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Exploring the Gender Identity and Subjectivity from Lacanian psychoanalysis: A Case Study of Anatomy of a Fall

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Abstract: This paper investigates the film Anatomy of a Fall through Lacanian psychoanalysis of subjects to reevaluate gender identity. Delving into the internal conflicts within the subjects, the authors reveal the illusion of subjectivity and the ideological operation of gender discourse. The analysis begins by critiquing two dominant feminist interpretations of the film: re-centralization, which attempts to invert traditional gender hierarchies, and essentialism, which assumes a fixed, inherent femininity. These perspectives, the authors argue, are limited in their understanding of gender identity, which is the signifier constructed by the symbolic order. By applying Lacan's theories on the formation of the subject, the paper demonstrates how the film's subjects are captured by the discourse of gender and experience the collapse of their subjectivity. The discussion further positions gender identity as a product of ideological discipline, which conceals the subject's inherent lack and incompleteness. Through this deconstructive approach, the paper proposes a potential path toward a transcendental subjectivity that transcends the constraints of traditional gender roles and ideological frameworks. Ultimately, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of how ideology shapes and limits identity, offering insights into the possibilities for resisting and reimagining subjectivity within contemporary gender discourse.

Keywords: subjectivity, Lacanian, gender identity, Anatomy of a Fall

1. Introduction

The film *Anatomy of a Fall*, which won the 76th Palme d'Or, tells the story of Sandra, a German writer living in a mountain chalet, who is accused of murdering her husband, Samuel. He falls to his death while their son Daniel is out. As evidence unfolds, the audience interprets the entire family and marital relationship through the perspectives of different characters, revealing that the marital conflict is only the tip of the iceberg, while the relationships between people are always complex and ambiguous. In the end, Sandra is acquitted based on her son's testimony. Director Justine Triet blurs the lines between reality and imagination, leaving the power of interpretation to the audience. Influenced by neoliberal feminism, which emphasizes self-empowerment and individual success of women, Triet uses reality as a template to portray a rare, perverted, and compelling image of a strong woman who challenges traditional gender roles in the couple's relationship.

Feminists who regard this film as feminist argue that it highlights the potential strength of a biological woman who gains power and subjectivity by breaking through social constraints

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traditionally reserved for men, including the freedom to be oneself outside of family roles. However, this view also deepens gender divides. Critics argue that the film is patriarchal because Sandra's portrayal aligns with masculine traits, suggesting she represents men rather than women and that the film is ultimately about the exploitation of the weak by the strong. The former tend to equate biological women with female identity, attempting to reverse gender roles in a way that re-centers women, which can be seen as a form of re-centralization. The latter assumes a unified and fixed core of femininity, conflating the term "female" with the patriarchal definition, thus falling into essentialism.

The authors utilize psychoanalysis to explore subjectivity and gender identity in the film, emphasizing a hermeneutic approach that prioritizes interpreting the filmmakers' unconscious rather than conscious expressions, remaining open to interpretations. Gender is discussed through the lens of post-feminism and queer theory, which contend that gender is a performance constructed by society, highlighting its fluidity and pluralism. Each gender identity exists only as a social construct signifier without essential or universal attributes. This paper aims to demonstrate the subject's split within the psychoanalytic framework, uncover the imaginary structure of reality, and examine how gender identity masks the subject's incompleteness and the impossibility of authentic subjectivity through film text analysis.

*All citations of film dialogue are from *Anatomy of a fall: Triet, J. Anatomy of a fall. Les Films Pelléas-Les Films de Pierre, Francia [1].*

2. Analysis

2.1. The subject

When discussing the subject, it is often treated as an essential, stable, and identical entity, as if this "subject," inherently rational and metaphysical, is endowed with free will to create its subjectivity. This perspective constructs a worldview based on the binary opposition between subject and object, defining "objective" through "subjective" opinions and avoiding the question: If a subject's desires are shaped by culture, does its subjectivity arise from itself or the Other? Nietzsche argues that since Plato, Western philosophy has sought universal, inevitable, and eternal truth, assuming that human thought can achieve objective knowledge through reason and experience [2]. However, language mediates human understanding, and truth exists only as symbols [3]. "There are no facts, only interpretations" [4]. Nietzsche's perspectivism paved the way for postmodern psychoanalytic theory and Derrida's post-structuralism to challenge traditional truths and value systems that shape the unconscious.

"The unconscious is structured like a language." (l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage) [5]. Lacan introduces Saussurean linguistic theory, pronouncing the impossibility of a Cartesian "I think" self-aware subject through his theory of the three registers. He further interprets the split and emptiness within the subject through the mirror stage and a reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex, distinguishing between the ego and the unconscious subject. As he cautioned, people should not confuse the ego as an imaginary function with the subject of the unconscious [2]. In other words, the ego exists as a part of the imaginary order of the subject. "According to Lacan's epistemology, acts of consciousness and experiences of the mature subject necessarily imply a structural coordination between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real" [6].

Lacan introduced "the Symbolic," "the Real," and "the Imaginary" as signifiers, much like the signifier "subject." These signifiers only gain meaning retroactively, constructed through the differences between words and symbols. "The signifier is attained by the forgetting of the mark that constitutes difference, in favor of things which are different: 'the signifier originates from the effacing of the trace'" [7]. The Imaginary is the dimension of the mirror, involving the ego,

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narcissism, objects of desire, and the ideal-ego, marking the first alienation of the subject. The Symbolic (the big Other) encompasses signifiers, symbols, rules, prohibitions, language, and social norms, where the subject gains identities necessary for social life. Together, these registers form the recognized reality. The Real, however, is the repressed residue of reality, representing what cannot be symbolized. It is structurally necessary but ontologically absent; once symbolized, it is lost.

The subject enters the Imaginary and forms the ego in what Lacan describes as the first alienation during the mirror stage. Before this stage, the infant does not distinguish between self and others or itself and the outside world [8]. Through the mirror, which is not necessarily physical but a medium reflecting the infant as a unified entity, the infant projects a complete, unified, autonomous image onto itself, gaining an illusory identification. Lacan describes this process as the establishment of the ego, yet the imaginary identification of "this is 'I'" is a "misrecognition." The infant's sense of unity is actually an identification with the Other. "Alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order." as Lacan claims, the unified ego originates from the infant's narcissistic omnipotence, which is an identification with an object outside of the infant's subject and the idealization of an incomplete self. The ideal-ego represents the ideal of perfection the ego strives for, setting the foundation for the Imaginary's fantasy construction. Lacan referred to the Imaginary reflection of the ego as "the little other" or "the object a," symbolizing the unachievable object of desire.

Therefore, the subject's imaginary self-identification becomes objectified. The subject's birth occurs after the second alienation, which happens upon entering the symbolic order. Mediated by language, the subject identifies with "the law of the father" and is governed by the unconscious. To gain a position within the symbolic order, the subject must relinquish and repress parts of itself. The question "What does the Other want?" signifies the subject's acknowledgment of the symbolic order. It recognizes itself through the gaze of the Other to achieve social validation and become a "person" in the world. Through identification with the symbolic order, particularly the symbolic father, the subject establishes an ego-ideal, identifying itself with the Other or the patriarchal "father."

"The ego-ideal is the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likable and worthy of love – the position from which we look at ourselves through the gaze of the Symbolic. It is through this 'secondary identification' that the aggressivity the infant experiences in the mirror phase is transcended" [2]. The subject's structure is dialectical. It moves from misrecognizing itself as the Other to identifying with the Other through the Other's gaze, continuously approaching the symbolic identity recognized by the symbolic order. Simultaneously, the subject undergoes the Oedipus complex, conforming to the disciplinary norms of the symbolic order and repressing desires that conflict with the father's law of the Big Other. As a result, individuals can only express themselves through language, symbols, and culture to be understood by others. The rules of language limit how meaning systems function, so the subject can only apprehend the world through an ideological framework, which is the implementation of the symbolic order.

"The subject's obsession with the illusory object is aimed at seeking a sense of unity, perfection, and identity...The ego-ideal represents the demands placed on the subject by social culture and ideology, and the subject's conformity to these demands. It serves a social and ideological function. On the other hand, the ideal-ego is a sense of self-satisfaction and identification under the influence of the symbolic order. It is an illusive and mirrored perception, where the subject, through social recognition, believes they have met the standards of the ego-ideal and integrated into society as a self-aware, autonomous, and complete subject. The subject needs ideological illusions to create a sense of a complete living environment, where they can escape the reality of being alienated and enslaved" [9]. Through a review of Lacan's idea that "the subject's desire is the desire of the Other,"

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the establishment of the subject implies a fundamental split. "Subjectivity" either describes self-centeredness that aligns with narcissistic projections (non-pejorative), or it describes autonomy recognized and esteemed within discourse and ideology, and these two aspects coexist. When these aspects conflict, however, the subject can fall into irreconcilable conflicts.

In identification, the subject aligns with both "the self that is being examined" and "the image of itself formed by the Other's gaze." The subject behind this identification exists outside both identities, representing the "nothingness" or "absence" from the Real. Conflicts between the ideal-ego and ego-ideal, can manifest as mental illness. The process of alienation (castration) is inherently incomplete, leaving unresolved remnants, as signifiers endlessly refer to other signifiers and cannot fully encompass the Real, leaving unresolved and inexpressible elements that constitute the domain of the Real [10]. Therefore, the subject can not be fully expressed yet understood from a suspended anchor point of communication. Both ideal-ego and ego-ideal imply the objectivity and incompleteness of the subject. However, the symbolic order, or the ideology, masks this structural lack with sublime objects of desire, sustaining the fantasy of unity.

As a construct within the symbolic order, gender identity functions as a discourse that conceals its emptiness and perpetuates societal norms. Essentially, gender identity is a social discipline where the subject must identify with a specific role to be understood and recognized. "Male" and "female" are signifiers, and the roles they signify within the symbolic order are central to repression. Societal expectations—whether for a woman to be a gentle wife or an independent career woman, or for a man to be a strong husband or embrace diversity—all share a similar structure.

In queer theory, viewing gender as a performance does not fully deconstruct its oppressive nature. Defining oneself within a gender essentially enters the signifying chain under the symbolic order, substituting one signifier for another without grasping the essence of "male" and "female" as symbolic identities. Thus, the deconstruction of binary gender opposition merely substitutes the content of the oppositional pair, while Lacan's assertion that "the sexual relation does not exist" fundamentally reveals that any subject can be a male or a female, not that a subject can be any female or male. Detached from the symbolic order, "female" and "male" as signifiers hold no inherent meaning; they only serve to anchor the linguistic system. Ideology requires subjects to identify with gender—or a particular group (even "queer" is a symbolic identification)—thus diverting them from more fundamental questions: "Why must I identify?" rather than "Why must I identify with this?" The former seeks to resolve internal conflicts, while the latter points to the emptiness of the symbolic order, the things beyond symbols.

2.2. The subjectivity

2.2.1. Samuel: the disillusionment of subjectivity

Samuel's death serves as the pivotal point of the film, illustrating how internal conflicts within the subject lead to self-destruction. This destruction signifies not only Samuel's inability to endure the contradictions of subjectivity but also his way to the sublime. Throughout the film, the audience is given only one significant glimpse into Samuel's perspective—the climactic argument between the couple. Otherwise, his presence is conveyed either through his voice or other's interpretations. At the film's outset, Samuel's existence is introduced through the misogynistic song "P.I.M.P.," which can be seen as expressing an unconscious ideology—a fantasy of the charismatic male under patriarchal discourse. "The P.I.M.P. song becomes a substitution for Samuel's actual voice: while there is no language to the music, as the prosecutor suggests, it can still symbolically express anger and pent-up frustration, enhanced by the repetition" [11]. The instrumental version of "P.I.M.P.," symbolizing Samuel, lacks linguistic signifiers, shaping the audience's first impression of him

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through the song's auditory sensation. At this point, Samuel is an entire object waiting to be understood.

When Samuel first appears as an image—a lifeless body—he naturally becomes a figure that "should" be sympathized with within the symbolic order: a victim. The closest the audience gets to Samuel is during the courtroom scene when a recording of the couple's argument is played. In the recording, Samuel laments that he has given too much to Sandra, losing time for his writing and feeling that his entire life revolves around her. However, Sandra bluntly points out that these life choices were his own: "It is your own trap." During the argument, it is revealed that with Samuel's consent, Sandra used his ideas and succeeded in writing. As Samuel escalates his accusations, Sandra counters that his preaching wastes even more time and asserts that he should act instead of portraying himself as a victim: "I see you very clearly, just not as a victim." When Samuel confronts Sandra about her sexual relationships with others, accusing her of using them to satisfy her physical needs, she responds, "You make yourself the victim." Samuel's subconscious rebuttal reveals a glimpse of his inner conflict: "I'm not a victim; I'm a man who has been cheated on. Plundered and cheated on." This statement hints at a dichotomy between being a victim and a man. Samuel repeatedly articulates his tragic figure, painting Sandra as a heartless tyrant, yet he denies being a victim. While justifying his needs and frustrations, he disregards Sandra's sexual needs. "You complain about the life you chose. You are not a victim. Not at all. Your generosity conceals something dirtier and meaner. You're incapable of facing your ambitions and resent me for it... You are petrified by your own fucking standards and your fear of failure... You're smart. I know you know I'm right." As a writer, Sandra possesses a powerful ability to analyze people, mercilessly exposing the flaws Samuel is unwilling to confront. She not only reveals these weaknesses but also clearly understands that her husband is aware of them and tries to encourage him to seek appropriate solutions. However, she overlooks why Samuel denies, avoids, and refuses to face these issues. Consequently, their argument culminates with Samuel exclaiming, "I can't stand any more of your fucking ice!" just as the screen fades.

In the conversation where Samuel expresses his desire, "I want time to start writing, just the same as you, " He projects his ideal-ego onto Sandra. This projection causes the first loss of his subjectivity as he both pursues and envies an external object. In fact, his narcissistic projection is what initially attracted the two to each other. Sandra describes Samuel as charming, and similarly, Samuel is drawn to Sandra's distinctive, unsmiling charm. Lacan describes two fundamentally different types of love: narcissistic sexed love and true sublime love (two fundamental types of love in Lacan's writing that need to be differentiated: narcissistic sexed love and true sublime love)[12]. The former operates through a narcissistic desire to be desired by others, where the lover is seen as the desired object (***object petit a***) in the lover's mind. This projection originates from the imaginary identification during the mirror stage, and the gap between the ideal mirror image and the subject explains the emptiness in the subject's love. "Love is deceptive because the subject who demands to be loved or who imagines that he gives love fails to recognize that it is really desire that is operating within the hollow of demand for love. At the same time, the lover loves so that the other will see her or him how she or he wants to be seen" [12]. When the subject fails to receive the expected response from their lover, this narcissistic love manifests as hatred. Samuel's agreement to let Sandra use his ideas stems from his self-obsession and the validation he derives from being "needed." Sandra's success forces Samuel to confront the disunity between himself and his ideal-ego. He sees Sandra as his ideal-ego, and her existence prevents him from being himself, or rather, from accepting his failures in life and writing. It's not just that Samuel denies his failures; he denies that the subject who fails is himself. He believes that Sandra's success should be his, leading to a profound internal conflict, a loss of subjectivity, avoidance of his writing issues, and prolonged depression.

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Moreover, Samuel's denial of his predicament and victimhood stems from the symbolic order he has internalized. His conflict with his ego-ideal—the identity he aspires to within the symbolic order—leads to a further loss of subjectivity. Through castration, the subject gains recognition by the symbolic by obtaining an object of desire to support its existence. Samuel identifies himself as a male and a father, roles that demand strength according to the big Other. The role he is expected to play, the role he desires, is not only that of a man but also of a father: powerful, authoritative, successful, and a representative of the symbolic order whom others desire to become. Admitting to being a "victim," a man weaker than his wife, a cheated husband, or a failed writer is unacceptable. His pride and societal expectations prevent him from revealing his vulnerability, despair, or failures. Reviewing the core points of Sandra's accusation, as highlighted by the male prosecutor: "I hear a man determined to regain control of his life... Do you kill yourself after fighting for time and self-esteem?" Samuel presents himself as a determined scholar with a strong sense of subjectivity. However, when Sandra explains that Samuel was unwilling to express his true thoughts and attributes his inability to write to his dependence on medication, his psychologist attributed his depression to the car accident and Sandra's reproaches. Samuel describes his feelings of guilt as being castrated by Sandra, "He described your behavior as quite castrating...by forcing him to give up what mattered most to him: writing." However, when speaking to Sandra, his narrative became more complex: "...and he wanted to write...he just stopped. He would belittle himself and ended up convincing himself he could not write because of his dependency on the medication." Through Samuel's various confessions to various individuals, it becomes evident that he was acutely aware of his own failures. However, he constantly attributed these failures—or instead, his suffering—to a series of excuses: the car accident, teaching, medication, Sandra, time... These metonymic excuses covered the disunity between Samuel and his ego-ideal, masking his inadequacy within the symbolic order. Samuel experiences castration—a process of deprivation and alienation. He feels that something is irretrievably lost, just as Sandra senses, "Something was gone." As a father, Samuel was forced to abandon his rebellious spirit as an individualistic writer, and viewing his son's accident as his own failure further stripped him of the jouissance of writing. The male psychologist and the male prosecutor, as representatives of the "Name-of-the-Father," are defenders of the patriarchal order. They presuppose men's dominant position—associated with subjectivity and higher status—while women, as wives, are seen as extensions of their husbands, occupying a lower status. A man who describes himself as a suffering subject is forbidden within the symbolic order; it is abnormal and incomprehensible. "A man is traumatized because he cannot be qualified for his symbolic role, whereas a woman is traumatized because she does not possess the object of the big Other's desire" [13]. The identification of the symbolic order constructed Samuel's ego-ideal. He is expected and expects to be a strong father yet he fails. Meanwhile, as he fails, Sandra embodies the successful father figure. As Sandra's counsel mentions, "He felt trapped... His wife published book after book. He must write... This energy is the energy of despair... In his final days, this man is not facing a war in his marriage; he is facing his own failures. Sandra Voyter is only guilty of succeeding where her husband failed." Samuel cannot accept his fall from master to slave, as his gender identity makes it impossible for him to accept a subordinate role.

Thus, Samuel feels compelled to love Sandra and view her as a competitor, a rival contending for the same identity. Sandra urges him to break free from societal constraints and confront his trauma—particularly the Daniel car accident—rather than relying on endless metonymic substitutions for imaginary compensation. Through attempts at medication, moving, fresh starts, and quitting his job, Samuel repeatedly faces the failure of these excuses and is forced to confront the agony of his fractured subjectivity. Therefore, Samuel's final and unreasonable outburst is a desperate release: his predicament remains unsolvable whether Sandra agrees to give him more time or not. At this point, Samuel's words can no longer express his suffering; he wants Sandra to both

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agree and disagree. He places his subjectivity externally, hoping that external changes would rescue him. However, he dreads Sandra's agreement because his excuse loses validity if she is not the obstacle to his writing. As Sandra points out, Samuel is aware that he has no escape; he has become his own greatest trap. Sandra's piercing analysis leads him to his ultimate breakdown. He is caught in the impossible position of both being unable to write and unable not to write.

In the end, Samuel is dead. Whether by suicide, murder, or accident, he is utterly reduced to an object, fully becoming a figure to be imagined and interpreted. People no longer care about who he is; they focus only on whether Sandra is guilty. Samuel's death transforms him into the ultimate victim within the symbolic, simplifying the complex questions of subjectivity to a binary judgment: guilty or not guilty. People choose sides and interpret the facts to fit their narratives, attacking opposing views— just as Samuel sought unity. Now Fully objectified, Samuel becomes the absolute other within the symbolic order, captured and interpreted in a state of pure signification, achieving a final unity: the fractured subject is no more.

Samuel's subjectivity is rooted in the ideal-ego he envisions and the subjectivity demanded by the symbolic, resulting in a perpetual lack of true subjectivity. He internalizes the desires imposed by the symbolic order and identifies these desires as his own. His acceptance of the ideology that he "can achieve what he wants" paradoxically traps him in the pursuit of the Other's subjectivity—the subjectivity of fantasy. Sandra, for instance, believes that Samuel can start writing at any moment if he wants: "Just do it." However, in Samuel's perspective, Sandra represents the big Other, as he describes to the psychoanalyst: "…you encouraged him to write, wanted him to succeed. But if he had, it would have been unbearable for you. That's the problem. It may have been subconscious." Samuel imagines Sandra as the symbolic order's punishment for his failures. The Sandra he imagines, a projection of himself, completes the process of repression and castration. As Samuel's object of desire, writing must fulfill the function of existence while remaining eternally out of reach, maintaining him in an eternal progress of pursuit. Once the subject realizes that the sublime object of desire, which he fantasizes as the solution to all his problems, can not resolve anything, he is confronted with the trauma of the Real.

Samuel's freedom is thus confined: he must either succeed or fail as a writer or a husband. The illusion of choice is a trap, as his subjectivity is tightly bound to these identities. In Samuel's understanding, he has no other options. He repeatedly uses his wife's shortcomings and the tragedy of their child as excuses to frame himself as a "failed writer" into a "forced-to-fail, with no time to write," which is more acceptable within the symbolic order. He gains a guarantee for his failure and the validity of his pain. This relentless struggle leaves him exhausted. "So what your patients tell you is the truth? You never wondered whether Samuel Maleski might have needed to imagine an unbearable imbalance to prevent himself from writing?" Writing is both Samuel's object of desire and the desire of the symbolic order he acknowledges. When his writing indirectly causes his son's accident, and he fails to produce any significant work, his subjectivity is irreparably fractured. His death ends the story of Samuel as the failed husband and writer—the subject who could not be fully symbolized. Simultaneously, the pure Other, the imagined victim Samuel, emerges as a symbol in narratives and imaginations, guaranteeing the legitimacy of the whole trial.

2.2.2. Sandra: the possible subjectivity of the incompletely castrated subject

Unlike Samuel, who fails to recognize that he has been ensnared by the desires of the symbolic order represented by patriarchal discourse, leading to irreconcilable conflict in his subjectivity, Sandra is aware of patriarchal expectations and actively resists the role of "wife." Sandra represents a subject who rejects the castration imposed by the symbolic order, embodying a perverse stance by confronting it with her order in the imaginary dimension. Sandra rarely smiles, and her demeanor is cold, rational, and strong, contrasting with the docile, compliant image of a wife (female) generally

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accepted and expected by patriarchal discourse. This distinctive temperament is precisely why Samuel loves her: "That is why you love me, right? If you wanted a stupid bitch who grins at your friends, you'd have picked someone else." Sandra distances herself from the image of a woman who seeks to be the object of the Other's desire. In the trial, the audience can learn that she has grown accustomed to the song "P.I.M.P.," which her husband has played for a long time, even though its lyrics degrade women. Sandra is not offended by the song itself but instead competes with her husband, who is "present" through the song, to control the power of discourse in the context. She is not offended because she does not identify with the image of a woman—or, more specifically, she does not identify with the identity of "a subject who desires to be desired by the big Other." From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sandra lacks the typical desire of a fully castrated woman because she is not concerned with "not possessing what the big Other desires." She does not "believe in a notion of reciprocity in a couple," "does not care about couple relationships," and views sex with others as a stress reliever rather than betrayal. The patriarchal fails to castrate Sandra; she sees "female" merely as a signifier, an external image that she does not recognize as her own. She doesn't accept the patriarchal discourse as a symbolic order that disciplines her, nor does she endorse the qualities that "female" signifies, such as "femininity" or "wife's duties." Instead, she adopts an imaginary order, the will to write, as her life's guiding principle replacing the gender narrative of the symbolic order with an imaginary narrative. Rather than resisting social disciplines of women, Sandra simply does not care about them.

Love, at its core, is an imaginary relationship based on the projection of desires between two subjects. In contrast, marriage (or family) operates within the symbolic order, shaped by gender identity, and functions as a symbolic relationship. Sandra, however, pursues the instability and possibilities inherent in subjectivity, resisting fixed identities or relationships and finding pleasure in constructing the other in reality into the imaginary order.

As a writer, Sandra recognizes the discrepancy between the imagined subject and the subject as it exists in the ever-changing moments of reality. While others attempt to symbolically define the subject, simplifying it into binary judgments, Sandra insists on maintaining the complexity of humans. She resists symbolic castration, repeatedly emphasizing that "that's not reality" and "things are more complicated." Contrary to the cold, unfeeling image of Sandra that Samuel describes—a figure he perceives as repressing him—Sandra's recollections after Samuel's death preserve the complexity of his character. For instance, when the defense lawyer highlights Samuel's vulnerability during the last year of his life, Sandra softly interjects with, "He's not like that," defending his dignity. Moreover, she does not adopt the guise of an absolute victim to exonerate herself. The symbolic order might accept a weak wife as a victim, but a strong and unconventional wife like Sandra is more likely to be considered guilty. Sandra's resistance to being symbolically simplified to a mere signifier within the patriarchal discourse reflects her refusal to be confined by the fixed roles society expects. The subjectivity to her is far more complex and fluid than the simplistic binaries imposed by the symbolic order.

The entire trial can be seen as a symbolic system's attempt to castrate Sandra, forcing her to accept the judgment of the "Name of the Father." Regardless of the outcome, the trial itself is part of the process where the subject must determine their identity through the gaze of the Other. "She wants to tell the truth, and it's very hard for her to understand that it's not a question of truth; it's a question of convincing. What interests me about this character is that she's someone who doesn't seduce, who doesn't want to seduce" [14]. Director Triet's description reveals Sandra's discomfort with the symbolic system. Similarly, in the film, the defense lawyer tells Sandra before the trial, "I don't give a fuck about what is reality. You need to start seeing yourself the way others are going to perceive you." Sandra is compelled to recognize herself through the gaze of the Other, reducing her

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identity to something simple that can be judged. She refuses to present herself as a victim, but during the trial, she is forced into a binary choice: victim or perpetrator, to be or not to be.

At the beginning of the film, when a student interviews Sandra, she does not give a clear answer on how she reconciles reality and imagination(fiction). The student seeks a clear distinction between "what is real and what is fiction." For her, the subject of reality and the subject of narrative are separate entities, which means that the subject's actions, in reality, are entirely controlled by consciousness, and there is no room for imagination or symbolic(narrative) dimensions in understanding the subject. She does not realize that, through the mediation of language, the subject can never present a stable and identical image. What is considered "real" is merely a momentary anchoring of language within a specific context. When subjects communicate, it is not two "real" subjects conversing but rather two subjects interacting with the imaginary order of the Other. When the student attempts to understand Sandra, she comprehends Sandra as the existence in her self-imagination, not the Sandra she believes to be the "real" one—paralleling the mechanisms of fiction. Sandra, however, shifts the student's focus to the student's own subjectivity. She does not assign identities but instead captures the unsymbolized traits of the other through casual conversation, understanding the Other's subjectivity not derived from narrative but from experience. In other words, Sandra is attempting to understand the unconscious of the student, to recognize a complex individual rather than simply the universal image she might represent, precisely where her novels surpass those of her husband. Samuel tries to transcribe reality into his novels through documentation, while Sandra retains the imaginative dimension during the alienated process of symbolizing a subject. By integrating imagination as part of reality, her novels and reality achieve unity. Sandra's imaginative dimension (her novels) replaces the symbolic order's object of desire in her reality, securing her identity as a subject. Thus, she preserves the possibility of choosing "something beyond" the options presented by the symbolic order, letting her subjectivity transcend the symbolic constraints.

She resists the identity imposed by the symbolic order, but this does not mean she can not be identified. Instead, she refuses to let a defined identity limit the possibility of her subject. ".....but what you say is just a little part of the whole situation.....a couple is kind of a chaos, everybody is kind of lost. Sometimes we fight together, sometimes we fight alone, and sometimes we fight against each other—that happens." When people examine a subject as the Other, they assume stability within both themselves and that subject, as if all subjects are fully self-aware and can be entirely symbolized. Within the symbolic order, people gain a sense of rational assurance from this order, treating habitual ideological products as self-evident "truths." However, these truth-claims obscure the internal nonidentity of the unconscious subject, which always remains unsymbolized elements and can never be fully defined. Ideology demands this definition—this identity—because without it, the subject would feel "lost." When a subject confines itself to a specific definition, that identity becomes internalized as the subject's own.

Sandra resents Samuel because he projects his sorrow onto their son Daniel, thus rationalizing Daniel's tragic situation. "I never saw Daniel as handicapped. I wanted to protect him from that perception. Because as soon as you mark a child that way, you condemn him." Sandra refuses to symbolically castrate Daniel by stripping him of his potential. Disability signifies abnormality, weakness, and the loss of possibilities. Samuel's misery unconsciously tells Daniel: You should feel sorrowful about your identity; you should be a pitied disabled person. "Normal" and "abnormal" become traps for Daniel's subject. Sandra does not wish for Daniel to be "like a normal child" because, in that context, Daniel is already defined as abnormal—a negative deviation judged by the symbolic order. She wants Daniel to do what he loves, to be himself, rather than conform to a specific identity dictated by the symbolic order.The former approach preserves the subject's potential to choose an identity and suggests multiple possibilities; the latter restricts subjectivity to a

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single identity, replacing the freedom to choose with the freedom to choose from the limited choices. This illusive freedom, the subjectivity, eternally separates the subject from its own will, especially when unaware of the unconscious forces at play.

2.2.3. Daniel and the dog: within the language and beyond the symbolic

"In this scene, our initial idea was to present it only through sound. The people in the courtroom don't know what happened; they must have their own opinions. We had to deal with this uncertainty"[15](Triet). During the playback of the recording, everyone in the courtroom experiences Daniel's world. Being nearly blind, Daniel can only rely on hearing and speech to understand events and people; he cannot see the discrepancies between actions and words. This trial is not only a symbolic castration of Sandra but also a process in which Daniel gradually distances himself from the image of his mother, learning about his parents and the social order through others' narratives. In the end, it remains unclear whether Daniel's final testimony reflects the truth or if he alters the narrative to protect his mother. Daniel chooses his mother's order over his father's, but this is not a free choice by the subject, as the options are predetermined. Even if Sandra encourages Daniel to make his own choice, he has no real choice. Convicting his mother would mean accepting patriarchal discourse and social norms, distancing himself from his mother, and aligning with the desires of the big Other—even if the big Other tells him, "You have the right to be free." Declaring his mother innocent would mean confronting the absence of the big Other, reconciling the unsymbolizable remainder of desire with his imagination.

"Actually, using sound is very difficult; depicting violent scenes requires immense energy, and sound cannot be faked... You can cheat with visuals, editing them as you please, but with sound, the audience can discern which screams are genuine and which cries are real; you can't fake it... Lying about emotions in sound is much more difficult than in visuals" [15] (Triet). According to director Trier, the emotional aspect of sound is conveyed as the residue of symbolism. Therefore, Daniel's world is not solely structured by narrative and discursive justice; in the courtroom, when people focus on the trial's outcome and ideologically judge Sandra and her husband based on value systems, Daniel hears more about emotions. What he hears goes beyond symbols to encompass complex emotions, understanding that, despite what his parents say, the enduring emotions between them are genuinely experienced. This experience is obscured and ignored within the symbolic order because it cannot be fully articulated and because they defy the fundamental law of the trial: binary oppositions.

In contrast to Daniel's "inability to watch but only to speak," the dog represents a subject that can "only watch but cannot speak." In terms of experiencing without intervening, the dog's perspective extends as a spectator's perspective within the narrative. The dog's understanding of the characters is limited to the imaginary order, whereas the audience can employ symbolic means to interpret the film. However, the dog's perspective is indeed the only "real" perspective, as its reactions are based on an authentic perception of the external environment, transcending the cinematic dimension. Its comprehension of the characters' emotions is phenomenologically real, embodying the symbolic residue of the emotions experienced by the audience. At the film's ending, Sandra wins the trial but gains nothing. She loses her husband, undergoes judgment, endures the violence of the symbolic order, and faces her son's mistrust, leaving her exhausted from prolonged self-defense. The trial's outcome can not alter this; the past remains, and the trauma deepens with each retrospective reconstruction, continually replaying. Sandra and Daniel's interpretation of the trial will also shift with their states and perspectives, and this retrospection will further construct trauma. In the final scene, amidst sadness and loneliness, Sandra lies in bed while the dog runs to her. At this moment, Sandra transitions from the filmic narrative to reality. The ending eschews ideological value judgments and does not provide a traditional symbolic resolution. Instead, it

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reflects the reality of a subject who has undergone significant life events—a profound sense of emptiness. This emptiness emerges from the collapse and absence of the big Other, compelling the subject to confront teleological questioning. These emotions and traumatic experiences resist symbolization; they cannot be fully articulated through speech, leaving them misunderstood and unacknowledged, with speech itself becoming a source of suffering. The subject's loneliness arises from the inability to grasp what lies beyond the symbolic order and the unavoidable presence of pain. The dog, as a perceiver beyond the symbolic order, directly experiences this inexpressible pain and thus offers the subject a form of understanding and solace that those within the symbolic order can not provide.

2.2.4. The crowd: the gaze of the other and the symbolic law

When the Other gazes upon a subject, the Other also exists as a subject. The Other assumes and desires that the subject aligns with their imagined version of that subject, using their accepted value system—the symbolic order—to judge and discipline the observed subject. The Other unconsciously enforces the principles of the symbolic order, mediating its regulation of subjects. When individuals form a collective, the collective's ideology prompts subjects to regard a specific discourse as a reasonable, universal, and normal truth, perpetuating that discourse. For the collective, anything unique that deviates from the norm is seen as an anomaly in need of correction. "In the subject's relationship to the community to which he belongs, there is always such a paradoxical point of choix ford - at this point, the community is saying to the subject: you have freedom to choose, but on condition that you choose the right thing" [10]. The crowd in the courtroom uses the illusion of justice to conceal the falsehood of both objectivity and subjectivity present in the trial. Objectivity is reduced to a mere matter of majority consensus and habitual norms, while subjectivity is rendered meaningless, with no true sense of self or freedom to be found. "It follows, from this constitutively senseless character of the law, that we must obey it not because it is just, good, or even beneficial but simply because it is the law -this tautology articulates the vicious circle of its authority, the fact that the last foundation of the law's authority lies in its process of enunciation: Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted. That is the mystic basis of its authority. Anyone who tries to bring it back to its first principle destroys it. The only real obedience, then, is an 'external'" [10]. People follow the symbolic order because it is the law; those who do not adhere to it are excluded. In the courtroom, everyone tries to forcefully interpret Sandra through the lens of order they identify with. Sandra's gender is female, but she doesn't conform to the signifiers associated with "female," like "dutiful wife," "submissiveness," and "positivity." She does not identify with the gender ideology understood by the majority, yet this does not mean she denies the signifier "female." She accepts "female" as an identity, but this identity does not align with the expectations of the big Other. Her order clashes with the order represented by the crowd, challenging the belief system of the big Other. As a result, she can not prove her innocence because she can not substitute the symbolic system to declare herself innocent.

Sandra could see her gender identity as a symbolic description and adopt a post-feminist stance, allowing fluidity in the signifier "female." However, this signifier is fixed within the Other or the social field, representing a position within a patriarchal system and a defined identity. Just as the male prosecutor presupposes Sandra's guilt, interpreting her actions as oppressive and premeditated, those living within this gender discourse preemptively react to Sandra's breaking of gender norms with discomfort and fear—this reveals that habitual rationality is not truly rational. The subjectivity does not originate from the subject. When ideology conflicts with reality, people rarely question the ideology itself but defend it: Sandra is immoral, she is an inadequate woman, and her husband is pitiable. As Žižek's explains the mechanism of ideological fantasy: "An ideology is really 'holding us' only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality—that is, when the ideology

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succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself... An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour" [10]. Gender discourse or gender identity isn't just a byproduct of ideology—it is an ideology. The identity itself involves projecting the self onto an external identity to gain recognition from others. Even if a subject establishes an entirely new identity within the symbolic order, this identity will still be observed and interpreted by others, and it will inevitably fail to align with both the subject's and the other's perspectives. Therefore, the subject's options of identities remain permanently "limited freedom."

2.2.5. The real and the imaginary: traverse the fantasy

Director Trier blurs the line between imagination and reality in the film by using sound gaps, allowing actors to improvise, keeping unintended camera shakes, adopting a documentary style, and drawing from personal experiences to shape characters. This deliberate absence of a conscious setting mirrors how Sandra shapes "real" people into characters in her novels. The film subtly explores the question, "What is real?" People often mistake their experiences and the "truths" of a particular ideology for absolute reality, but the reality itself is shaped by imagination. When life is recorded and turned into a film, is that recorded reality or imagination? As discussed, intersubjective understanding is always built in the imaginary—the "subject who is talking to me" is the "subject I imagine is talking to me." We cannot determine whether that subject is real or fictional. The entire film could even be interpreted as Sandra's newly published novel, where imagination becomes reality.

Sandra does not represent liberation from the ideological constraints of gender identity. Through repetition, gender studies and the concept of gender identity have shaped themselves into an ideology—gender has become ideologized. Gender identity, as the sublime object of ideology, obscures the gaps in the symbolic system and positions itself as a form of truth, compelling subjects to identify with a pluralistic position to assert their "subjectivity," thereby countering the previous "patriarchy." However, "patriarchy" essentially is a signifier of the discipline and the oppression of "the big Other." The pursuit of gender plurality itself creates a new, subtle form of "patriarchy." centralizing new gender classes and structuring the object of desire for subjects.

Critiquing ideology does not mean playing the role of an awakened individual or replacing an old ideology with a new one—replacing "male" with "multiple genders/undefined gender." Believing in the absence of ideology is the most ideological fantasy of all, as the signifier merely changes its name. As Žižek puts it, "What is important about ideology is its form, that is, the fact that, in one direction, as much as possible in a straight line, they keep on going; once they have made up their minds, they must follow, even the most doubtful opinions..... They must believe that their reasons are sufficient and that their decisions will lead them to achieve their goals" [10]. The most crucial aspect of critiquing ideology is reflecting on its operation mechanism—discovering its splits, surpluses, and voids, piercing through the illusion, and recognizing the imperfection of the symbolic order. The perfect state of "equality," "freedom," and "subjectivity" promised by ideology exists only as an illusion, with nothingness hidden behind them. In other words, the real does not exist. By traversing the fantasy, one can experience the incompleteness of the symbolic order and the nonidentity of the subject, replacing the big Other's fantasy with the subject's own. Beyond the fantasy lies nothingness, and overcoming this nothingness requires an eternal process of reconstruction and destruction. It is not merely about rebuilding but eternally repeating this process, experiencing and affirming the fantasy, the opening process (the continuous pursuit) created and destroyed by oneself. It is not so much that the subject can become any gender but rather that the subject can become any subject. When the subject realizes the lack, absence, and emptiness are due not to the subject's incompetence but rather to the failure of the symbolic order, any symbolic

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violence will be rejected. The subject will no longer equate the symbol with itself: it is merely an identity, perhaps useful for describing, but it is never the full expression of the subject. Thus, the subject will attain authentic subjectivity—that fragmented and split subject is precisely the entirety. By traversing the fantasy, the subject can identify and reject the ideological illusions imposed upon them, leading to the subject's liberation from the false promises of ideology. However, this liberation is not absolute. It is based on ongoing critique and reflection on the nature of fantasy itself. Treating the process of destruction and reconstruction as the totality of the meaning, one can finally shatter the false illusion of subject liberation and reach the pure jouissance: the experience of subjectivity.

3. Conclusion

Gender identity, queer theory, and feminism have been crucial in mobilizing political support for minority groups. However, they also risk "prioritizing" these groups, creating a power structure that resists questioning. The challenge to the binary gender structure has disrupted the phallus's role as the sublime object of ideology, revealing flaws and emptiness within the symbolic order. However, the gender movement, through repetition, has established an ideology that is now seen as beyond reproach—one that loudly claims inclusivity and diversity while producing a new discourse of mastery under the guise of being awakened. As cultural movements evolve, we see the potential for destabilizing hegemonic discourses.

Anatomy of a Fall portrays a strong and unconsciously independent female director, not as a betrayal of female identity but as a deconstruction of the allure once considered exclusively male, which transcends gender identity and raises questions about what the symbolic order has obscured: Why are men and women positioned in opposition? Lacan's statement that "the woman does not exist" and "there is no sexual relationship" [16] does not advocate for nihilism but suggests that the opposition between male and female is false and merely symbolic. Masculinity and femininity have no essential nature; what matters is the relationship between the subject and desire. Queer theory's pluralistic approach offers only a moderate but failed solution that maintains ideological differences in power, offering a stable belief system. Criticizing specific ideologies covers the instability and absence of the subject. Authentic subjectivity does not require identifying with a particular identity to find meaning in life. Meaning exists only as a subjective imagination or ideological fantasy. Instead, it involves acknowledging that life has no meaning, recognizing the falsehood of fantasies, and embracing the ongoing process of rebuilding and destruction. By fully accepting the negativity and nihility, the subject gains the most vital sense of affirmation —the subject exists independently of meaning.

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