Moi 2002: 164-165), so any gendering of the semiotic is retrospective. This use of *symbolic* follows Lacan’s formulation of it, although sometimes in using the term Kristeva is talking about strictly symbolic phenomena (those associated with stasis,
identity, logic, grammar) and sometimes she is talking about the symbolic order as a whole, which in her theory encompasses not just symbolic phenomena but also semiotic (those associated with rejection, resistance, pulsation) (Oliver 1993: 39).

Although the semiotic is marginalized and disavowed by the symbolic, in Kristeva’s theory these two are simultaneous and interdependent, and the semiotic is always exerting pressure on the symbolic (Kristeva 2002: 34, 38). This is a sense that is lost in Lacan, whose terms (Real, Imaginary, Symbolic) seem more like linear stages, each replacing the next. However, Lacan’s jouissance consists of drives—Trieb [drive], dérive [drift], pulsion, or urge, as Lacan glosses the term (2002: 290)—that are not resolved by achieving their aim. As such, it seems a similar concept to Kristeva’s semiotic. Kristeva posits three areas where the semiotic pulses through the symbolic most insistently: madness, poetry, and divine ecstasy. A fourth, identified by Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, is death. This thesis will examine which routes popular films take when dealing specifically with marginalized subjects and their efforts to transform or awaken.

Kelly Oliver’s interpretation of Kristeva claims that an individual who relies on the symbolic alone is reduced to a “rigid unified subject position,” while one who refuses the symbolic altogether is left with psychosis (1993: 13). She asserts that identity and alterity must coexist in each of us, for without the alterity of the semiotic—the sense of difference, of “the other within”—there is complete stasis, and without identity—the sense of self, of subjecthoud—there is chaos. This chaos means “no society, no human life, no love” (12). Yet perhaps the symbolic order requires one to think that it is the building of a separate self that enables life and love, when really that is not a necessary and sufficient condition. What if one does not refuse the symbolic, and its separate selfhood, but more or less exceeds it, surpasses it? Kristeva’s contributions attempt to describe how that excess might be approached and cultivated, and thus take psychoanalytic theory further, clearing the hurdles that some of Lacan’s writing and speaking has placed in the way of change.

Lacan often remains a bit more implicated in the patriarchal order than the process of expressing oneself through the symbolic requires. When he focuses in his later work on “the Woman” as “the subject supposed to know,” the guarantor of knowledge and a category of object, (1982: 137-161) Lacan gets to de-emphasize the fact that it is, in fact, man, the only fully subjectified “subject” within his own theory, who can never know—even though some supporters say this is his entire point. His rhetorical strategy and the “topic” (Woman) he uses to illustrate the point serve to do the very thing he seems to want to point out to the reader: we blame “Woman,” make “Woman” the problem, when really everyone who uses language has these problems. Silverman makes clear that lack is a condition of all subjects. Yet on the face of it, Lacan continues to focus on “Woman” as the problem, rather than focusing on women and men both having a problem that is continually blamed on women, making their predicament even worse than men’s.

In emphasizing femininity as a construction, Lacan often de-emphasizes masculinity as a construction. The feminist reader of Lacan must seek that idea out and

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7 This thesis will capitalize Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic only when necessary to make it clear that the reference is to the Lacanian order. Kristeva’s terms semiotic and symbolic will remain uncapitalized, since they refer to elements that Kristeva claims can appear in any of the orders (when she is persuaded to compare her own terminology to Lacan’s, e.g., as cited in an interview in Oliver 1993: 38-9).
keep it in the forefront of her mind in order to consider his work productive and not simply descriptive and complicit with the patriarchal symbolic order. My interpretations of Lacan’s theories above have stayed abstract (removed from his more clinical writings and lectures) and have relied upon other feminist Lacanians’ existing interpretations in order to propose that they be useful for a feminist theory of subjectivity.

Interpretations of Lacanian psychoanalysis like these can be used productively today in feminist film theory on two fronts. The first has certainly begun: to make the symbolic system (film being a part of that system) less patriarchal and hierarchical. Why always make the same people—women, people of color, the working class, etc.—the bearers of lack? Some films have opened up more possibilities for who can be the active, gazing, speaking subject of a film and who is looked at, done to, and spoken for in a film. Some mainstream films have also become less classical, less “invisible” in their form, making the spectator aware of the film’s form, taking him or her outside of the imaginary world of fullness that classical form tries to sustain. However, this can only take us so far. The Lacanian symbolic system is entered precisely at the moment that one begins to see others as separate from oneself, engendering a sense of loss, creating demands and desires, and necessitating the use of language in an attempt to fulfill those demands and desires. We must begin to confront this loss directly, and begin to conceive of movement beyond the subject position that the symbolic order offers. This movement, I believe, does not have to be a regression to an imaginary, pre-Oedipal period. It remains to be seen, however, whether film, a symbolic system, can help us with this movement. This thesis explores the capacity of film to represent or encourage this movement—that-is-not-regression via both Lacanian and nondualistic philosophies.

Not many published works connect these two traditions. There is currently much written about Jungian analysis and Buddhist meditation, Freudian psychoanalysis and Buddhist meditation, and various combinations of Jung, Freud, yoga, and meditation (for example, Harvey Aronson 2004; Mark Epstein 1995, 1998, 2001; Christopher J. Mruk 2003; Jeremy Safran 2003). Yet these books and articles deal with the intersections of applied, clinical Western psychotherapies and Eastern meditative practices, and they mention Lacan not at all or briefly in passing. There are three works that bear the closest relation to this thesis, addressing the relationship between theoretical psychoanalysis and nondualistic philosophies.

In one, Ashmita Khasnabish (2003) delves into the intersections of Western psychoanalytic theories for textual analysis and Eastern philosophy. Her focus, however, is on Irigaray’s theories and their relevance to Hindu mythology and metaphor—specifically that of Kali, Radha and Krishna—and the analysis of literature—that of James Joyce, Clarice Lispector, Rabindranath Tagore, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Khasnabish’s project is parallel to that of this thesis, but it focuses on Irigaray’s work and literature instead of Lacan’s work and film. She seeks to show that Irigaray’s use of the term jouissance is the same as the Sanskrit term ananda (bliss, joy, ecstasy) as it is described and approached in Hindu mythology and Indian philosophy. She chooses to work with Luce Irigaray’s concept of jouissance, which emphasizes sexual difference, rather than Lacan’s, so that she can develop the implications of jouissance in the sexual union of the figures of Radha and Krishna (23-25). She sees Irigaray as being much more open to dealing with the imaginary and the body, yet also more able to situate women in the symbolic order and ascribe consciousness to them, than Lacan (45-47).
Certainly Lacan’s works do not deal thoroughly with the body, although in his remarks about mystics he leaves room for its potential. However, this thesis takes pains to show that Lacan, and a few of his adherents, already admit that neither men nor women are fully conscious and fulfilled within the symbolic. For this and other reasons, this thesis focuses on Lacan’s texts, not Irigaray’s. Irigaray emphasizes sexual difference to an extent that I find unproductive, insisting on it even when she finds no clear differences at all, and to some extent denying that women may feel some of the same split subjectivity that men do. Because Khasnabish is focusing on Irigaray’s development of sexual difference, the transformational relationship of Radha and Krishna, and literature, her arguments run a parallel track to those of this thesis rather than intersecting with them. There is another important difference: Khasnabish oscillates between interpreting Hindu mythology through the lens of Irigaray, and understanding Irigaray through Hindu mythology. However, this thesis stays steadily positioned to interpret Lacan through the lens of nondualist metaphysics, not vice versa.

In another recent text, Raul Moncayo (1998), working within the Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis in Berkeley, interprets Lacan as being much more accepting of “non-theistic” religious and spiritual experience than Freud, and he shows how Lacanian concepts can be correlated to Zen Buddhist concepts. Moncayo explores Lacan’s terminology—particularly the realms of the Real and Symbolic—to explain how Lacan’s theories make room for nonsymbolic experiences. His article seems to be geared toward clinical analysis; he includes no textual analysis of film or literature. However, his is the one article by an analyst that adheres to Lacanian terms and attempts to explain their significance for nondualistic possibilities—a central element of this thesis, as well.

In the third, Anne C. Klein (1994) asserts that Buddhist philosophy and practice can ease the tension in feminist (and other) discussions that polarize essentialism and postmodernism. She sees similar discussions taking place in Buddhist texts as a result of the practices of mindfulness, yet these discussions include both the ephemeral, fragmented constructedness of all experience and also the constant, underlying sense of coherent presence, without creating a dichotomy between these two. This is another project that parallels this thesis’s approach to Lacan by using nondualistic philosophy and practices to make better sense of Western poststructuralist theory. I have found, in Klein’s work, the very ideas that struck me as so obvious when I read Lacan, Foucault, and Butler, as well as feminists like Denise Riley, after having begun the practice of yoga: these writers’ work is far more understandable if the reader has a knowledge of nondualistic metaphysics, and their work is far less pessimistic if the reader has a nonsymbolic practice—something that takes one away, briefly but regularly, from language and discursive thinking. This thesis seeks to show how poststructuralist theory like Lacan’s can be seen as leaving space for nonsymbolic experience, and how mainstream films like The Piano can sometimes do the same.

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8 Admittedly, these interpretations of Lacan, developed in Chapter 3, rest upon reading his work, not interacting with him in person. Even more importantly, these interpretations take place long after the work of Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, Silverman, Žižek, and many others have reacted to Lacan’s ideas, responded to them, and shaped how Lacan and others have revised and elaborated upon them. Their dismissal of Lacan as being supportive of the patriarchal symbolic order and their development of alternative theories is probably a central factor in my ability to re-interpret his written work as allowing room for and actually supporting alternatives. That is, it is in part because of the success of these critics that I can return to Lacan and appropriate some of his work in yet another way.
Scope and Methodology

This study will examine two films, *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano*, developing a close textual analysis of each film, paying particular attention to their shared theme of women trying to move outside or beyond the symbolic control of the men who surround them. Neither of these films is necessarily read as “feminist,” yet each can be interpreted in a way that sheds light on the predicament of women (and men) on film, and perhaps off film, as well.

The creators, the viewers, and the characters all use symbolic means to mount and to represent a struggle with the symbolic order. Although the processes of production and consumption are of interest, this thesis will focus on a textual analysis that examines the struggles of the characters within the filmic text, seeking to participate in public discussion of these texts and influence the creation and viewing of future films.

Given that a work of art (and commerce) will have many possible readings, it is the approach chosen by the analyst or critic that will guide her interpretations. The two specific analyses in this paper will be used to explore the limitations of psychoanalytic theory for a feminist approach to film, particularly films that involve themes of awakening in female subjects. Certain strains of psychoanalytic approaches have been used already to analyze each of these films, yet those analyses tend to assume either that the symbolic is an order that female characters seek to enter fully (and would be lucky to succeed in doing so) or that the symbolic is inescapable (and efforts to do so are a waste of time). My own analyses suggest otherwise, and so they are a fresh perspective upon these films, but also a reworking of psychoanalytic theory.

This thesis will primarily use Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, leaving aside other French theorists such as Irigaray and Cixous, as well as American and British writers who interpret Freud differently. It will rely upon a hybrid interpretation of Lacan that draws upon Grosz, Rose, Silverman, Kristeva, and Žižek, departing from some of the usual applications of Lacan in film studies. I array and synthesize these interpretations of Lacan’s work in Chapter 2 in order to lay the groundwork for the connections this thesis makes between Lacan and nondualistic metaphysics. In Chapter 3, I turn to a close reading of relevant sections of Lacan’s major works to discuss the references and parallels to Eastern ontology therein that suggest that a patriarchal symbolic and split subjectivity is not inevitable. Chapter 4 presents the analyses of two films, *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano*, that can be more fully understood through the lens of this nondualistic Lacanian analysis. These analyses are examples of how critics and viewers might understand an increasing number of mainstream films today that explicitly draw on or unwittingly tap into nondualistic perspectives of reality and subjectivity that were first written down thousands of years ago.

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*While we could avoid the terms of psychoanalysis by simply calling this thing with which these characters struggle “patriarchy,” these films and much of the criticism of them are so influenced by psychoanalytic theories that this thesis will continue to explore the application of these theories and their limitations for a feminist project. In addition, Chapter 2 will demonstrate how patriarchy may, in fact, be viewed as separate from the symbolic order within a nondualistic Lacanian framework.*
“A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.”

—attributed to Albert Einstein in Howard Eves’ *Mathematical Circles* Adieu

**Chapter 2: Useful Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory**

I interpret Lacan’s theory of subject formation as one that begins in the same way for every human, regardless of its particular endocrine system or genitals. It is only in dealing with the effects of entering the symbolic that subjects begin to load sex and gender with all of the properties that play out in our lives and on film. Several existing interpretations of Lacan support this perspective.

In the framework of Lacan and his supporters, lack is experienced and dealt with in several ways. Lacan strongly asserts that “there is nothing missing in the real,” particularly in his discussions of the castration complex (1982: 113); the process of human development begins with direct experience of the Real. In the Imaginary, as the sense of a self separate from the (m)other develops, the possibility of the (m)other being absent appears, and then symbolization is an attempt to recover the objects that are perceived as potentially missing. Yet children cry from the moment they are born; what do children want? To answer this question, Lacan distinguishes between needs, demands, and desires, and the following introduction of these three terms follows Elizabeth Grosz’s (1990) clear delineations.

A **need** is our direct experience with that which we biologically need to survive (milk, etc.), which satisfies us (temporarily) once it is gotten. There is no perception of “absence” yet. There is no lack. Direct experience is possible because the child is in the order of the Real. A need produces a child’s cry, which stops when the need is satisfied.

A **demand** is only possible during the mirror stage. Once we realize that it is possible for the (m)oother to be absent, we begin to try to control that which is potentially absent with language. (Freud’s *fort-da* game is an attempt to control something “gone” and “here” through words.) Now needs are superimposed with demands, which are formulated with language. Demands actually have two objects—the thing needed and the relation with the mother from whom it is demanded. The mother is the more important element, yet this request will never be fulfilled satisfactorily, because that would require being “filled by the other” (Grosz 1990: 62) completely, being unified with her, which, according to Lacan, would annihilate the subject. Thus, the subject is always a site of lack. So demand is insatiable—it demands a concrete, particular object like milk (the Real) yet it can only be satisfied by the impossible generality of all-encompassing love.
that unifies the child and mother (the Imaginary). When the particular object is obtained, the subject is always disappointed, because the unconditional love has not been.

A desire “is a fundamental lack, a hole in being that can be satisfied only by one ‘thing’—another(’s) desire. Each self-conscious subject desires the desire of another as its object” (Grosz 1990: 64). Desire wants unconditional absolutes from the (m)other, but it cannot be consciously articulated by the speaking subject, so when a demand is made after the mirror stage, desire is repressed. Yet “desire speaks through demand, operating as its underside or margin” (65). Or as Lacan says, the “absolute” desire for unconditional love “shows through” in demands after the particular need has been split off from it (2002: 258). This repression of desires “marks the child’s entry into the domain of the Other—the domain of law and language, law-as-language. The symbolic is the domain...of the signifier’s primacy over the subject” (Grosz 1990: 66).

I understand this to mean that while the child is still in the Imaginary, her demands include both need (for the thing) and desire (for the mother’s unconditional, identity-melting love). Once she enters the symbolic, desire is repressed and the unconscious forms. Each linguistic demand buries the child’s desire for subject-dissolving love in the unconscious. Despite our everyday, ordinary belief in the subject as an autonomous actor, this theory points out that it is the language and law of the symbolic that solidifies the creation of the subject as it simultaneously splits the subject, creating a part of the subject that desires a merging with others that is not directly acknowledged or expressed.

So, not only do symbolization and language acquisition come about in response to the possibility of absence or lack, but they also simultaneously create and split the subject, and they require constant repetition of that splitting of subject/object (Rose 1982: 31). In practical terms, this is experienced in every sentence uttered, as the speaker is forced to make distinctions between subjects and objects in order to convey an idea through grammatical constructions. What is interesting, from a feminist point of view, is that if the phallus is the primary signifier—the signifier of signification—as Lacan and most theorists after him assert, then what psychoanalysis exposes is that the phallus is lack, absence, splitting—all that which is usually attributed to not having the phallus (the state of femininity) both within and outside of psychoanalysis.10 As Lapsley and Westlake point out, “men have traditionally situated this lack in women rather than in language. In doing so lack is transformed into women’s deficiency” (1992: 35). Lapsley and Westlake discuss films in which women, signifying lack, are violently harmed by men who hope to avoid facing their own divided, lacking subjecthood. However, films like The Piano and Thelma and Louise can be read as exposing the lie of woman as lack, by showing that men, possessing the phallus and standing in for the symbolic order, only attempt to give to women what they have themselves taken away, rather than providing something that women were already lacking.

Most mainstream American films support our everyday attempts to disavow lack and splitting within ourselves. Silverman (1988) analyzes the process of the filmic apparatus as it involves the viewer in a series of ruptures that recreate those experienced in the transition from Real to Imaginary to symbolic (and thus from needs to demands to desires) during the formation of the subject and as it attempts to hide those ruptures and

10 This peek behind the curtain of the phallus is not always acknowledged in popular and in academic discussions of Lacanian theory, though specific authors do emphasize it, such as Kaja Silverman (1988).
displace lack onto others. This happens within the projection of the film itself and also within the narrative of the film. Silverman’s (1988) appropriation of psychoanalytic theory develops the idea that the lack that women represent is one that is projected onto them by male subjects who cannot face their own split subjectivity and feeling of inadequacy. In order to maintain an illusion of wholeness and unity for themselves, the processes of production are hidden, and women on screen are displayed fetishistically or voyeuristically.

In a symbolic where the phallus is the primary signifier, subjects project their sense of lack onto those perceived as being without the phallus: those without power in social structures, who speak at their own peril. Lacan, Silverman, and other psychoanalysts focus on the ways this dynamic plays out between men and women, but lack is not only projected onto women. It is also projected onto people of color and those who have other “marked” characteristics. Gender may be the first characteristic that a child in this historical-cultural period learns to use to disown the feeling of lack, shunting it onto the mother, but soon enough, a child sees others who lack power whom s/he can use to project that feeling of lack. While Žižek (1989, 2001) does not propose a specific process like this, his analyses of films, literature, jokes, and historical events that project lack onto the figure of “the Jew” include ethnicity and religion as characteristics that can carry the weight of lack, in addition to gender.

Thus, in the interpretation of Lacan that I am proposing based on commentators such as Silverman and Žižek, young girls and boys are alike in their initial disavowal of loss and lack. Girls, just as much as boys, seek to project these feelings onto others; however, in our culture(s), they are much more likely to experience interactions with others who already frame them as lacking. Therefore, while girls do not accept the original sense of lack that entry into the symbolic mandates, they do often accept the projected lack by which others symbolize them (reinforced by a social system in which it is the phallus and its mythological association with the biology and social roles of men that is the primary signifier). The problem of separate subjects each projecting lack onto the others can thus be seen as somewhat theoretically separable from the problem of patriarchy.

The phallus does not necessarily have to be the primary signifier, as it is in a patriarchy, for language and other signifying systems to function. Grosz points out that while Lacan’s theory is explanatory for our present culture(s), it should not be taken as a statement of universal processes, particularly as it is posited with the phallus as primary signifier (1990: 188-192). Yet what good would it be to have some other primary signifier, something else that signified power and signification, if it had to be something that still excluded certain people? If the primary signifier could be changed to something other than the phallus, the new one would have to disadvantage some group—unless the process through which we constitute ourselves as subjects also changes. Someone or something will always have to be excluded from the self and seen as separate, as other, in order for language to work as it does today, as an invisible technology that is hardly ever considered in everyday life (and if it is, not usually as a technology that, while helpful, always falls short of describing reality). Changing the primary signifier would simply result in a different set of inequalities and oppressions. Perhaps, in addition to attempting to change the signifier, we can make lack something that can be owned up to by the subject rather than projected onto the (m)other.
Could becoming aware of desire, buried in the adult unconscious, lead to owning one’s own lack rather than projecting it onto someone else? And could this awareness happen on a cultural level as well as an individual level? These questions are addressed not only by Lacanian psychoanalysis but also by Buddhist and Upanishadic philosophy and practice, which can provide a clarifying backdrop, helping a reader understand Lacan’s metaphysics. Within any of these frameworks, are these questions relevant for women?

As Jacqueline Rose points out, Lacan says that woman is subjected to the symbolic order “just as much as the man” while also being “placed as an object” in it (Lacan cited in Rose 1982: 45). Simply put, a woman experiences all of the drawbacks of entering the symbolic (the sense of losing the mother and the objects that once were not separate from her, frustration at attempting to express the inexpressible through language, etc.) and none of the perks, since men do not accept her as having entered the symbolic and become a subject. Since Lacan’s theories focus on language and symbolic systems, “woman” becomes the category of “object” for men, standing in for objet a, the object that is lost forever through symbolization.

In fact, in order to understand Lacan’s statement that “woman does not exist” (1998: 7) in light of the discussion thus far, we can consider the corollary that Žižek so concisely asserts: “a man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks that she does exist” (1989: 75). Žižek’s formulation here emphasizes that a man only thinks that he exists as a separate, autonomous subject; he is, in fact, in the same metaphysical boat as women, by virtue of having taken up language and the symbolic-I and having begun to experience lack. Žižek’s pithy formulation is one that focuses on the problem of the masculine subject.

This interpretation of psychoanalytic theory is in contrast to Joan Riviere’s masquerade. She asserts that a woman is someone with masculine qualities (subjectivity, agency) attiring herself in femininity. This is done explicitly as a cover-up to avoid punishment for absconding with the phallus; that is, a masquerading woman is a man pretending to be a woman. This leads Riviere to the idea that all femininity is masquerade (1929: 39). It’s all a put-on; no distinction can be made between an authentic womanliness and a masquerade. Riviere’s descriptions of women’s expectations of punishment for taking on positions of power, and attempts to prevent retribution via feminine masks, are still relevant today. This focus on the constructedness of femininity is useful, but putting all attention there encourages us to forget that masculinity and autonomous subjectivity are also constructions. It encourages us to believe that an unfragmented subject could underlie each one of us if only we would forgo unnecessary masquerading. In fact, masculinity too is a put-on; more importantly, individual subjectivity itself is a put-on.

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11 This kind of masquerade is still evident to varying degrees in the behavior and appearance of many women in positions of economic, political, intellectual, physical, and other kinds of power. It can also be a useful way to explain the exaggerated femininity of female characters of film and television who display power (e.g., Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Elle Woods, etc.)

12 As previously mentioned, Lacan’s Seminar XX can easily be read as emphasizing the constructedness of femininity, as well, since the focus seems to be on “woman.” However, this thesis is emphasizing those interpretations that build upon the sections of Seminar XX that suggest the constructedness of all subjectivity.
This thesis examines the constructedness of all separate identity and subjectivity, and the problematic nature of any speaking being believing itself to be uncastrated and whole as an individual. For this project, then, Žižek’s clarification of Lacan helps us remember that most men (and most women, including those who masquerade) are subjects who lack, yet pretend that they do not lack—who pretend that their sense of themselves as subjects is whole and unfragmented. The lack that women often do acknowledge (and either accept or resist) is not that which they originally experienced during subject formation, but a later projection from others. It is this process—accepting or resisting projected lack—that is often used to define a woman as “not feminist” or as “feminist.” However, I would suggest that the feminist project is also concerned with both women and men acknowledging and confronting what I will call “original lack,” and not only “projected lack.”

Not all of Lacan’s writing makes it easy to interpret his theories in this way, but some of it does keep this idea in the forefront. For example: “A woman is a symptom…[although] in point of fact a woman is no more an objet a than is a man—as I said earlier, she has her own [objet a], which she busies herself with” (Lacan 1982: 168). Woman is a symptom for the man because she is “the place onto which lack is projected, and through which it is simultaneously disavowed” (Rose 1982: 48). This clearly describes the process of dealing with lack for the male, but since everyone loses the object and experiences lack when acquiring language, women as well as men can project this lack onto something or someone else, the objet a. Some women will do this to other women or to their own bodies. Both men’s and women’s projection of lack onto the “other” can take the form of those who are different for reasons other than sex or gender, such as race, ethnicity, and class.

In fact, the Oedipal stage can be understood as actually veiling, rather than exposing, the processes of entering the symbolic and becoming a subject, since everyone who uses language is symbolically castrated before any anatomical castration is noticed or threatened13 (Silverman 1988, Lapsley and Westlake 1992). So, the more complicated machinations of Freud’s Electra complex can also be seen to mask these processes. This eliminates the need for separate, gendered descriptions of these early stages, once we get below the “veil” that these mythic descriptions provide. We can then observe that the projection of lack onto women that we see today in every culture in the world may well seem primary because gender is simply the first point of difference introduced to a child in the process of I-separation, and thus the first difference that is marked with lack (but not the last).

To further this idea, the description of the last stage completing the entry into the symbolic as an “Oedipal” stage may be understood as a symptom rather than a cause. This is the position Lapsley and Westlake (1992) take when they point out that the Freudian Oedipal “stage” does not cause castration or the fear of castration. On the contrary, symbolic castration causes the Oedipal myth to arise in Freud’s work. 14 It is a

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13 I do not think the anatomical castration threat—the type that Freud emphasized—is necessary, but it is helpful to keep in mind simply in order to remember why we are using the term ‘castration’ at all in describing the losses experienced in the formation of the subject.
14 Lapsley and Westlake cite this interpretation of Lacan as coming from the works of Alain Juranville (Lacan et la Philosophie) and Mireille Ardrès (Lacan et la Question du Métalanguage). Kaja Silverman’s (1988) use of Lacan and Freud also acknowledges symbolic castration, and focuses on its relationship to the anatomical castration fear reified in Freud’s Oedipal stage, which provides for the male subject’s
myth that attempts to repress “the castration that is the inevitable consequence of the signifier” (45), if we understand castration as Lacan does. Entry into the symbolic “castrates” and divides the subject even as it delineates him, so the myth of Oedipus works to make it seem that Imaginary plenitude would be possible if only the law of the father did not intervene between the subject and the mother, the site of the imagined former plenitude (44-5).15

This myth, if taken as actuality, covers up two important points. First, the child already felt lack simply from developing a “specular I” in the Imaginary, well before the “social I” developed from the intervention of the third element and entry into the symbolic. Second, this myth masks the fact that if the symbolic law of the father could be overcome, and the Imaginary imago could be seen to be a misrecognition, the subject would cease to exist as a separate entity, and would merge with the (m)other.

The first point plays a role in feminism as a movement. Recognizing the myth means recognizing that dismantling and resisting the patriarchal symbolic is only one aspect of a larger project; ridding ourselves of the law of the father and relieving ourselves of the supplementary burden of men’s projected lack is a huge task, but even that will only take us so far. We also need to acknowledge that there is no “going back” to an imagined or hypothesized former time of plenitude, equality, and matriarchy. We must address the situation we find ourselves in now and attempt to move beyond it.

The second point is one that individuals can fall prey to when they encounter poststructuralist theory (feminist or otherwise). Recognizing the myth requires relinquishing a major perk of the symbolic—namely, the sense of a separate self or ego. Some readers of poststructuralist theory selectively focus on concepts that seem liberating without considering that they require loosening one’s grip upon one’s certainly of an individual subjectivity. For example, one can read Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1993) and pick up on the idea of performativity16 but use it superficially, without acknowledging that it requires giving up all ideas of an authentic self underneath all the performance (for an example of this type of superficial application, see Charlotte Brunsdon 1997).17 This leads to all kinds of atomistic, individualistic, solipsistic interpretations of poststructuralist work, and it leads to an interpretation of Lacan’s work that leaves us trapped in the symbolic.

15 Note that reading the Oedipal stage as a symptom of Freud’s is not (yet) a common interpretation of Lacan in cinema studies; see, for example, Laura Mulvey’s 1992 analysis of Citizen Kane, which reiterates the idea of the Oedipal stage as the true moment of loss caused by the intervention of the father between the mother and child (in particular, pages 49-59).
16 Judith Butler’s (1993) performativity is a theory that reiterated actions construct that which we think of as our identity, including biological sex, not just the social category of gender. Additionally, this construction of sex, gender, and desire in Butler’s theory is not achieved by a subject that exists prior to that construction; it is in the construction that the subject comes into being (1993: 9-10). This is another example of a nondualistic metaphysics undergirding poststructuralist theory.
17 In a parallel way, many people starting a meditative practice from a nondualistic tradition are thrilled at some of the effects of the practice and the way it changes their perceptions, and they want to continue to experience benefits and changes without questioning their sense of a separate self. Thus, a meditative practice can actually feed the ego and its sense of mastery, up to a point.
No wonder, then, that most Lacanian interpretations that do recognize the necessity of relinquishing the separate sense of self conclude, as Lapsley and Westlake do, that plenitude is “innately impossible” (1992: 44). After all, what good is a sense of nonduality if there is no subject to enjoy it? And from the perspective of a practicing psychoanalyst, what good is plenitude as a concept if it is beyond the bounds of how I can help a patient as an analyst? What good, indeed?
The truth is you’ve already heard this. That this is what it’s like. That it’s what makes room for the universes inside you, all the endless in-bent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you’re a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it’s only a part….But at the same time it’s why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or to speak in tongues….it’s not English anymore…. —David Foster Wallace, “Good Old Neon”

Chapter 3: Toward an Explicitly Nondualistic Lacanian Theory

Lacan’s ideas about the formation of the subject can be read as resting upon a metaphysics that posits the Real as a continuous stream that is inaccessible via symbolic processes of language, law, and conscious thought, which all dissect and label that stream. This metaphysics, in its earliest recorded form, is found in the Upanishads, a text that conveys the bare bones of Advaita Vedanta, later expanded upon and fully developed by Vedantic commentators and by Buddhist philosophers throughout Asia.

Thus, I agree with the aforementioned Lapsley and Westlake’s explanation of Lacan’s view of Freud’s Oedipal stage, yet I do not believe that symbolic castration is a final, insurmountable endpoint and that we are all doomed to a split, lacking, individual subjectivity. While Lacan focuses much of his work on describing this state, there are many aspects of his work, both early and late, that do not portray it as an inevitable endpoint. To support this interpretation, I offer a series of textual references in Lacan’s work to nondualistic metaphysics and their accompanying practices.

The first is the end of Lacan’s seminal 1949 “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” lecture. Lacan ends this lecture by admitting that not only is the imago a misidentification, but also that neurosis and psychosis show us (in extreme) exactly what’s wrong with the world at large: the very formation of the sense of I in each one of us.

The inertia characteristic of the I formations can thus be understood as providing the broadest definition of neurosis, just as the subject’s capture by his situation gives us the most general formulation of madness—the kind found within the asylum walls as well as the kind that deafens the world with its sound and fury. (Lacan 2002: 9)

He goes on to explain that it is “love” that can break the hold that the imaginary imago has on us. That “love” is not the same thing as “altruistic feeling,” which is nothing but a manifestation of the aggressive ego itself (ibid.). This “love” that Lacan offers as a possible weapon against the ego also cannot be romantic love or sexual relation, which Lacan repeatedly demystifies, as when he says that “two have never become but one,” despite our common assumption that unification of two people is what love is (1998: 47). He goes on to state that the sexual relationship “never makes anyone leave himself behind [or “go beyond himself,” as the translator’s footnote provides in an alternate translation]” (ibid.). That is, a romantic/sexual love of one person for another person does
not break the hold that the imago has or dissolve the border between subject and object. In fact, in another essay Lacan draws attention to the way in which language always subverts an attempt to express love as a dissolving of boundaries between the lover and the beloved when he problematizes “the first person as grammatical subject in our languages [langues]”—the ‘I love’ that hypostasizes a tendency in a subject who denies it” (2002: 24). The very act of speaking makes the separate “I” seem concrete and real and separate, even when the speaker is attempting to claim permeability. The practices of Buddhist and Upanishadic meditation suggest that this permeability can be accessed; Lacan’s work reveals that he is aware of these practices and the nondualistic philosophy behind them.

This becomes clearer in the last few paragraphs of the “Mirror Stage” lecture. Given that Lacan has just been talking about the widespread societal “madness” caused by the basic formation of the sense of I, I interpret these paragraphs to mean that only a compassionate love that sees self and other as already one (rather than a feeling that comes from the self and is directed towards the separate other) can begin to ameliorate the “general...madness...that deafens the world with its sound and fury” (2002: 9). This interpretation is bolstered by Lacan’s closing remarks:

In the subject to subject recourse we preserve, psychoanalysis can accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the “Thou art that,” where the cipher of his mortal destiny is revealed to him, but it is not in our sole power as practitioners to bring him to the point where the true journey begins. (ibid.; italics his)

Here Lacan explicitly refers to a nondualistic Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta, by citing the phrase “Thou art that.” Tat tvam asi is the oft-repeated mantra that asserts that you are Brahman (often translated as “universal consciousness” or “absolute reality”). The Shvetashvatara Upanishad describes Brahman as “attributeless reality”

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18 Literally, Advaita means not-two and Vedanta means the end of the Vedas or the end of knowledge. Sometimes Vedanta is interpreted as the culmination of all knowledge, and sometimes it is taken to mean a movement beyond knowledge.

19 Lacan has used a loose translation. In fact, the Sanskrit more literally translates as that thou art, or that you are. Sanskrit makes subject/object distinctions via inflections (basically, changes in word endings), so grammatically this sentence parses as follows: tvam is a nominative second-person singular pronoun (the nominative case indicates the subject of the sentence) of unmarked gender, and asi is a second-person singular present tense verb. Hence, you are. Tat is an “unemphatic pronoun used to qualify what is not immediately present to the speaker” (Coulson 1992: 63) and it is a neuter third-person form of that or it. It, too, is inflected for gender, showing that it is neuter and not masculine or feminine, but interestingly, the inflected forms are all exactly the same for the nominative, accusative, and vocative singular cases (43). That means that phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically, there’s no way to tell whether tat is the subject or the object of the sentence—it can stay ambiguous. This is something we can’t reproduce in an English translation, which uses word order instead of word endings to show these distinctions—although maintaining the Sanskrit word order gets us close, because with the translation that you are we at least have the two pronouns nestled up side by side in the initial position of the sentence. In addition, because Sanskrit doesn’t use word order to signify grammatical relations, word order is used to show emphasis (48). Here, a usually unemphatic word, tat, is given emphasis by being placed first in the Sanskrit sentence. “That (which you cannot immediately observe—yet) you are.”

20 Brahman, universal consciousness, should not be confused with the English approximations of Brahma, a god of creation in Hindu religions, nor with Brahmin, a member of the priestly caste. All three seem to etymologically descend from the Sanskrit root brh, to be great (in size) or to expand. Lanman’s dictionary makes a distinction between the neuter brahman as “impersonal universe-pervading spirit,” and the masculine forms of the word (with emphasis on the second syllable and different case endings) that mean “Creator of the world” or “priest” (1884: 201-202).
(The Upanishads 222) and “the one who appears as many” (225). Throughout the Upanishads and their later commentators, reality is asserted to be nondual; although our normal mode of perception divides objects from one another, the metaphysics of the Upanishads claims nothing is separate. More specifically, the ontology of the Upanishads claims that separate selfhood is an illusion. “As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, though wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, beloved, the separate self dissolves in the sea of pure consciousness,” (The Upanishads: 38).

The earliest written Upanishads are often dated somewhere between 1600 and 800 BCE. Easwaran, for instance, puts the composition of the earliest Upanishads at circa 800 BCE (1985: 10), making it difficult to ascertain whether their oral beginnings lie in the Indus civilization (settled in the Indus Valley circa 2500-1800 BCE) or in the Aryan cultures gradually invading from the north between 2000 and 800 BCE (Feuerstein 1989: 65-66), or some combination of the two. Feuerstein notes that there is archaeological evidence of continuity of traditions in the Indus valley (as does Easwaran 1985: 8), and that given the far larger numbers of the native inhabitants compared to the invaders, and the patterns of similar but better-recorded invasions elsewhere, the post-Vedic Upanishadic writings probably owe much to the Indus culture (Feuerstein 1989: 101).

It was a later commentator on the Indian subcontinent, Shankara, who in the eighth century CE (67) wrote down detailed interpretations of the nondualistic philosophies contained in the Upanishads. He advocated a combination of reason and selfless love in order to realize nonduality, but his emphasis was always on reason (jñana yoga) used to see through the veil of maya, the illusion of multiplicity. His writings accommodate an outline of an impersonal divinity called Ishwara, which admits of many forms, as befits a metaphysics that can be adapted to the many branches of Hinduism, each one using the form of a different deity to focus devotion (Shiva, Kali, Vishnu as Krishna, Vishnu as Ram, etc.). The acceptance of a deity allows individuals to particularize and make concrete the fullness of the nondual ground of being.

Interestingly, many schools of Buddhism prefer to focus on the emptiness of the nondual ground of being; however, commentators familiar with both systems often see these conceptualizations not in conflict but instead as two ways of expressing the same sort of nondual metaphysics21 with different emphases on how to recognize it—one focusing on devotion to others (facilitated by seeing everything as divine and full of meaning) and the other focusing on dismantling the common conceptualizations of everyday self/other thinking (facilitated by seeing one’s concepts of self/other as constructed and empty of pre-existing meaning).

The deities allowed by Vedanta are often reified in practice, though, and integrated with beliefs from earlier Vedic and pre-Vedic times, like transmigration of an eternal soul—as Stephen Asma also notes happens with Buddhism and folk beliefs in Cambodia, and with Christianity and folk beliefs in America—Santa, Christmas trees, etc. (2005: 53-70). The Vedantic scholars after Shankara continued to debate whether one should conceptualize a divinity with form—saguna Brahman—or instead concentrate on the formless, nondual, divine reality as it changes from moment to moment—nirguna Brahman.

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21 See, for example, Georg Feuerstein 2003 or Robert Thurman 1998.
Shankara’s explanations of the Upanishads and their metaphysics were predominant within Hindu thought, and were later predominant among translations to European languages, but his was not the only nondualism put forth at the time. Others interpreted and taught the Upanishads differently, such as Abhinavagupta, a Shaivist tantric philosopher. In addition, the Buddhist development of nondualism, which was gaining momentum during Shankara’s time, often does not rely upon a god form at all, and it more clearly expounds an approach to awakening as a process rather than a goal. There are many schools of Buddhism and they vary in how they explain the nature of reality, whether or not the concept of a soul or self is useful, and by what kinds of practices awakening should be approached.

To take one example of the kind of nondualistic teaching that does not deny the multiplicity of forms that we experience in everyday life, Nagarjuna, a Mahayana Buddhist, is famous for claiming that *samsara is nirvana* (Feuerstein 1974: 135; 2003: 111). In Buddhism, samsara is the repetitive cycle of suffering and attachment to ever-changing forms that each of us is stuck in—and yet that cycle is our only pathway to *nirvana*\(^2\), the word most used in Buddhism to describe stillness and nonattachment. Although many oral and written teachings emphasize methods for “attaining” nirvana, this one reminds the practitioner that, in fact, one should not disdain or deny the ever-changing forms of everyday life and habit, as they cannot be tossed aside in favor of some alternate reality—working with the struggles of life is the only way. The illusion and the reality are one and the same. According to traditions within both Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, from the point of view of someone awake, the path and the goal are the same thing, not different.

This is a metaphysics different from Shankara’s in an important way, as it implies and even mandates a different set of practices. Feuerstein explains that Shankara’s work “affirms the reality of the One only, denying the independent existence of the Many” (1974: 74), and this attitude leads to a world- and life-denying kind of asceticism and inaction (135-140). Shankara’s metaphysics emphasized the nonduality of the atman (individual eternal soul) and Brahman (universal consciousness), yet it problematically drew a line between these and the material world (including the body). Thus, even when relying upon the concept of nirguna Brahman, a formless consciousness of which all individual consciousnesses are a part, instead of relying upon deities, Shankara’s interpretation of the Upanishads leads to a disregard for the body and the material world, and it even reinforces the idea of an individual soul, albeit one that is identical with the universal—rather than a recognition that the separate self, or soul, does not actually exist as we commonly think it does.\(^2\) Buddhist texts like the *Dhammapada* and *Abhidharma*

\(^2\) The Sanskrit *nirvana* translates as *nir*, “not,” and *vana* “blown.” The cessation of blowing is sometimes characterized as the extinguishment of a fire (Harvey Aronson 34-35) when one ceases to blow on it or use a bellows—thus in nirvana one is no longer feeding the flames of desire or craving. It is also described as the end of the inhalation and exhalation of human respiration, which are fluctuations of the breath thought to be parallel to the fluctuations of the mind (Swami Muktibodhananda 1998: 272-3, 594-5).

\(^2\) Thus it’s strange that Shankara is often referred to as a “radical nondualist,” since his logic rejects the dualism of subject/object but leads to another kind of dualism (that between reality of oneness and illusion of multiplicity). On the other hand, J. G. Suthren Hirst, among other defenders, explain away this problem by saying that his statements seem to contradict each other only because sometimes he is writing from a conventional viewpoint, and sometimes from the viewpoint of ultimate reality, and that he is first and foremost a teacher using his statements for pedagogical purposes (2005: 2, 89).
are more explicit in their nondualism and include assertions that the individual soul is not a useful concept (as noted by many translators, commentators, and scholars, such as Aronson 2004: 64-69; Easwaran 1985: 118-120; Wallis 2004: 176-177). However, the recorded or attributed words of the Buddha generally avoid nihilism by avoiding taking a stand on whether or not the individual soul or self exists; they more often claim that it is not a useful concept and not provable through experience.

Thus this diversion into the nondualistic thought implied by Lacan’s use of tat tvam asi brings us back to the ending of the “Mirror Stage” lecture, which can be interpreted as saying that the psychoanalyst can only bring the analysand up to the point of recognizing that his sense of self, as a separate entity, has (merely) a symbolic existence. The analyst cannot guide the patient any further given that the psychoanalytic process seeks solutions on the level of the individual subject, and it is this very subjecthood that is misleading if we take it to be the only possible way to see reality.

Later, when Lacan flips Descartes’ cogito ergo sum on its head in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” he provides a hint as to what may be beyond the analyst’s domain, the place where the individual may go beyond individual subjecthood. “I am where I am not thinking. . . . What we must say is: I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking,” (2002: 157). These sentences fit well with Lacan’s idea that the signifier constantly slips out of reach in an unending chain of signification, but they also point to a distinctly meditational approach to experiencing one’s existence rather than an intellectual, conceptual, or symbolic approach to it—and they certainly move beyond a talking-cure approach to it. Lacan suggests here that one can understand one’s being better in moments without discursive thoughts rather than through thinking (as thinking is generally done with words, Symbolically, or images, Imaginarily).

This is the main technique of the Upanishads, which turn the external sacrifices described in the Vedas into the internal sacrifices of meditation practices. These practices are developed as the various schools of yoga (raja yoga, jñana yoga, hatha yoga, karma yoga, tantra yoga, etc.) eventually written down in the Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, and other ancient texts. Raja and jñana yoga, in particular, emphasize the practice of being without thinking. Raja yoga consists of meditative practices that focus on one sound or object until the “seer” merges with the “seen” (or the hearer merges with the heard) and thoughts cease to distract one from the point of focus (Ramamurti Mishra 1963: 225). Jñana yoga practices focus on the question “Who am I?” and examining each potential answer as it arises with the realization “neti, neti” (not this, not this—e.g., I am not this thought, I am not this ache) until one has exhausted the possibilities of rational thought in answering this question (Georg Feuerstein 1989: 44-47).

This is also the major technique of the Buddha, set down in texts like the Dhammapada by later students and developed into various schools across India and the rest of Asia (Mahayana, Theravada, Zen, etc.). Buddhist practices include one-pointed meditations and insight meditations like those of raja and jñana yoga, but they also emphasize open-awareness meditations in which the meditator simply attends to whatever arises—thought, physical sensation, emotion, visual stimulus—and then releases it, rather than pursuing it and sustaining interest in it (Anne Carolyn Klein 1995:...
61-88). These techniques are all ways to periodically minimize or find respite from the constant discursive mind activities we commonly call thinking.

Analysis, then, based on the symbolic realms of language, conscious thought, and unconscious thought (which is structured like language, according to Lacan (2002: 287), and thus is still a part of the symbolic), can only take one so far. The rest must be explored without the analyst, according to Lacan’s statements in both “The Mirror Stage” and in “The Instance of the Letter” (2002: 9, 157).

As previously mentioned, Lacan does not allow his readers to believe that it can be explored through sexual relationships. He regularly makes fun of the possibility of unity in the form of “the One,” the unified romantic-love couple (e.g., 1998: 47-49, 66-68). Lacan’s derogation of “the One” and of “good old God” (1998: 68), however, does not mean that he is dismissing a metaphysics of nonduality. Alan Watts explains nonduality by writing that “all explicit opposites are implicit allies….this unity is not mere one-ness as opposed to multiplicity, since these two terms are themselves polar. The unity, or inseparability, of one and many is therefore referred to in Vedanta philosophy as ‘non-duality’ (Advaita) to distinguish it from mere uniformity” (1972: 138-139). This distinction provides the reader with a way to understand that nonduality does not have to include an idealism of “the One” or a reliance upon the big Other of “God.” The material world is an ever-shifting manifestation of the entirety. There is no idealistic One that the material world masks or veils; there is no transcendental One that is above or beyond the material world. Instead, the veil of the material world is itself that which is unseparated and nondual.

Advaita, "Nonduality," a term which, while it denies duality, makes no affirmations about the nature of unity and must not be taken to imply anything like our monisms or pantheisms. A gnosis (jñana) is taught in this metaphysics….The famous "No, no" [neti, neti] of the Upanisads, which forms the basis of Sankara's method, as it did of the Buddha's, depends upon a recognition of the truth—expressed by Dante among many others—that there are things which are beyond the reach of discursive thought and which cannot be understood except by denying things of them. (Ananda Coomaraswamy 1939)24

It is important to note that Advaita Vedanta in the Upanishads and later commentaries conveys this nonduality, but there are other strains of Vedantic and Yogic thought that do not. They portray the material world as an illusion or veil that must be lifted to see what is underneath rather than what is already there. As noted, Shankara’s explanations of Upanishadic wisdom tip over in to this camp, and seem quite Platonic. Some sects of Hinduism also ascribe to this more dualistic metaphysics (which is conveyed in a competing Indian philosophical perspective, or darshana, called Samkhya). In India, Tibet, China, Japan, and other Asian countries, Buddhist scholars

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24 Note that this “neti, neti” is the main approach used by Lacan, as well as Foucault and Butler. One pedagogical corollary of this thesis is that many readers’ frustration in reading poststructuralist theory might be assuaged if they were offered a) an introduction to nondualist metaphysics and b) the possibility of nondiscursive inquiry into metaphysics to supplement the negative answers found in the discursive inquiries.
developed the nondualistic metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta further, making it a more integral part of their practices. Thus, the nondualism first put down in the writings of the Upanishads often is lost, refuted, or substantially altered in other texts from the Indus Valley and Aryan cultures of India (as in Samkhya philosophy and Classical Yoga; for example, see Feuerstein 1989: 82-85, 168-198), yet is prevalent in the texts from other Asian cultures, and even occasionally gets incorporated by Western philosophers like Schopenhauer. Nondualist practices like the Tantric branches of yoga and Buddhism are marginalized, regardless of the culture in which they develop.

Does Lacan’s concept of jouissance have some relationship to the nondualistic realizations that these Eastern texts describe as possible via meditative practices? Jouissance, which can be translated as ecstasy or bliss, is also described as an experience that cannot be spoken (2002: 290). Rose describes jouissance as “something more than pleasure that can easily tip into its opposite” (1982: 34); already, we can see that it involves excess. At most, jouissance “can only be said [dite] between the lines by whomever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition” (306). Submitting to and mastering symbolic processes inevitably entails the “castration,” the splitting of the self, as Lapsley and Westlake describe, and this consequence is then hidden by the Oedipal myth and the belief that it is the law, or the name-of-the-father—a third element entering into the dyadic imaginary bliss—that has ruled out jouissance. In this light, jouissance describes a momentary glance of the Real, an immersion in a stream of nondual reality that dissolves the splitting of the self and the division of self/other. Khasnabish (2003) agrees that jouissance is ananda, the Sanskrit word for bliss, and that it is synonymous with Brahman, the realization that thou art that. She further points out that the Mahanirvanatantram states that Brahman and Kali are identical, dispelling any ideas that this state might be the province of masculinity.

It is crucial to recognize that Lacan is highly suspicious of psychoanalysts who seek to strengthen the ego-image, the “ideal-I” begun in the Imaginary and both strengthened and split by the symbolic. The more developed the ego becomes, the more the person is “alienated from his jouissance....This ego is frustration in its very essence” because it is a misidentification (2002: 42). Analysis is frustrating because the person being analyzed realizes that all the language she uses to reconstruct herself to another person, to convey a sense of the image she has of herself as a coherent, unified whole, is merely a construction—and so is that sense of self (2002: 42; 1998: 86). Lacan does not wish to build up this illusory sense of self; in fact, he repeatedly criticizes the analysts who wish to do so (e.g., 2002: 104, n.6). He consistently claims that the unconscious is Freud’s most important and least understood concept, and that its importance comes from

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25 Tantric practices emerged between 200 and 1200 CE from both yogic and Buddhist traditions to reinforce the centrality of the body and the material world in awakening. Vedanta, raja yoga, jñana yoga, and Mahayana Buddhism emphasized consciousness and mind in their practices, and other traditions emphasized ritual; tantric offshoots of these schools created or revived techniques involving the body and breath. Today the term tantra is usually associated in America with sex, and in India with magic. These associations have more to do with the “left-hand schools” of Tantra, which incorporated sexual rituals, than the “right-hand schools,” which did not (Feuerstein 2003: 337). In fact, hatha yoga, with its emphasis on movement of the body and breath, is often taken to be a type of tantric yoga (330).

26 And as previously mentioned, almost every branch of these philosophies, no matter how clearly nondualist and non-idealist and agnostic in its initial texts, becomes culturally muddied with various deities and pre-existing beliefs over time.
how it undermines our attempts to conceive of ourselves as unified subjects. Any attempt to avoid the split nature of the ego is foolhardy. Thus, Lacan’s description of the Imaginary and symbolic orders is inherently critical of their processes. He does not see his role as analyst one in which he supports a person’s illusions of an Imaginary ego or constructions of symbolic language.

Lacan claims that someone in the position of a woman can experience jouissance but not know anything about it. Note that Lacan states that this position can be filled by “any speaking being whatsoever” (1998: 72, 80) willing to “not-wholly situate itself in the phallic function” (72), and he even explicitly mentions a man who has done so, Saint John of the Cross (76). In “God and Woman’s Jouissance,” Lacan identifies both women’s orgasms and the experiences of mystics as opportunities for this non-phallic jouissance. So why is it that woman can experience this jouissance but not know anything about it or be able to say anything about it? Lacan’s tone seems condescending towards these experiencers, classed mostly as women, who cannot know or say anything about that which they experience:

There is a jouissance that is hers (à elle), that belongs to that “she” (elle) that doesn’t exist and doesn’t signify anything. There is a jouissance that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it—that much she knows. She knows it, of course, when it comes (arrive). It doesn’t happen (arrive) to all of them. (1998: 74)

However, we can read this lecture while keeping in mind that it is anyone who finds (or puts) her- or himself in the non-phallic, not-whole position who can experience this ecstasy. The reader has to keep this in mind to withstand the jokes that seem to be at the expense of women, in order to reframe them as being at the expense of all speakers who attempt to perceive themselves as unsplit, whole subjects, because those in the phallic position are fooling themselves. Lacan’s focus on the nonexistent “Woman” leads to the corollary previously mentioned: “a man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks that she does exist” (Žižek 1989: 75). This is evident in the diagrams Lacan presents, as well: he writes “Woman” with a bar across it, but he also shows the subject as an “S” with a bar across it (see, for example, 1998: 78).

In fact, Lacan is not necessarily denigrating those who experience jouissance for not being able to speak about it or know about it. He says that his own writings (Écrits) should be classed with those of the mystics St. Teresa and Hadewijch d’Anvers (1998: 76). He says, as well, that he believes in this non-phallic jouissance (1998: 77), the ecstasy possible for someone who has been able to unburden himself of the misleading belief that he has the phallus, or someone who has been able to unburden herself of the misleading belief that the phallus can be had.

In addition, Lacan even takes on the rhetorical style of a mystic, speaking in metaphors and figurative language and opting for oral transmission more often than written, allowing others to write down his spoken words. He implies in his convoluted lectures that if the listener is not already ready to realize the truth of his revelations, s/he

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27 Note that this lecture addressing mysticism, from Seminar XX, is given over twenty years after Lacan’s reference to the Advaita Vedanta mantra tat tvam asi in “The Mirror Stage.”

28 Note that Upanishad literally translates as upa (near), ni (down) and shad (to sit); these are the teachings that one must sit down near a teacher to hear and understand, much as Lacan’s students and patients had to do.
won’t understand them anyway. Like a mystic attempting to reveal the unsayable, he speaks in *sutras*, or threads, that are later expanded upon by commentators. In writing about “The Function and Field of Speech and Language,” Lacan refers to the teaching of Abhinavagupta, another nondualist philosopher, on *dhvani*, the “property of speech by which it conveys what it does not say” (2002: 81), that is, that which is conveyed in excess of what is said. He suggests that analysts should keep this property of *dhvani* in mind and imbed their speech with symbolism and “semantic resonances” to evoke responses from their patients—or, presumably, their readers.

He also mentions that his short-session techniques in analysis—ending a session abruptly before its scheduled conclusion—are similar to the strategies of Zen masters with their students; they surprise or shock their students in order to facilitate realization (2002: 98). Thus we can see that Lacan shares similarities with mystics and sages both in the form of his teachings and in the nondualistic content of them. And, of course, in the assertion, put forth in both the form and content of his work, that the experience of jouissance is beyond knowledge in the symbolic or linguistic sense.

Advaita Vedanta agrees that the experience of being is not one that can be approached through language nor can it be explained through language. As Alan Watts simplifies it: “The difficulty is not only that language is dualistic….so long as I am trying to grasp IT, I am implying that IT is not really myself. If it were possible, I am losing the sense of it by attempting to find it. This is why those who really know that they are IT invariably say they do not understand it, for IT understands understanding—not the other way about” (1972: 139). The very process of knowing, of thinking, presupposes something that is other than the self. Jouissance, then, is an experience of being that is beyond knowing or speaking, and Lacan’s description of it meshes with yogic and Buddhist descriptions of awakening or enlightenment as, initially, a glimpse of the nondual Real. Some of those descriptions foretell, eventually, the ability to consistently stay immersed in it.

Ashmita Khasnabish comes to a similar conclusion that jouissance is *ananda* (bliss) as it is described in the Upanishads and by the modern Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo (2003: 21-22). However, she chooses to work with Luce Irigaray’s concept of jouissance, which emphasizes sexual difference, so that she can develop the implications of jouissance in the sexual union of the figures of Radha and Krishna in Indian mythology (23-25). Irigaray’s work encourages this kind of application, whereas Lacan’s, with his constant mocking of the sexual relation, discourages it. It does not, however, rule it out. As we have seen in his discussion of the mystics, the jouissance of those who have given up any illusions of phallic power and individuality may appear sexual, as shown in Bernini’s statue of St. Teresa.

Thus, Lacan dismisses organized religions as not being able to deal with the Real, but he does not dismiss the mystical, heretical branches of them, nor Buddhism and Vedanta. The same may be true of Lacan’s dismissal of the sexual relation: he is dismissing the usual gendered, lack-projecting romantic love, and sexual contact that takes the other as object, but not what the sexual relation can be as non-phallic.

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29 His lectures concern themselves with metaphysics and ontology at least as often as they mention patients’ pathologies, if not more. His theories are both philosophy and psychology, another similarity to Vedantic and Buddhist texts.

30 According to Zen anecdotes, sometimes with a sharp blow to the back or head during meditation.
jouissance, as he refers to when writing about St. Teresa’s ecstasy. Some mystical traditions assert that sexual acts can provide a glimpse of jouissance in what is sexual excess—neither that which is sought as a goal, nor related to as object.

There are, however, at least two different jouissances being discussed in Lacan’s work. Bruce Fink (2002: 34-36) describes succinctly these two jouissances: the “paltry” ordinary jouissance that each of us does have access to, the small joys that to us seem inadequate, because we compare them to the Other, non-phallic jouissance that we imagine is total and so much more ecstatic than what we already experience. Fink links the non-phallic type of jouissance to mysticism and its idea of nirvana or ecstasy as a fantasy of “total…satisfaction” (36). Note that this description, however, fits the ideal of enlightenment or awakening as an end goal, a point of arrival for happiness at some future date, rather than awakening as an ongoing practice of paying attention.

Why, then, does Lacan use the same word for the two experiences, the phallic, minor pleasures experienced by relating to objects and the non-phallic jouissance only obtained by relinquishing all hope of phallic power and separation? I suggest that it is because they are indeed one and the same. Some mystics describe their experiences as ones that are blissful to an extent that seems beyond any that ordinary mortals have felt, and some texts hold out these blissful states as a kind of prize. Khasnabish’s work tends to emphasize this kind of blissful end-state (for example, 2003: 21, 45-46), and it is of course typical of practical texts that wish to offer some sort of goal or “carrot” for the beginning student. However, the teachings of other mystics, yogis, and buddhas often tell students that the techniques, the methods, the efforts of the student are already the fruit, and there is no end goal to strive toward. This is the difference between conceptualizing awakening as a blissful future state and understanding it more directly as a state that is possible right now, with the practice of nonattachment and the observation of how things are at the present moment. With this second understanding of awakening, Lacan’s dual use of the term makes much more sense: phallic jouissance, the mundane, paltry pleasures we have access to in everyday life, can be enjoyed in a non-phallic way. Those very same experiences, once they are no longer desired and clung to by the subject-trying-to-have-the-phallus, are what Buddhists call awakening and Lacan called the jouissance of the Other, the jouissance of the woman, or non-phallic jouissance.

Just as there are at least two jouissances, Lacan seems to discuss at least two kinds of interactions with the Real. Raul Moncayo equates jouissance with an experience of the Real (1998: 195) and he agrees that the Real is nondual as in Zen Buddhism, but he also points out that Lacan has two Reals—one that is repressed through symbolization, and another that is unrepresentable through symbolization (182). Accordingly, there are two kinds of symbols or metaphors—those that result from a repressed idea and those that result from an experience outside the symbolic (188). Moncayo distinguishes “between the hidden and silent, on the one hand, due to repression or censorship, and the concealed and latent, on the other hand, due to a form of nondual existence-nonexistence that lies beyond language and symbolization” (194). He lauds the use of symbols to try to obliquely say something about the Real through metaphor or double entendre in analysis or in mystic teachings, an emphasis that is parallel, I think, to Kristeva’s hope of revolution through poetry, and Lacan’s reference to using dhvani, imbedded unsaid meanings, in analysis.

31 For example, the aforementioned left-hand Tantric offshoots of yoga and Buddhism.
Whether there are two jouissances and two Reals (or just two ways of seeing the same experiences) depends upon your perspective. From the perspective of the symbolic, when using language and law and writing analytical articles, there are two. In the nonsymbolic experience, there are not two. This is not union of what was previously separate; it is identicality. For some purposes, it is helpful to distinguish these as two concepts, as long as we remember that this is a strategic move that helps us, within the symbolic order, understand why and how things happen.

Of course, the arguments of this chapter—mine, Klein’s, Moncayo’s, and Khasnabish’s—may be read as ones that are based on the very desire for “unity” that Lacan decries as never being possible, even as it dictates our actions. However, I read his dismissal of “the One” and “good old God” as being based primarily on two points. First, as already mentioned, unity is most often attempted through romantic/sexual relationships and organized religion, routes that are not terribly fruitful and are most often fraught with attempts to shore up the ego’s frail sense of individuality instead of gradually dismantling it. Second, as I will now elaborate, I believe that Lacan disparages these concepts because they expose a nostalgia for a past state rather than development toward a new one.

Lacan indicts the symbolic for “the imaginary unity which its most persistent myths continue to promote” (1982: 47). Unity of the subject is a myth of the symbolic order; unity was not possible in the Imaginary order, either, and unity between subjects attempting a sexual relation is impossible still. This formulation of subjectivity and sexuality seems to draw lines of division where none were acknowledged before. To state that the subject is internally divided, and the sexual relationship of two subjects is also always split, works to demystify the special status formerly accorded to the individual subject and to the romantic couple.

Yet in pointing out that there are divisions within the conceptual “unit” of individual subject or romantic couple, Lacan has also brought into doubt the accuracy of the divisions that form the borders of those concepts. These are the divisions that separate the subject from others and the couple from others. If we can now see fissures within the subject, why continue to consider the fissures that separate the subject from others to be somehow more prominent or important than those we can see within it? In debunking the myth of unity in sexual or romantic coupling, Lacan has made the indiscriminate nonduality of all things more likely.

Lacan’s careful insistence that the Imaginary, as a previous state of supposed unity, is nothing to aspire to go back to, is, I think, a way to discourage a belief in a conservative movement back to a former plenitude, as might happen in an individual who experiences loss as s/he matures—or as might happen in a society with a tendency toward nostalgia for a misremembered past. However, Lacan’s work does not rule out change in general, or mystic states in particular. As shown in this chapter, he discusses it obliquely, leaving room for a nondualistic ontology as a possibility. Poststructuralist theory like Lacan’s needs to acknowledge its indebtedness to nondualistic philosophies like Advaita Vedanta and further learn from them.

Lacan and other poststructuralist thinkers such as Butler and Foucault discuss the “subject” by emphasizing its fragmentation, making it unclear how anyone can any longer act in concert with others, since no identity can be claimed or shared (for example, Butler 1993: 142-149). Difference is often emphasized, and the myriad ways in which
one person is different from another is given as a reason not to generalize about others (see, for instance, Judith Roof and Robin Wiegman 1995). Many applied film analyses using Lacanian theory do so to further emphasize fragmentation, split subjectivity, and lack, as well (e.g., Bernd Herzogenrath’s 1999 analysis of David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*).

Lacan and these other poststructuralists bring our attention to the cracks in the subject and in the romantic-love couple, but we can go another step further: if these formerly solid, unified units are fragmented, then we can see that we are much more connected to “others,” those that we tend to leave out of our concepts of the subject and the couple (and the nation, and the ethnicity, and so on). Poststructuralists tend to emphasize the cracks that fragment us, yet we can also emphasize the bonds that we were blind to before (and mostly still are, in everyday actions).

The “loss” of the unity and autonomy of the individual subject does not have to emphasize its fragmentation. Why not emphasize, especially for the feminist project, the way in which this blurs the boundaries between individuals, bringing a larger nonduality into focus? Nondualistic philosophies claim that we will have, at first, only an incomplete, intellectual understanding of this fluidity between subjects, rather than a total understanding of it that allows us to act on it at every moment as it forms the basis of all our interactions with “others.” If this is so, and we find ourselves still falling back on a sense of ourselves as individual subjects, there are practices of compassion for those “others” as a guide for behavior, until we can consistently remember that the boundaries we have set up between individuals are of our own making. These practices are already established in Vedanta and Buddhism, and Western practitioners have been adopting them and adapting them in increasing numbers for fifty years now (evident in the proliferation of Western academic and activist works both by and about Buddhism, such as Klein 1995 and Moon 2004).

Lacanian models can help bring some structure to an analysis of Western filmic texts that have been, in part, molded by those Lacanian and Freudian models, and fit them quite well. Yet those models do not offer the critic or analyst a way out of the circumscribed areas described in all of their mundane terribleness. Neither do they offer the female characters in these films a way out. As I have argued above, Lacan mentions alternatives to the symbolic sense of separate selfhood, and he does not rule them out, but he does not lay out a course of action toward them. He limits his methods to thinking and talking, and does not put forth a method beyond these. Of course, the female characters of these films can be seen to be fighting to enter the symbolic order, or resisting the lack that is projected onto women, in particular, within the symbolic order, or struggling to deal with the lack and splitting that is a part of any subject within the symbolic order. Most analyses would argue the first or second; I will argue that the third is also true.

This thesis proposes that it is a nondualistic metaphysics that supports Lacan’s model, and thus it interprets his model as one that can include human development beyond the borders of the symbolic that is not a U-turn back to infancy, a detour into insanity, or a dead-end of death. Before this thesis moves on to the film analyses, however, it must still address Žižek’s argument against what he calls “Western Buddhism.”

Žižek has written a scathing critique of what he refers to as “New Age ‘Asiatic’ thought,” which he sees as a conglomeration of “different ‘Taos’” and a “Western Buddhism” (Žižek 2001b). He sees these philosophies as promoting passive acceptance
of one’s daily lot and the existing political-economic system and withdrawal from political and social activism. Indeed, he believes that just as Western capitalism has established itself around the world, this Eastern “New Age” strain of thought is “establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of the global capitalism” (ibid.).

Žižek is correct that Buddhism and yogic philosophies can be watered down to support an existing social system. They can, as he suggests, be compartmentalized to ensure that the insights or benefits one gets from a meditative practice do not have to affect one’s actions in everyday life except insofar as they offer a method of detaching from them. As such, meditation becomes a refuge, a place to recharge before going back out to accept one’s duties, enabling one to detach from the effects of one’s own actions and stay calm regardless of what those duties are. This is the glossy image of Buddhism and yoga that is most often found in advertisements and pop culture references. But it is not necessarily the experience of practitioners. In fact, this version of these philosophies is closer to nihilism than to original texts of Buddhism, which famously rejects both eternalism and nihilism in favor of a middle path (see, for example, Aronson 2004: 64-69; Dhammapada 1995: 96-7; Easwaran 1985: 118-120; Wallis 2004: 176-177).

Žižek goes on to claim that “the central ethical lesson of Bhagavad Gita” is that “even the most horrifying crimes eventually DO NOT MATTER” (ibid., capitals his). This critic, who can interpret and analyze Hollywood films and ethnic jokes for the deepest of metaphor and metonymy, here claims that the ancient story-within-stories of the Bhagavad Gita is actually saying exactly what it says on the surface: it is story about a man who is advised by a god to fight and kill family members and friends. Yet there have been 2000 years’ worth of allegorical interpretations of this story already offered. To provide just one of the most common, the hero is often taken to be a man doing battle with his own ego. He struggles with the question of destroying the structures of his ego the way he would struggle with the mandate to kill his closest friends and family. Krishna, his charioteer, provides techniques for overcoming the ego’s boundaries.

In his straw-man argument, Žižek piles in one heap many overlapping yet distinct philosophical and religious traditions. He slaps the term “New Age” on them and paints them with the same brush as a marketer looking to sell herbal tea with the image of a meditating monk. A one-paragraph or one-image version of Eastern metaphysics can certainly be used to support an ethics of passivity and acceptance of the existing order; so can a one-paragraph version of Lacan. The varying and overlapping theories of reality and subjectivity that are put forth in the many texts and commentators of Vedanta and Buddhism can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, just as the texts and commentators of Freud and Lacan can be. If one wishes to focus upon the “Western Buddhism” of glossy magazines and television soft news, then Žižek’s characterization of its affinity for propping up an existing social, economic, and political system is accurate (though still unnecessarily allied with global capitalism—any existing system would do). However, Buddhist and Vedantic/yogic practices and theories of reality can be used to reflect upon one’s past actions and consider how one wishes to act in the present and future.

The Bhagavad Gita tells its readers, “You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself—without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat….They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them” (Bhagavad Gita 1985: 13-14). Thus, the Gita asserts the nonduality of reality and the illusory nature of the
separations we perceive, not the illusory nature of the material world per se. In addition, however, we are advised to take action in the world and within ourselves—specifically, not to be passive and accepting. We are encouraged to remain dispassionate rather than reacting to protect the ego; thirdly, until we can truly stay aware of the nonduality of reality, our nonseparation from others, we can supplement our metaphysics (which takes practice to maintain in the face of our usual mode of experiencing the world) with the ethical precepts stated in the Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Eightfold Path. Thus, a metaphysics of nonduality can be a foundation for an ethics of compassion. Admittedly, it does not have to be, but historically the two were offered in concert and can continue to be.

Slavoj Žižek, in fact, concludes two of his books with discussions that point to nondualism. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he claims that the endpoint of psychoanalysis is one in which the subject no longer assumes that s/he is a subject and no longer assumes the existence of the big Other, but “accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy” (1989: 230). “Idiocy” implies an undesirable state, even a regression. It seems that Žižek intends to end on a note of futility and hopelessness, yet if we bypass the emotional content and connotations of “meaningless idiocy” then Žižek is simply referring to the unspeakableness of this state, its inaccessibility to knowledge, as Lacan and Watts attest. Žižek describes losing your symptom as losing the substance of yourself, your jouissance, your joy (1998: 68). But is jouissance only the joy of never-having-known, of being an idiot? I think that Kristeva and Moncayo, and even Lacan, suggest that it can be the joy of having known but gotten past one’s habitual attachment to and reliance upon that knowing (the knowing of language and analysis).

In addition, at the end of *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Žižek claims that, in direct contrast to the erroneous metaphysics presented in *The Matrix*, “our reality is that of the free agents in the social world we know, but in order to sustain this situation, we have to supplement it with the disavowed, terrible, impending fantasy of being passive prisoners” (2001: 231). The similarity to the philosophies and actual practices of Vedanta and Buddhism is startling. A practitioner may begin a meditative practice with the hope of awakening from an illusory state, but s/he will soon be made aware, in a nondualistic tradition, that in fact s/he is already awake, that s/he is already that which s/he seeks (*tat tvam asi*). Reality is accessible only through illusion, not by dispelling illusion (*samsara is nirvana*). We cling to our fantasy of being trapped, but as soon as we let go, we find we have been free all along. We have both a fantasy of being trapped, as Žižek says, and also a fantasy of freeing ourselves from that trap and finding an ultimate jouissance, as Fink points out (2002: 36). That these are fantasies does not mean there is no truth in them at all; however, the awakening that nondualistic Vedanta and Buddhism describe in theory

32 We have already seen, however, that some developments and offshoots of Vedanta and Buddhism have strayed into denial of the physical, material world, such as Shankara. It seems that the more institutionalized these methods and philosophies became, the less able they were/are to maintain a nondual metaphysics and ontology.

33 These ethical precepts vary a bit in detail and terminology, but all of these texts include ahimsa (not harming) and satya (truth telling).
and teach as practice is one of realizing that one is already free, though we find ourselves
in situations caused by past events (expressed in the ideas of “dependent arising” and
individual and collective “karma”).

This change in perspective is a process, not a destination, and thus a final
endpoint of “enlightenment” or “escaping the Symbolic” isn’t necessary. Awakening can
occur as a continuous process. Is that process in the service of hegemony, destabilizing to
hegemony, or can it be both? Since one is not regressing, one does not lose symbolic
processes when one finds respite from them. Symbolic concepts and languages still affect
one’s actions, and can do so in many ways.

Thus, movement beyond or through the symbolic does not necessitate
revolutionary actions, but it certainly does not discourage them. And since Žižek brings
up global capitalism, it isn’t hard to see the potential effects of nondualism becoming
more prevalent and more people understanding themselves as not separate from other
people. Capitalism does a poor job of making evident the costs of goods and services that
are long-term, like degradation of the environment, declining health of workers, or
drastically imbalanced accumulation of resources, and thus consumers and managers who
see themselves as individual, autonomous islands are not often encouraged to see beyond
immediate costs to themselves, and they can discount or deny long-term costs to “others.”
Yet a more constant perspective of nondualism fostered through discussion of it as a
theory and through experience of it in practice would dilute the tendency to only consider
oneself and a few select other individuals in making decisions. Žižek’s argument not only
characterizes all Eastern practices as comparable, but it also assumes that they are only
practices, with no theoretical underpinnings, or at least none that are discussed outside of
Asia.

However, his argument does speak to the same fear that Kristeva has when
considering whether or not nonsymbolic experiences like mysticism and poetry can be
revolutionary. Kristeva points out that the pressure that the semiotic (or that jouissance,
in Lacanian terms) places upon the symbolic is supportive of the entire symbolic order, in
the same way that she claims the semiotic bodily drives must combine with symbolic
elements of grammar to create the symbolic order. She raises this problem in Revolution
in Poetic Language:

Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and “incomprehensible”
poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to
what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and his
communicative structures. But at what historical moment does social
exchange tolerate or necessitate the manifestation of the signifying process
in its “poetic” or “esoteric” form? Under what conditions does this
“esoterism,” in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying
practices, correspond to socioeconomic change, and, ultimately, even to
revolution? And under what conditions does it remain a blind alley, a
harmless bonus offered by a social order that uses this “esoterism” to
expand, become flexible, and thrive? (2002: 30)

Kristeva suggests that it is when the signifying process, which draws on both symbolic
and semiotic elements, is “a practice, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and
society,” that it can become revolution. She says that texts can transform the subject-in-
process, and this change goes hand in hand with political revolutions transforming
society (30). Critics of Kristeva point out that no revolution has occurred based on avant-garde literature, and Moi attributes Kristeva’s belief in the importance of the poet and psychoanalyst to her refusal to see how truly marginal these people are in late capitalism (2002: 170). However, if we look at the larger cultural arena of which poetry, psychoanalysis, and other arts are a part, we might reassess the situation. In many ways, mainstream media draw upon the avant-garde more and more quickly, albeit often in watered-down, oversimplified form. We can also consider the dissemination of the practices and techniques associated with nondualistic philosophies and how those directly affect individuals’ daily decisions. For example, a carnival or a shaman may come to town once a year, thus providing a needed break from the laws and rules of ordinary symbolic life, and its unruly semiotic potential is easily forgotten until next year. But ‘esoterism’ in the form of a daily hour-long yoga or meditation practice, focusing on bodily sensations and breathing and providing a break from the perpetual meaning-making, is a regular influence on a person’s state of mind. This is particularly true if it is practiced in the context of a nondualistic ontology (rather than presented only as a method of detachment from the rest of the life of the autonomous individual).

The ancient texts of the Upanishads and the philosophers and practitioners of Vedanta and Buddhism offer the idea that movement beyond ordinary, dualistic, symbolic process can be accessible in lived experience. Lacan, from his early work to his last, says that it can, as well, though he stops short of making it a part of his analytic method. These “individual” lived experiences may or may not lead toward ethical and social change. What happens when characters on screen undergo significant transformations like those suggested by an explicitly nondualistic Lacanian theory? The next chapter will explore the possibility of representing these experiences on film.
The critic is responsible to a degree for articulating those voices
dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts….The critic’s
attitude…should in addition and more often be frankly inventive…which
means finding and exposing things that otherwise lie hidden beneath piety,
heedlessness, or routine.
—Edward Said, in *The World, the Text, the Critic* (1983: 53)

**Chapter 4: Nondualistic Lacanian Theory Applied**

*Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *The Piano* (1992) are two films that first brought my
attention to the transformation or awakening of the female subject on the screen.
Psychoanalytic approaches have been used already to analyze each of these films, yet
those analyses tend to assume either that the symbolic is an order that female characters
seek to enter fully (and would be lucky to succeed in doing so) or that the symbolic is
inescapable (and efforts to do so are fruitless) (see, for example, Richard Allen 1999;
Lynda Hart 1994). Similar analyses are made without the explicit use of a psychoanalytic
framework (for example, Stella Bruzzi 1993; Elizabeth Hills 1999; James Maxfield 1996;
Michael Real 1996).

However, using a nondualistic psychoanalytic framework, it becomes clear that
both of these films feature women who struggle with but also renounce central elements
of the symbolic order in an attempt to move beyond its limitations, and that these
attempts are valuable, though flawed. The two films offer different emphases: for most of
*Thelma & Louise*, the focus is on the struggle with the existing order and only at the end
do the characters fully renounce it, while for most of *The Piano*, the central character has
already relinquished the tools and hallmarks of the symbolic, yet she is slowly dragged
back into it.34 However, in both films the narrative arc focuses on actions by which the
subjects appear to be resisting the laws and rules of their time—Thelma and Louise’s
outlaw actions and Ada’s extramarital affair. The characters find power and desire in
these actions, and they seem to be a way to resist the symbolic order of the name-of-the-
father, yet they find themselves pulled ever more insistently into the existing social order
as a result. The very actions they take to escape the binds of the existing social order
wind up trussing them further. This is visible in both films, even though they each
emerge from and play with the conventions of different genres: adventure and romance.

Buddy adventure films are generally stories about men, often rebellious men, who
deny and protest a feeling of lack within themselves by wielding the very same symbolic
means that create that lack—phallic words and weapons. In *Thelma and Louise*, which
was marketed as a buddy road movie, the main characters’ rebellious use of guns and
force attempts to assuage the very problems it causes, as well. However, this film makes
it easier to see that guns are a poor replacement for real agency; they are phallic
placeholders that merely allow their holders to stay blind to the loss experienced in the
adoption of language. The women’s interactions with the men who are obstacles on their
path are humorous and vituperatively satisfying, but their use of guns only continues to
detour them and imbed them further in the realm of the Symbolic. At the end of the film
they give up using the guns, just as they have stopped using language, law, mirrors and
gazing, in their search for a way beyond.

34 See Appendix for short synopses of these two films.
Mainstream romance films are stories about men filling a lack in women—a lack that the men themselves have created. And this, too, is precisely the story of entering the symbolic order, which fills a lack it creates. *The Piano*, marketed and often written about as a romance, makes it clearer than most romance films that the lack is created by the man himself (a signifier, in the patriarchal symbolic order Lacan describes, of the symbolic order itself), who then fills this lack. Throughout the film, patriarchal, symbolic-order romantic love tries to stand in for something it itself has taken away. In addition, the male does not admit his culpability in having taken it away, and the replacement is generally a pale shadow of what was originally there.

There are aspects of each film that cannot be accounted for within a traditional psychoanalytic approach that focuses on a dualistic symbolic order. This thesis will now turn toward these films to show how the nondualistic Lacanian theory synthesized in previous chapters can be used to analyze female characters within narratives of awakening. These characters are not simply trying to enter the symbolic; on the contrary, they become aware of the *projected lack* they are marked with in their place within the symbolic order and they attempt to resist this. Furthermore, in each film, the female characters at some point also realize the *original lack* that is the hallmark of participating in symbolic life, as both its cause and its effect. These are stages of awakening in themselves, but these characters also go further in showing an effort to actually experience nonduality, a state described by Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism and often translated as awakening or enlightenment.

*The Piano* and *Thelma & Louise* make it clearer than most mainstream films that lack and dualism is created by the phallus itself (the primary signifier, in a patriarchal symbolic order, of the symbolic order), which then attempts to replace what has been taken away by offering a sense of an autonomous self. Throughout the films, patriarchal, symbolic-order phallic elements—violence (in the form of guns) and romantic love (in the form of men)—try to stand in for *something the symbolic order itself has taken away*. The female characters come to see not only that men project their own feeling of lack onto them (since they are in a patriarchy), but also that their own individual subjectivity causes them to feel lack (since they have entered the symbolic and believe wholeheartedly that they are separate). What they do with this understanding, and what we, as viewers, do with it, lies before us to explore.

**Thelma & Louise**

Existing analyses of *Thelma & Louise* provide interpretations of the gaze, the mirror, the law, language, and rape that highlight the struggle these two women have with the patriarchal symbolic order (see Lynda Hart 1994, Ann Putnam 1993, and Sarah Projansky 2001 for three of the most thorough). Reframed in the terms used in Chapter 3, these analyses reveal that the two characters awaken to the projected lack of patriarchal symbolic order. However, because they do not address the nondual nature of reality, these analyses are limited in how they can deal with the scenes in which the characters go beyond seeing the oppression resulting from projected lack and “cross over” in their perspective to see the original lack, that which is created by their own entry into the symbolic. They awaken to the symbolic order and its illusory nature, its inability to fully account for reality and its attempts to hide that inability. Existing analyses don’t fully
confront the problems of the characters’ appropriation of phallic weapons to resist the symbolic, and their decision at the end of the film to not use those weapons.

The film begins by establishing the two women’s places within and subjected to the symbolic: Louise is a waitress and a girlfriend and Thelma is a housewife. They are presented as constantly defending themselves against economic, verbal, and physical assaults. They seem, at first, to not even notice these assaults as such. Even Louise seems not to notice that she is complicit in this order: the cabin they are using for their getaway is available only because her manager wants to minimize its economic value for his soon-to-be ex-wife, who will be getting the cabin after the divorce.

The women’s initial response to the discomfort they are experiencing in the roles they play in the patriarchal symbolic is to leave town. Louise then resists the lack projected upon them by Harlan’s physical and verbal attacks by appropriating Darryl’s phallic gun and killing Harlan. This initiates a journey in which both characters resist, take over, and then relinquish the mirrors, gazes, language, laws, and guns that mark their trajectory through a Lacanian symbolic order. The actions that seem most transgressive or resistant are those of their outlaw life, in which they use guns, a phallic symbol of the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis. And this is where most analyses end, blaming the suicidal end of the film on the idea that two women who dare to wield the phallus must die. Yet the two women do have further moments of awakening, and they move beyond the symbolic in choosing to relinquish its markers.

In the beginning of the film, both main characters use the mirror to prepare themselves to be looked at. Ann Putnam (1993: 296-297) notes many examples of the mirror motif that underscore the dynamics of gazing and being gazed at throughout the beginning of the film. For instance, Louise looks at herself in a bedroom mirror as she finishes packing and puts on a jacket. Thelma checks her hair in the car’s sideview mirror as they depart. Louise later leaves Thelma alone with Harlan as she checks herself in the bathroom mirror at the Silver Bullet, competing with other women for mirror space. This moment reinforces what has been shown happening at the bar between the two women: just as Thelma abandons Louise in order to dance with a man she has just met, so does Louise temporarily abandon Thelma in order to check her appearance. In front of the mirror, women shove each other, making no attempt to communicate with each other in their efforts to prepare to be looked at. These initial uses of the mirror emphasize the two women’s acceptance of their marginalized place within the symbolic order. They have passed through a Lacanian mirror stage in which they accepted the separation of Self from Other, the system of language, the social and familial law, and the misidentification with the “ideal ego” seen in the mirror. These scenes also draw attention to the place of the feminine within the symbolic: as the object of the gaze, always preparing to be looked at, as Laura Mulvey argues ([1975] 1999: 62).

The first time the women begin to use the mirror in a different way is just after Louise shoots Harlan, as Putnam notes (1993: 296). As Louise looks into a bathroom mirror, adjusting her hair, she sees a speck of blood on her cheek. Upset, she wrenches herself away from the mirror and immediately moves to get back on the road. The next morning, as she stops in a motel and calls Jimmy, she sits with her back to the wall, a dresser mirror right next to her. She keeps her back to it, never using it. Louise’s relationship to the symbolic order changes as she begins to turn her back on the mirror.
After this, Thelma’s use of the gaze and the mirror begins to change, as well. At a roadside store she walks into JD coming out of a phone booth and they eye each other. She looks over her shoulder at him as she returns to the car. Waiting in the car for Louise to emerge from the store, she sees an old man staring at her. In self-conscious response, she pulls out eyeliner and uses the rearview mirror to put it on. At this point, she is still using the mirror as a way to prepare to be gazed upon. As she catches sight of JD, she switches to the sideview mirror to add lip gloss and then adjusts the mirror to watch him approach the car. Thus, while Louise seems to be shifting toward a more introspective use of the mirror and may already be turning away from it, Thelma begins using the mirror to return the gaze of a male.

Louise, on the other hand, begins to show a propensity for taking the gaze away from men. As she emerges from the store, she challenges an ogling man with the words, “What’re you lookin’ at?” That night, in the motel room with Jimmy, Louise reminisces about their first meeting, reminding him of what he said: “I said you had a nice pair of eyes.” She covers his eyes and asks him to tell her what color her eyes are, a move she says is similar to her original response to his line. Thus, in both their first meeting and their last, she takes away his gaze quite literally by blocking his sight.35 She also counters the implication in his pickup line that he was looking at a piece of her (his phrasing actually suggests her breasts, not her eyes) by asking him to tell her something more meaningful about herself (the color of her eyes), something that metaphorically indicates that he has paid attention to more than just pieces of her body (since the eyes can indicate something more of the mind or emotions).

The next time Louise uses the mirror, the scene amplifies the way in which everything has changed for her once she has committed murder, detached herself from Jimmy, and lost her savings. In this scene, Thelma has gone inside a store to rob it, leaving Louise to wait in the car, creating a parallel with the earlier scene in which Thelma waited for Louise to come out of a store. This time, Louise sees two old women inside a building. Just as the old man staring at Thelma prompted her to put on makeup, Louise’s response to the old women looking at her is to search for lipstick. Leaning over to look at herself in the rearview mirror, her face registers a recognition of the uselessness of getting ready to be gazed upon, to take up her place in the symbolic order. She throws the lipstick out of the car in despair, and retreats from the mirror once again (also noted in Putnam 1993: 296).

Neither woman uses a mirror to primp after this scene. In fact, in Louise’s next encounter with a glassy-eyed, staring old man, she doesn’t look for a mirror at all. She takes off all her jewelry—similar to makeup in that it is often used to attract the gaze of men—and trades it all, including the diamond engagement ring, for a dirty old hat to keep the sun out of her eyes. This scene indicates a serious emotional or spiritual change for Louise, one that requires her to divest herself of these feminine and material things.36

Louise’s rejection of the mirror is linked to her clear rejection of language, which, in Lacanian theory, is bound up with accepting the symbolic order during the mirror

35 However, Louise describes her original response as having been to close her own eyes and ask what color they were, rather than covering Jimmy’s eyes, as she does now. Thus, even here, there is a movement from shutting her own eyes to disabling Jimmy’s gaze.
36 Her reasons must be other than rational; a rational action would be to sell the diamond ring for cash to help with their escape. She has relinquished a need to stay alive in the symbolic.
stage. Throughout the film, Louise is mistrustful of both language and law, and she initiates their escape to Mexico because of this distrust. As Lynda Hart (1994: 435) notes, she also never gives in to the symbolic order when it comes to the issue of Texas—she does not follow the Freudian rules that say she should tell someone about it and then she’ll feel better, and she is constantly trying to teach Thelma to “stop being so open.” Hal says he almost feels like he knows Louise, but she is quick to tell him that he does not know her—even though he does know what happened in Texas.

The film makes it clear that just because Hal knows about Louise’s victimization doesn’t mean he knows Louise; linguistic or legal knowledge about her does not allow Hal to understand her. In Judith Butler’s words, Louise, as a subject, cannot be “determined by those constructions,” even though she cannot exist outside of them or prior to them, either (1993: 124). At the same time, Louise never tells Thelma what happened to her in Texas, and yet Thelma does know her; the way the women look at each other and, in the end, need few words to communicate shows how well they know each other. Thus, Louise’s transformation began long before the film’s start, when she started to mistrust the symbolic order, but over the course of the film she begins to respond to the symbolic violence from the men around her, violence that is perpetrated with the dual weapons of language and law.

After driving through the night, the change that Louise is going through is further symbolized by her awe at watching the first rays of sunlight come over the walls of the valley. Typical of her mistrust of language—not explaining what happened in Texas, not being open with strangers—she doesn’t try to express what she has discovered or realized. Both her exchange with the old man and her experience of the dawn are without language. These nonlinguistic events mark another change in Louise, one that existing analyses don’t delineate. She has now not only recognized the lack projected onto her (and begun to fight it), but also realized the lack inherent in participating in symbolic life at all.

The film up to this point certainly provides abundant events to justify Louise’s mistrust of language. Harlan assaults her verbally, JD squeals on her, Earl the trucker repeatedly hurls sexual volleys at her, and even Jimmy betrays her by telling the police about their meeting. In the end, the police find her because Hal’s speech lures her into staying on the telephone too long. At the same time that these men’s words create obstacles in her path, symbolic phalluses get in the way of her progress through the landscape: “spouting steam, spraying planes, spilling hoses, pumping oil riggers, and men pumping iron and pumping gas” (Putnam 1993: 296). Thelma and Louise try to avoid these phalluses and the law, and slowly, they notice the limitations of the mirror image and language. Yet they do so through appropriating phalluses of their own, and committing somewhat violent, and certainly unlawful, acts.

After Louise’s awakening, the mirror is still used to check on possible threats to their escape, as when the overzealous policeman pulls them over and Louise uses the mirror to report to Thelma on what he’s doing. In this case, the mirror, formerly used for self-surveillance, is rearticulated as a tool for surveilling the law. The policeman orders Louise to remove her sunglasses, demonstrating his control of the gaze, but once Thelma puts the gun to his head, he is barely able to talk or look at her. Under the guidance of Thelma, Louise takes his gun. She then destroys his radio, taking away his ability to speak to the police, and trades her red-rimmed fashion sunglasses for his sturdier
eyewear. Confronted with yet another man blocking their path, Thelma and Louise have stripped him of his phallic gun, rendered him unable to use language or the law, and appropriated the tool of his gaze (also noted in Projansky 2001: 262, n. 12).

Soon after this scene, Thelma has her own awakening. She looks at the landscape in the sideview mirror—the very one she used to prepare herself for the male gaze and later to gaze at a male—and then she looks above the mirror’s frame to the landscape itself. This simple eye movement, along with the shots that show first the mirror’s reflection of the landscape and then the landscape itself, reveals Thelma’s understanding that paying attention to the image in the mirror is no longer useful now that she has become aware of the real thing and looked at it directly. Unlike Louise, she is still prepared to try to express this epiphany in language, explaining that she suddenly feels “awake…wide awake. I don’t remember ever feelin’ this awake before.” After this scene, Thelma never looks into the mirror again. Instead, she confronts the mirror and phallus in a particularly dramatic way in the scene with Earl’s truck.

Earl is the trucker that the two women have seen repeatedly throughout their travels, and each time he has honked his horn, yelled obscenities, and made sexual gestures. The women’s last outlaw episode (before the final chase) occurs when they invite him to pull over to the side of the road. When he emerges from his huge oil rig, he stands, small, squinting, inarticulate, and without his giant silver phallus, before them. Thelma and Louise are in control of the gaze, the language, and the phallus in this situation, now reiterating the control they demonstrated with the policeman. Louise once again reverses the gaze when she says, “Why don’t you take off those shades; I wanna see your eyes.” This man has looked at them and verbally harassed them, and instead of continuing to follow the standard advice of pretending not to see him, the women turn the gaze on him with full force—and now, not only is it hard for him to see them, it is also seemingly impossible for him to speak. The dialogue takes pains to justify their actions and their gaze. It points out the similarities between Earl’s harassment and Harlan’s attempted rape when Thelma asks the trucker if his actions meant, “Suck my dick,” which is what Thelma remembers Harlan saying.37

Both Putnam (1993) and Projansky (2001) point out the use of the gaze, language, law, and phallic symbols to assault these women, and their attempts to avoid the assaults and appropriate the weapons. But neither analyzes the final counterassault on the truck in the same terms. Louise proceeds to shoot out the tires on the giant phallus, but Thelma actually blows it up. It is Thelma who has just recently completely rejected the mirror, pointing out its insufficiencies, and it is significant that not only is the truck phallic, but it is also silver, perfectly clean, and smooth—just like a mirror. In fact, each time the Thunderbird has pulled alongside the truck, its shiny surface has reflected the blue-green car and the women, and as Earl jumps out of the truck, the camera shows us his reflection and the landscape in its shiny hubcap. Thus, Thelma destroys the phallus and at the same time shatters the mirror.

37 It may also be worth noting that Thelma misremembers Harlan’s words—twice. The first time is when she is reminiscing about Harlan’s inability to “read” Louise and understand that Louise might shoot him. The second time is in this confrontation with the trucker, Earl. Harlan says, “Suck my cock,” yet Thelma quotes him as saying “Suck my dick,” both times. A small difference, yet considering the importance of language and the way in which Louise demands an apology from each man for his words (and does not get one in either case), it seems fitting that Thelma modifies these words for herself.
If the mirror, the phallus, language, and the law are pushed away, refused, by the end of the film, then have Thelma and Louise refused the mirror stage, refused to believe in the Self as separate from Other, refused to see themselves as image, as ideal ego? Have they refused to accept their place in the symbolic order? Thelma, portrayed as childlike for the first part of the movie, has definitely gone through a transformation, but instead of accepting and acknowledging her image in the mirror, she has blown the mirror up; instead of looking at the landscape in the mirror, she has chosen to experience the land directly. She has realized that what the mirror offers is an illusion or a shoddy imitation of the real; looking in it is like being asleep rather than awake. And Louise, whose distrust of language and law began well before the weekend depicted in the film’s plot, finally acts upon that unease and rejects those symbolic tools, one by one. Not until the end, however, do the two women relinquish the final symbolic tool they have appropriated: the gun.

Retracing the characters’ movement through the progression of their use of guns, we see that after the murder, Thelma and Louise’s appropriation of the gun is tempered with the humor they display whenever they use it. They simultaneously appropriate the power of the phallus and laugh at it, as when Thelma says she learned to shoot “off the TV.” This use of the phallus has shades of Judith Butler’s parodic repetition if taken in the context of the strong criticism of the phallus throughout the film. (The phallus is associated with the control and alteration of the landscape through repeated shots of hoses, sprinklers, a cropduster, masses of electric poles, and fields of pumping oil wells; with the police and their guns; and with the men, horses, and bulls who obstruct Louise and Thelma’s path.)

Louise admits during their flight: “I think I mighta got us into a situation where we both could get killed.” This is followed by a speech from Thelma about how she would have been in a far worse situation if Louise hadn’t killed the man who was raping her; she has no regrets except that it was Louise, and not herself, who killed Harlan. This conversation shows that both women are now aware that they were always in the symbolic order, but as women (as those who do not have the phallus), men (those who are trying to convince themselves they are indeed whole and do indeed hold the phallus) projected their own lack onto them, and the result was verbal, visual, economic, and physical abuse. Thelma lays out in this speech that she now recognizes how her life was already “ruined,” and it would have been far worse if Louise hadn’t intervened or if they had put themselves at the mercy of the police.

Once the women have stolen the phallus in the form of guns, they are suddenly in the symbolic in a way they’re not supposed to be, as subjects-who-think-they-are-whole holding the phallus (guns, language, gaze), and using it against men. The film confirms that they will be punished, as Riviere’s (1929) patients feared 70 years prior. (Interestingly, the film does demonstrate that a Rivieresque masquerade helps. Hal suggests that the women still have a chance of explaining their way out of the situation when Harlan is first found and the gun is still hidden in Louise’s purse, a feminine accoutrement that masks the phallic instrument. Afterward, when the women take no pains to hide their guns, they have committed more crimes and there is no longer hope—for Hal, the women, or most viewers—that they will be able to emerge from this tangle unpunished.) Thelma’s speech exonerating Louise explains that at this point in the narrative, she realizes that they’re in quite a mess, agrees that they might get killed, yet
still thinks that being a subject who thinks she has the phallus is “more fun” than her previous state.

The film’s narrative drive is focused on the punitive effects of those who were previously marked “woman” appropriating the phallus in certain ways. At the same time, the narrative points out the insufficiencies of the phallus: it doesn’t get the two women where they want to go, never providing the promised agency. The larger phallic guns of the law do not succeed in capturing the two women, either, despite their abundant visual and auditory presence at the end of the film. While it may be great fun for a viewer to watch these women smoke, drink, drive, and shoot, their appropriations of masculine behaviors do not free them. Some viewers may choose to focus on this failure as resulting entirely from their transgressions as females picking up these symbols of masculinity, but we can also pay attention to the ways in which these markers of power and agency fail men, as well, both within the film and without it. The film underscores this in the last shot of Hal in his frustration.

I cannot agree with Ann Putnam when she says that the film is “a narrative enacted on a mythic road to a mythic place where in the end, everyone owns the gaze” (1993: 302). The ending of the film complies with a naturalized idea of what must happen when two women react to the tools and terms of the patriarchal symbolic order by running from them or by picking them up and using them. It is not enough that they have fled the urban and suburban areas of society and moved into the desert landscape; this is not far enough for them to have made it to Butler’s “constitutive outside.” They must be chased further, into an abyss. If everyone owns the gaze in this ending, then only some people get to do so on solid ground—and this is no different from familiar narratives involving women who return the gaze or resist other aspects of patriarchy and thus must be pushed over the edge. As a result, I think some of the most valuable work this film does is in the way that it encourages the viewer to think about this predictable ending and its “inevitability,” as has been discussed both in private and in public discourse (for example, Jane Arthurs 1995; Linda Frost 1998; Colleen Kennedy 1993). The other significant elements are those that show the two characters going further than realizing the awful state they were in as subjects marked as “women” in the symbolic and reveling in the “fun” of brandishing the phallus, as they realize just how doomed to fail the phallus is—not just their appropriated ones, but those of the men chasing them, as well. The separate, individuated self, even when armed, is impossible to defend.

At the end, the Polaroid photo that Louise takes of them before they drive off for their weekend flies out of the car as they drive off the cliff; the static image that each of the women had of herself is gone. The shot of the photo disappearing into the wind indicates the way in which each of them has let go of her sense of an individual self. The choral, uplifting music that swells as they go over the cliff underscores this interpretation of their final choice to forgo the gunplay and the incarceration—to opt out of being either the wielder or the recipient of the phallic weapon, and to let go of protecting the separate self.

The closing music then changes to a song with the lyrics, “You’re a part of me; I’m a part of you.” This song is first heard earlier in the film, when Louise talks to Jimmy on the phone in the hotel room, the morning after the rape and killing. In the earlier scene, the song’s music begins as Louise emotionally asks Jimmy if he loves her, and when he hesitates before answering, she collects herself and appears to resign herself to
realizing that romantic love will not offer a solution to her problems (as any interpretation of Lacan would certainly agree). The lyrics of this song begin when the scene cuts to Louise hurriedly rousing Thelma by the pool and driving off. At this point, the meaning of the lyrics is ambiguous—do they refer to Jimmy, with whom Louise is parting ways, or to Thelma, whom she is about to ask to accompany her to Mexico? When the song plays again over the end credits, it clearly refers to Thelma and Louise, the couple we have seen together throughout the film, and the events, seen in retrospective, have led to the point at which “this grand illusion takes us home,” as the lyrics express.

The song lyrics describe a simple, merging nondualism. The character development shows the two women changing to be more like each other; most dramatically, Thelma merges with the mother-figure Louise, becoming more self-sufficient and sometimes taking the lead in a way that only Louise does in the beginning of the film. Many analyses highlight this transformation (e.g., Janice Welsch 2001: 253-255), but they do not call attention to the way in which the women’s attempt to take control using guns is always a reaction to a confrontation with utter loss in the form of physical or economic assault. One woman witnesses this loss and devastation in the other’s emotional reactions, and these echo her own past experiences. Obviously, Louise shoots Harlan in response to seeing Thelma harmed by him in a way that reverberates with a prior event in Louise’s own life. In response, she appropriates Darryl’s gun and kills Harlan. Later, Thelma takes the gun to commit armed robbery, and she does this in response to seeing Louise utterly distraught at the economic violence JD has wrought upon them by stealing Louise’s savings. Thelma, too, is responding to seeing the loss her partner experiences when Louise breaks down in the hotel room. Less obviously, though, this theft and Louise’s breakdown echoes her own economic oppression at the hands of her husband, who wouldn’t allow her to earn money herself and didn’t compensate her fairly for her work in the home (represented by her jalopy in the garage, which is visually and verbally compared to Darryl’s shiny sports car). Clearly, in scene after scene, the two women resort to using phallic guns after being confronted with loss and lack. So, despite many viewers’ and critics’ pleasure in the retributive violence the women enact, we can see in a Lacanian analysis that they are simply resorting to the tools of the symbolic as a way to deal with lack and absence, just as each of us acquires language to deal with lack and absence. If we add the insights that nondualism brings to Lacan’s work, then we can understand that learning to use guns will not be the end of the development of these characters; there are much more radical steps they can take than simply appropriating the phallus.

In addition to the song lyrics and the character development, the visuals show Thelma and Louise merging with the other in the form of the landscape. They become tan and orangey, like the rock and sand around them. Many analyses characterize their visual transition as being from feminine to masculine (e.g., Hart 1994: 436), but they go beyond taking on a phallic or masculine persona. They visually begin to merge with the land, so that it is harder to differentiate them from everything else around them. Louise expresses their attempt to do this early on when she says, “we’re too conspicuous.” By the end of the film, this is no longer true. Their skin blends into the rock and their car blends into the sky.

Throughout the film, the women lose faith in the promise of the phallus in several ways. It takes Thelma longer than Louise to realize that romantic or sexual attention and
love from a man is not going to make her feel better; it is not going to erase the projected lack or the original lack of the symbolic life. She believed in it enough to marry her high school boyfriend, Darryl, who has turned into a controlling husband. In getting out from under his thumb she responds to the attentions of Harlan, who flatters and attends to her in a way that Louise immediately sees through. Thelma, though, does not. And a day after the rape, Thelma (violating many viewers’ sense of reality) desires and pursues JD. All three men betray her confidence in the romantic/sexual relation as a means of happiness and making good the lack. After JD takes Louise’s savings, Thelma finally begins to wield the phallus herself, as Louise has resigned herself to doing. In Lacanian terms, she has become a man, a person who aspires to possess the phallus and in so doing, tries to pretend s/he is a whole, unsplit, separate-from-others subject. Thelma sees her own transition from housewife to outlaw as “fun,” and the film counts on viewers taking pleasure in this transformation, as well; note that much of the subsequent public argument surrounding the film focused on whether or not the women as outlaws were fun, feminist, threatening to social order, or some combination of these (see, for example, Margaret Carlson 1991; John Leo 1991; Janet Maslin 1991; Patt Morrison 1991; Richard Schickel 1991; Laura Shapiro 1991). But at the very end, Thelma suggests that they relinquish this last symbolic tool—the gun—rather than turn and fight. She does not suggest giving up the gun and turning themselves in to the law, which would further subject them to its projected lack. She suggests the only other visible alternative—driving over the cliff into a giant hole in the ground. She recognizes that her gun has not provided the certainty of a separate self she has sought.

The guns made the two women phallic subjects in the symbolic order, and yet the women finally have to confront the fact that the sense of power the phallus is supposed to provide is never actually realized. The guns that promise security—from bears, serial killers, rapists, policemen—never come through. Over and over the symbolic falls through for Thelma, in the form of the men she tries to trust and rely upon, and then in the form of the gun she picks up in an attempt to take control herself. For Louise, too, this is true. Although Louise is already mistrustful of Darryl, Harlan, JD, and even Jimmy, she is repeatedly tempted to trust Hal, the detective. Hal tracks down Louise’s car, breaks into her house, investigates her past, brings in the FBI, and gets her to stay on the phone to discover their location—but he says he wants to save her from the threats to her life and liberty that have come, from the very beginning, from him. Although he does seem to be truly attempting to help the two women, his is an assistance that reveals the trap of the symbolic itself. It intensifies the lack and suffering one feels as it claims to be ameliorating it.

The unusual freeze-frame and fade to white at the end are subtle cues to viewers that the creators of the film have chosen not to show the women’s deaths, thus drawing

38 A parallel transformation is seen in Thelma’s relationship to food and drink. In the beginning of the film, she limits herself to small bites of a candy bar as she cleans up her kitchen, placing the bar back in the freezer between bites. Her bite-sized portion control continues when she drinks single-serving bottles of Wild Turkey. After JD steals the money and she assumes a phallic position, she finally starts drinking from a big bottle, no longer trying to limit herself to a limited, portion-controlled world. She’s gotten too big for the barely-controlled satisfactions of her former life. By the end of the film, she gives up the drinking altogether.
attention to their symbolic entry into what cannot be symbolized. These devices at the end of the film may allow viewers to question the ending and why it seems inevitable that these characters cannot live outside of the symbolic, but would either have to be reintegrated back into it (by getting caught) or die. These are the limited options that have been presented to women who awaken from their old perceptions for hundreds of years, from the tale of “The Lady of Shalott” (the 1842 poem of Tennyson and far earlier incarnations of the folktale) to *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin’s novel from 1899) to *Thelma & Louise*. Lynda Hart (1994: 445) identifies the canyon into which the women disappear as a representation of the unrepresentable, the Real. I agree with her conclusion that “Thelma and Louise cannot tell a truly different story, but it….historicizes it….indicating that it is susceptible to transformation” (ibid.). Yet there are two ways in which her analysis devalues even the attempt of the characters to escape from symbolic restraints and illusory solutions. First, she calls the spaces that Thelma and Louise seek “impossible,” in both the title and the text of her article, indicating that their attempts are pointless. And second, she calls the landscape through which they attempt to move “imaginary,” suggesting in Lacanian terms that it is regressive and that the women seek to return to a prior state. Without an interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis as nondualistic, even a sympathetic analysis using its terms gets bogged down in seeing movement outside the symbolic as regressive and/or pointless.

It is important to note that male characters do not seem limited to these two options. *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* are stories of 1990s American masculine subjectivity and its problems. They can be understood as problems arising from capitalism, consumerism, feminism, overbearing mothers and emotionally absent fathers, or some other combination of historical factors—and they can be understood as problems arising from the formation of the subject itself. They are films that have a similar basic premise to *Thelma & Louise*; a man realizes that his seemingly successful life veils an unnamable problem that he is beginning to notice. Unlike Thelma and Louise, these male characters do not require a sudden, shocking event to propel them into their search for a more meaningful life. In both films, the male protagonist narrates his story retrospectively from off-screen—a separate space and time—and mocks his former incarnation, the one we see on screen. This provides the reassuring knowledge for the viewer that although the men on screen are weak and powerless, obviously lacking, they will become aware of this lack and will change. Both male protagonists pursue unfruitful means of making good the lack they feel—one through support groups and fight clubs and domestic/economic terrorism, the other through re-living adolescence. Both resort to hyper-masculinized means in these attempts. Both protagonists realize late, at the end of the film, that relationships they took for granted before are actually better ways of dealing with the lack—albeit with the implication that the sexual/romantic relation is a key one, an implication that Lacan would suggest is still illusory as long as one conceives of the phallic function as feasible.

These male characters have control over their stories in a way that Thelma and Louise do not: they narrate them. They also have a greater chance of surviving, both in the diegesis, as in the case of *Fight Club*, or simply in the role of the narrator, as in

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39 *Fight Club* does begin with voiceover in a “present-tense” situation, but immediately moves into the “flashback” that provides the bulk of the film. *American Beauty*, on the other hand, provides a voiceover that identifies itself as speaking from a sort of nonliving realm, the voice of the male lead after he has died.
American Beauty. They are not doomed to the fates of so many transgressive female characters: death, madness, or reintegration into the symbolic. Thelma & Louise provides an ending that can be interpreted as representing movement beyond the symbolic, but it is still immensely problematic in that its signifier is death. Another film, The Piano, encourages and in some ways requires more of this critical awareness of the endings mandated for women who appropriate and relinquish the symbolic.

The Piano

In many ways, The Piano is a more complex and interesting narrative than Thelma & Louise in its exploration of female subjectivity. Thelma & Louise, like most films that suggest that subjectivity and the symbolic order are problematic, do so by confronting the protagonist(s) with some trauma, some kind of death or violence—in this case, patriarchal violence that is physical, verbal, and economic—and the characters respond with violence. It is exactly these kinds of stories and historical events that lead theorists like Slavoj Žižek to conceive of the Real as horrifically void and most commonly encountered in trauma (for example, in 1989: 170-171). Without a traumatic exigency, a subject can live an entire life in the symbolic, always looking for symbolic resolution of symbolic desires, which will never come. In these cases, only witnessing, perpetrating, or experiencing violence or death could shock the subject into questioning his or her concepts of reality.

In contrast, in the traditions of nondualism that Lacan obliquely refers to in his work, both theory and practice lead subjects toward techniques of questioning that symbolic ‘reality’ and experiencing the nonsymbolic, nondual Real directly, without the need of a shocking stimulus. There is no need to believe in some special endpoint of “enlightenment” in order to note or experience the benefits of these practices. The process of practicing itself is the awakening.

The Piano begins with a protagonist who has already begun one of these practices: she is voluntarily silent. Unlike other films in which the heroines are faced with a traumatic event that makes them eventually, in the end, recognize the loss inherent in the symbolic—or in which the heroes respond to this recognition with violence of their own in an effort to deny that loss and project it onto others—in this film, we don’t know exactly why the heroine decided to stop speaking. She has done so at a young age, well before the plot time covered in the film. The term “mute” haunts most analyses of this film, with all the implications of this as a problematic condition, possibly imposed upon her, certainly not beneficial. Yet her silence can also be seen as a choice, a decision to practice silence in the way that hermits, monks, nuns, and adepts have. It is a blatant move to limit one’s involvement in symbolic meaning-making. Though she says in the narration that she does not know why she stopped speaking, both the narration and the diegesis claim that it is a strange and powerful “will” that moves through her and causes many of her actions. Ada has seen original lack—not just projected lack—already from the beginning of the film; her silence can be seen as a nondualistic practice in not separating subject and object as one must do in speaking.

Yet Ada does make music. This is one obvious reason for some critics’ reliance upon Kristeva theory to interpret the film: Kristeva directly addresses music’s nonsymbolic—in her terms, semiotic—capacities, which are explored through Ada’s
character. The main problem with most of the existing analyses, whether they are Kristevan or Kleinian or some other psychoanalytic strand, however, is that they glorify Ada’s entry into the symbolic because it seems resistant or rebellious. Ada’s awakening of desire for Baines, however, is only one part of this story. It is the beginning of her re-integration into understanding herself as a separate self—one who might be identified as having the phallus (as Lacan identifies the “man”) rather than one who has no chance at that (the Lacanian “woman”). Baines is the character who winds up with the desire to be desired, which Lacan claims is the place of the “woman.” While Ada and Baines’ relationship begins with Baines trying to place Ada in a traditional womanly role—basically that of the prostitute—it then changes into a relationship in which these roles are reversed. However, both of these relationships are securely within the symbolic, no matter how refreshing it may seem that Ada begins actively desiring. The end of the film reveals that Ada understands that she has been dragged back into the symbolic order through what seems on the surface to be a transgressive relationship. As in *Thelma & Louise*, the actions of the heroine that seem most resistant and that drive the plot are actions that enmesh her further in the Symbolic order.

In any interpretation of Lacan, desire is a hallmark of symbolic life. As described at the beginning of Chapter 2, desire doesn’t even emerge until the subject is split and can no longer acknowledge his/her longing for nonduality—this is the point at which demands turn into unconscious desire. Some critics writing about *The Piano* problematically assert or assume two things: first, that experiencing or reclaiming desire leads to a happy ending, and second, that entry into the symbolic is the only acceptable or positive outcome. A typical analysis of *The Piano* is found in Michael Real (1996: 200). Real asserts that Ada’s having sex with Baines (instead of Stewart) and beginning to speak (instead of playing piano) represent her liberation. Stella Bruzzi (1993: 232-242), also claims that when Ada moves from Stewart to Baines and from silence to speaking, this is “a reclamation of women’s desires” (242).

Yet the circumstances under which Ada transitions from Stewart to Baines and from silence to speaking reveal that erotic desire, speaking, and other aspects of the symbolic order are fraught with difficulty. These analyses downplay those circumstances—Baines’ economic and physical coercion of Ada—in order to celebrate her eventual desire for Baines. However, if we look at Ada through the lens of a nondualistic psychoanalysis, then she is a character who has already been through the cycle of desire and speaking, and has begun practices that are beyond the patriarchal symbolic. The losses she experiences in the course of the film—her piano, her finger, her daughter’s loyalty—encourage her to take refuge in the institutions and persons who force those losses upon her.

Critics express delight at Ada’s reclamation of desire, yet if we keep in mind the Lacanian explanation of desire outlined in the beginning of Chapter 2, we can better understand Ada’s narration at the end of the film. Once desire has led Ada back into the symbolic, she ends in a place where, in her words, she only “tries” to be happy, rather than actually experiencing happiness.

Up to a point, I agree with the many critics who claim that *The Piano* begins by stressing the regressiveness of being outside the symbolic order, framing it as “pre”-symbolic, even in an adult woman. Ada is a woman who, along with her young daughter, Flora, goes to New Zealand for an arranged marriage. Ada’s childishness is underscored
by her similarities to Flora. As Richard Allen points out, they have similar gestures and costumes, they are often framed similarly, and Flora speaks for Ada (1999: 53). Although Flora has already acquired language, she is still going through a period of deciding whether to separate from her mother and enter the symbolic order fully. The landscape also echoes this, as the ocean often functions as a symbol of a maternal, all-encompassing plenitude. Barcan and Fogarty point out that even the “sucking mud” and tree branches evoke a sense of the landscape as full of obstacles often coded as feminine (1999: 6).

Writing about The Piano tends to describe Ada’s state as presymbolic. In addition to explaining her state as nonlinguistic, they describe it as able to express emotion in a way that the symbolic code cannot (Neil Robinson 1999: 28), and as “animally” and “feeling” (Jane Campion in Barcan and Fogarty 1999: 8). Yet if we think of Ada as attempting to live outside or on the fringes of the symbolic—as having already passed through it—this state could also be without language, but be described as aware or post-rational. This state would not have to relinquish the status of “emotional” or “physical” (associated with the pre-symbolic Imaginary) nor the status of “rational” (associated with the Symbolic), and yet it would not be fully described by those adjectives, either. Both the pre-symbolic and the post-symbolic would see no distinction between Self and Other, but a person who has moved outside the symbolic might be very different from one who has never entered it.

The film repeatedly notes that Ada did learn to speak as a child; she entered the symbolic order during what we may presume was a “normal” mirror stage. When she was 5 or 6, she stopped speaking, refusing to continue active participation in the symbolic order. She also knows how to write and will resort to that when necessary—another sign that she knows the symbolic but resists it or has resigned from it. Thus, she is not in a presymbolic state; rather, she seems to be resisting the symbolic state and the limitations it places on her. Analyses that attempt to place her in the pre-symbolic cannot explain why the film takes pains (in the initial narration) to state that Ada once spoke.

Richard Allen describes two narratives that he sees at work in The Piano. Both center on the entry of the main character, Ada, into the symbolic, developing the self as separate from other, with the piano as either a path to that development or a method of resisting it. This separation is both implicitly and explicitly positive in Allen’s analysis. He describes anything that is not the symbolic as “primordial,” “pre-oedipal,” and close to “psychosis” (1999: 56). In his reading, when Ada enters the symbolic order, she is forced into the “realisation of the unbreachable chasm between self and other” (51; italics mine). That is, Allen believes that she recognizes that she is actually separate from everything else—and he believes that this recognition is true.

We can see in this critic’s approach that a place outside the symbolic, a state in which Self and Other are seen as nondualistic, is seen as illusory or regressive within this interpretation of psychoanalysis. In this analysis, Lacan’s references to and support for nondualistic teachings must be ignored, and The Piano’s alternate ending of silence, which Ada longs for, must also be shunted aside.

40 In Thelma & Louise, the obstacles in the landscape are phallic and masculine; in The Piano, they are enveloping and feminine. In the former, the female characters eventually launch themselves into a canyon, winding up in the topographical equivalent of a vagina, as many critics have noted. In the latter, Ada leaves the enveloping landscape of the frontier for a settled town as she is re-integrated into the symbolic, while the alternative ending immerses her in the ocean itself—an ending more like that of T&L.
In formulating feminist film theory, it seems counterproductive to use language that frames the rejection of (or resistance to) the symbolic order as unfruitful—or even as fruitful but necessarily feminine. Theorizing a non-psychotic psychological state of nonseparation of Self and Other could be more useful to feminists and others who are not well-served by the “truth” of a separate Self.

Critics like Allen are highly concerned that Ada start speaking again, convinced as they are that her muteness is a problem rather than a practice. This is understandable, given that within feminist cinema and scholarship, the enforced and required silencing of women has been brought to light and critically examined in the hopes of enabling women to speak as they wish. However, in *The Piano* we know that Ada’s refusal to speak is a powerful refusal to stay fully within the symbolic order because there is no explanation provided for why Stewart, her husband, does not assert his economic rights over her body by forcing her to have sex or throwing her out of his house. He asserts his rights to owning the piano, and in general, he does not question the rules of the Victorian symbolic order; in fact, he reproduces it, as Allen outlines (1999: 57). In order to not be subject to his discipline (especially as he begins to see her time with Baines, a neighbor, as suspect), Ada must be beyond the laws of this order in some way. Her will, expressed primarily through refusing to speak, positions her there.

Ada’s piano playing is a mode of expression that is not fully language, either. It is usually songs of her own composition, and it is not linked to sheet music. Morag, an older woman, makes a further distinction when she says that Ada’s piano playing is not like Nessie’s, another white woman. Morag emphasizes how it “creeps inside” a person, echoing the suggestions throughout the film that Ada can place ideas directly inside other people’s heads. Kirsten Moana Thompson sees the piano playing as showing the “possibility of sublime transcendence” (1999: 74), something that cannot be represented, only experienced. The sublime is a state similar to what I have been describing as “awakening” based on Vedantic and Buddhist texts, and what Lacan refers to as “jouissance of the Other,” which can be experienced after conceptualizing the Self and Other as separate and then further letting go of the illusion of or hope for phallic power and separation. However, transcendence has shades of the world-denying approach of Shankara’s nondualism, and can develop into the idea of awakening or jouissance as becoming or acquiring something other than what one already is—further entrapping one in desire. The problem with phrasing this kind of experience as “outside” or “beyond” the symbolic is that this phrasing suggests yet another duality, that of inside the symbolic and outside the symbolic.\(^{41}\) Butler has made an argument that the “real” or the “abject” is not outside the symbolic so definitively after all, and the way in which she sees this area as productively applying pressure to the symbolic seems similar to Kristeva’s formulation of the semiotic, that place from which Kristeva says there comes a pulsion of nonsymbolic ruptures in meaning (Moi 1985: 170). Butler and Kristeva, by pointing out how the real is not actually outside of discourse altogether, blur the distinctions between “real” and “imaginary” and “symbolic” that Lacanian theory proposes.

It is clear, though, that Ada is not fully within the symbolic, and other characters see her as someone who has resisted its limitations and who is not interested in phallic power and separation. “Ada’s piano playing avoids the pitfall of recuperation by

\(^{41}\) From the point of view of nonduality, this would be inaccurate. Hence the idea that from the point of view of the awakened, awakening is a non-event; nothing has changed; it was always as it is.
masculine discourse” (Robinson 1999: 33), and her initial sexual activity with Baines also avoids punishment. Stewart is afraid of her and respects her while she resists the symbolic order; later, once she has decided to enter it, he punishes her repeatedly. He cannot understand her behavior until she shows that she has re-entered the symbolic order—desiring Baines, kissing herself in a mirror, writing a love note. Indeed, as predicted by Lacan’s, Butler’s, and Kristeva’s theories, Stewart thinks Ada may be mentally disturbed. When she demonstrates that she still has access to a power that is not of the symbolic order, transferring her thoughts to him without saying them (although interestingly, Stewart can only understand them as language), he once again fears her.

Yet it is not Stewart who most directly challenges Ada’s effort to experience life in nonsymbolic ways. Baines is the one who forces Ada to confront re-entry into the symbolic when he takes the piano: if she’s going to continue rejecting language and the expectations of adult femininity with her piano (and her daughter), then she’s going to have to endure his sexual touches and desires (in order to get the piano back). Yet what he actually wants is more than just for her to tolerate his barked commands and intrusive hands—he wants her to desire him back. If Ada continues to resist entering the symbolic fully, then she will not desire him; she will only tolerate him until she gets her piano back. She will only desire him if she separates the Self from Other and accepts language. “Bodily desire and articulation of an independent selfhood are inseparable” (Robinson 1999: 32). This is true because one cannot desire something that is already part of one’s Self; it is only when one sees the Self as separate from other things and people that one can desire those things or people.

Robinson’s perspective is clearly in line with the common interpretation of the Lacanian mirror stage, which forces the critic to adopt an approving (or at least resigned) tone toward those events that individuate the subject, a stage that is seen as not only necessary and inevitable, but also permanent. Lacan’s work seems mostly resigned to the constant circulation of desire, while critics like Robinson seem pleased about it. Although Lacan makes references to those who may have rid themselves of it and his metaphysics seems to be informed by nondualist traditions, he does not teach their techniques for ridding oneself of desire. He describes the situation without providing much hope for change. (In contrast, within a nondualist tradition, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism start with injunctions to recognize human anguish, to understand its cause, which is precisely those constant desires and cravings Lacan describes, and to systematically let go of those desires (see, for example, Batchelor 1997: 6-11).)

The risk of desire is that which comes with seeing the Self as separate. What Ada will lose is a sense of connectedness, to her daughter and to her piano (among other things), which is not presymbolic or immature. In fact, it may be more accurate than what re-entering the symbolic can offer: heterosexual desire. I agree with other critics that the film certainly frames heterosexual desire with Baines as liberating, since it is shown in contrast to the far worse fate of marriage to Stewart. However, it also points out the ways in which this “love story” with Baines is far from happy and ideal. Interpreting the story through a nondualistic framework allows us to bring more attention to Ada’s practice of silence, and the possibility that in fact she might be happier and more authentic if she continued to move beyond individual subjectivity rather than being drawn back into desire.
Ada begins to get angry as Baines objectifies her with his desire, staring at her, commanding her to show herself, touching her as she plays piano, and smelling her clothes. Baines simultaneously desires her and sees her as an object, something separate from himself—these two things are intertwined, since if he were not fully in the symbolic, he would not see her as something to want to have; he would see her as already one with himself, and one does not want what one already is. Understanding that Baines sees her as an object forces Ada to confront the symbolic again. In seeing that he sees her as an object, something separate, she begins to see herself that way, and because she returns to seeing herself as separate from everything else, she begins to desire him back.

Both Allen (1999: 51) and Robinson (1999: 31-32) see this as an improvement in Ada’s situation, because the only alternative they can imagine is one in which Ada is stuck in a pre-oedipal or pre-symbolic stage. Many viewers, in fact, see Ada’s articulation of desire (and independent selfhood) as desirable, as what makes this character feminist or progressive (see, for example, Fincina Hopgood 2002), but those interpretations are responses to the repression of women’s sexual desire and expressions of independence in the social world. We can imagine, as in the previous chapter, that in moving beyond the symbolic, desire and self are not lost, just transformed. However, this particular film cannot offer this transformation; a transformed desire cannot blossom from the coerced sexual-economic arrangement between Ada and Baines. This film can only direct our attention to the failures of heterosexual romance.

Ada’s “desire” for Baines as a positive force in this text is revealed as problematic if we look at the consistent manipulations and ways in which desires are created in her by men taking things away. Baines takes the piano and then “gives” it back. He separates her from her daughter for long periods of time and later “provides” for her and her daughter to live together. Stewart takes one of Ada’s fingers and Baines “makes” her a replacement. Ada has created her own means of expression through the piano and her daughter; Baines separates her from both—and in the end of the film, then “teaches” her to speak (again). Throughout the film, patriarchal, symbolic-order romantic love tries to stand in for something it itself has taken away. This kind of desire creates the very lack it pretends to fill, just as described in the early formation of the subject.

The text of The Piano will not allow Ada to rest outside the symbolic at the end of the film. Instead, there are multiple versions of the ending. Neil Robinson writes of these “multiple iterations” caused when “teller and audience negotiate the story in order to find a telling that pleases both,” as shown within The Piano when Flora and Ada tell stories and tailor them to their audiences (1999: 22). The film’s ending also has multiple iterations: the scene in the town of Nelson and the scene of drowning are two ways of ending the film’s story, allowing the audience to negotiate the meaning that pleases them more.

In one ending, Ada returns to the symbolic as she lives a life in the town of Nelson with Baines, and she notes with surprise that she is trying to be happy. In the other ending, she drowns and states that in the silence of the sea, she is happy. These two endings sit side by side, overlapped by the voiceover, which hints that if the Nelson ending is more likely, then in that place Ada is always longing for knowledge of the Self and Other as nondual, and the silence that ends the divisions created by language. Whether the viewer believes that one ending is the “reality,” or instead believes that either is possible, she is confronted with and encouraged to think about both.
These two options do encourage the viewer to “denaturalize” Ada’s ending, even more so than *Thelma & Louise* did for those two characters. Yet they still provide an extremely limited array. Robinson admits that the film “cannot yet model clearly” how a woman might live within the symbolic order without being erased (38). I must add that neither can it model how she might live once having seen through the symbolic order. Like *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano* can only provide two options: full acceptance of life in the symbolic order or death.

Allen emphasizes that by throwing herself into the water, Ada tries to follow the object that was associated with her life outside the symbolic, and by coming back up out of the water, she goes on to live a life in the symbolic with a missing finger that constantly reminds her of her lack of wholeness in that symbolic order (1999: 62). I agree with the content of Allen’s interpretation of the ending(s), yet not with the way he disparages Ada’s attempts to live outside the symbolic. Allen believes that Ada has no chance at ever being whole, that the piano was nothing but a “prop” that gave her the illusion of wholeness, and that now that she is safely inside the symbolic, she can see the “truth” of her lack. This is an important lesson, but it elides the difference between seeing the truth of others projecting lack onto you and seeing the truth of the original lack you have assumed by virtue of using symbols—for Ada learns both these lessons and in the end returns to the standard role of a woman in the Symbolic: a separate subject not empowered by a belief that she wields the phallus and traditionally a primary target for those who wish to disavow and project their feelings of lack. She does not assume the role of a man—someone who thinks he exists and has power as an individual self—nor the role of one who has relinquished all belief in the phallus, in desire, in a separate self, like the mystics Lacan uses as examples of the nonphallic.

From a feminist point of view, this is entirely pessimistic. Even Butler’s theories do not describe a way in which an individual can experience nonduality rather than separation; the formulation from which she starts, in which there is no prediscursive individual “subject” at all, is only a concept for us to hear and perhaps try to believe. But a nondualistic interpretation takes a different view of Ada’s initial decision not to speak and the nature of her relationship with her daughter and her piano. Her eventual re-establishment of her separate self and desire for an Other (at one point made visual as she gazes at herself and kisses herself in a mirror) is a disappointing re-entry into the symbolic. As the wife of Stewart, she is subjected to the will of a man, and her resistance seems to come in the form of her desire for Baines. But in fact, this seemingly transgressive desire leads her away from the awakening she had long ago begun. With a black cloth over her head, she re-learns to speak. She has returned to darkness, to sleepwalking. Unlike Kate Chopin’s character in *The Awakening*, Ada’s extramarital affair leads her away from a deeper understanding. Ada chooses life instead of death, yes, but that life is in firmly re-established in the symbolic.

Unfortunately, while *The Piano* shows that neither life in the symbolic nor death in the ocean is a happy ending, it cannot show us any other option.
Act as if the future of the universe depends on what you do, while laughing at yourself for thinking that your actions make any difference.
—Buddhist saying

Conclusions and Further Applications

It is unfortunate that neither of these films can imagine a woman awakening and also staying alive. *The Piano*, at least, suggests that neither re-entering the symbolic nor committing suicide is a happy ending. And Campion’s later film, *Holy Smoke* (1999), does re-imagine the outcome of a coercive male-female relationship and the question of nonsymbolic experiences.42 As Robinson notes, the exciting thing about these films is that the audience can keep alive the criticism of the symbolic/social/patriarchal order, even if the character cannot (37). Since these characters either re-enter the symbolic order or wind up dead, the audience has to do a bit more work to keep this criticism alive.

It is permissible to either see women who are together and relinquishing the markers of the symbolic, or a woman who goes on living at the end—just not both in one story. *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano* offer openings for a critique of the patriarchal symbolic order, but they by no means require these critiques for an understanding of the films. So why use the symbolic apparatus of film in order to try to lessen the burdens the Symbolic Order imposes on certain individuals and groups? “There is no other space from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language” (Moi 1985: 170). I agree that feminists interested in individual agency and social change must speak, and I would argue that there is also room for nonsymbolic experience as a regular practice. Nonsymbolic experiences need not be prompted only by violence or near-death incidents, and this is something little-explored in mainstream films.

Kristeva posits three areas where the nonsymbolic—the semiotic—pulses through the symbolic most insistently: madness, poetry, and divine ecstasy. A fourth, identified by Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, is death. Why do narrative films that show women resisting the symbolic order so often rely on madness and death for their themes, and particularly for closure? Perhaps poetry and meditative divine ecstasy are not visual enough. There is certainly a long tradition of stories relying on madness, death, near-death, and violence as their primary modes of telling stories about awakening and enlightenment; as one example, the Bhagavad Gita uses the metaphor of war within a family to portray a struggle within the individual subject. The modes of production and consumption of modern popular films make it less likely that viewers will interpret violence as a metaphor for the “battle” within, or death as metaphor for transformation, without extratextual commentary and discussion.

However, even films like *Thelma & Louise* and *The Piano*, with their limited visions of how these journeys might end, inspire public and private discussions of their meanings that can include the possibility of awakening to a new perspective on reality. Do these discussions simply help the existing social order thrive and expand, or do they encourage people to encode and decode signs at the edges of their meanings, pushing us further beyond what we already know? I think that when the meanings of these films become the center of public discussion, they do offer a challenge to hegemonic ideas of

42 Interestingly, to far less positive popular reviews.
subjecthood and gender relations. While I wouldn’t say that they introduce an antithesis to hegemony’s thesis that results in a harmonious synthesis containing a balance of the two—this would be to ignore the incredible force that hegemony has—I do think that they introduce new possibilities, new ways of thinking about where one begins and ends and how one relates to others, to many people. These possibilities do not simply disappear when the magazine articles hit the recycling bin and the DVD moves out of the new release section. While the films and discussions of their meanings may indeed help the existing social order to become flexible and thrive, they also help subgroups of that society become flexible and thrive in ways they could not before, and they do so in unpredictable ways.

Three recent dramas that take up these themes are Mike Leigh’s *Closer* (2004), Paul Haggis’s *Crash* (2004), and Jim Jarmusch’s *Broken Flowers* (2005). They feature characters that are flat and/or unsympathetic enough that viewers retain a distance from events and can see the samsara—the cycle of repetitive craving and cruelty that people play out, based on seeing themselves as separate from others and acting in new situations in habitual ways. Without prior knowledge of nondualistic theories, however, the endings of all three of these films seem hopeless, and the viewer will not necessarily be prompted to examine his or her own cravings and behaviors for similar cycles like those that are so easy to see in the characters.

A more lighthearted recent film, David O. Russell’s comedy *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), provides a more explicit, albeit jumbled, presentation of nondualistic theories and practices. However, films like *I Heart Huckabees* don’t work well for viewers who don’t have familiarity with nondualistic metaphysics. For example, in a movie review, Jim Pappas (2004) tries to make sense of the film by comparing Vivian and Bernard to God and Caterina to the Devil (capitals his). His conclusion is that the film is gibberish. While it does mix Western existentialism and nihilism with nondualistic ideas from the Advaita Vedanta and Tantric Buddhist traditions, it is not nonsensical until a viewer tries to make sense of it with Judeo-Christian symbolism.43

These are a few of the recent films that could benefit from a thorough analysis that considers the intersection of nondualism and psychoanalysis to interpret and elaborate upon their themes. Such discussions about film characters’ subjectivities offer a point of entry for a nonhegemonic ontology and metaphysics. Mainstream films, up to this point, have not been fully successful at exploring this possibility on their own, particularly as it bears upon female characters’ awareness of self/other permeability. The addition of critical discussion of these possibilities in scholarly and popular forums may offer more people an introduction to viewing the material world around them, their place in it, and their relationship to “others” in a very different way.

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43 Anecdotally, a student in an introductory media aesthetics class commented that she thought the metaphysics the characters in the film espoused sounded like something the filmmakers “just made up.” (FST/COM 146 class discussion, January 12, 2005) I explained that Russell most definitely did not invent nondualism. Viewers’ unfamiliarity with nondualism clearly makes it difficult to impossible for them to make sense of films like *I Heart Huckabees* and *Holy Smoke*—and difficult for readers to make sense of poststructuralists like Lacan.
Appendix: Film Synopses

Thelma & Louise
Louise is a waitress with a noncommittal boyfriend, Jimmy, and Thelma is a waitress, cook, and maid to Darryl, her husband, a man who doesn’t want Thelma to work outside the home or have children. They leave town for a weekend vacation and stop at a roadside bar. There, Louise kills a man who has assaulted and is trying to rape Thelma. Louise, believing that she will be prosecuted despite the circumstances, decides to flee to Mexico and asks Thelma if she wants to accompany her. The two women run from local, state, and federal police, encountering men who hinder and help their progress along the way: Jimmy, who brings Louise’s savings; a hitchhiker named JD who steals that savings; the owner of a convenience store that Thelma robs; an unnamed policeman, whom they lock in the trunk of a patrol car; and Earl, a harassing trucker whose truck they blow up. Louise also interacts with Hal, a detective who is both aiding the efforts to track them down and attempting to help them extricate themselves from the mess. The two women decide, when trapped at the edge of a canyon, to drive over the edge rather than surrender to the law or continue fighting it with its own weapons.

The Piano
Ada is a nineteenth-century woman who does not speak. She and her young daughter, Flora, are sent from Scotland to New Zealand to marry a man she doesn’t know, Stewart. She brings her daughter and a few possessions, including a piano, which she plays lovingly. Her new husband refuses to bring the piano from the beach where it landed to the house in the forest. A neighbor, Baines, offers to take the piano and “sell” it back to Ada in exchange for piano lessons, but he soon makes it clear to Ada that what he wants is sexual interaction, not piano playing. Ada at first rejects him, then she submits reluctantly, and then she actively engages in this sexual relationship. Stewart spies on them and responds by boarding Ada up in his house. She tries to communicate with Baines by writing on a piano key and sending it via her daughter, but Flora instead shows the key to Stewart, who retaliates by chopping off one of Ada’s fingers in front of Flora. Ada, Baines, and Flora leave the island together, and in the process Ada jettisons the piano, begins to commit suicide, then changes her mind and swims up to the surface of the water. The three then settle in a town where Ada teaches piano lessons and Baines re-teaches her to speak.
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