

While the stream of “are”s continues, the video cuts from the meat locker to a long shot in which the camera rapidly moves over a landscape, mostly dry grass with a sparse scattering of trees. The instruments suddenly drop out, so that for a moment we just hear Sumney’s voice once more reciting wordless “ah”s. The video cuts to an extreme closeup of meat, with ladybugs crawling over it. This is slightly reminiscent of the closeup of maggots on meat in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1926, though ladybugs are far less disgusting than maggots). Then full instrumentation resumes, for the last reprise of the chorus; and we cut back to the outdoors. We see Sumney running along a path; from high up in the sky, we see that the path on which he runs is really a closed loop. Then the camera, from somewhat closer in, and closer to ground level, circles around Sumney as he dances in place. The sky behind him is filled with an ominous, spiraling swarm of insects or birds (it is hard to tell which; evidently this is a CGI construct).

There are a number of quick jump cuts as Sumney dances ever more energetically, waving his arms towards the sky, and with an expression of ecstasy. At the same time, the swarm fills more and more of the sky. Just as the singing ends, and the music fades out, we cut to a shot of Sumney lying on the ground, panting heavily as if exhausted. In the absence of music, his breaths are quite loud on the soundtrack. An enormous mass of ladybugs (like the ones on the meat earlier) crawl all over his face and torso. The camera slowly moves closer and closer to Sumney’s face, with the bugs in disturbing profusion. Finally, the video cuts to black, though the heavy panting continues on the soundtrack for a few more seconds.

The emotional power of the “Virile” music video comes from its accretion of details, both in the music and in the visuals. Though the song is a rave-up, meant to overwhelm, its instrumentation is finely articulated, and continually varies over the four minutes or so of the song. At times, staccato beats and ferocious treble riffs cut across the melody, while at other times the instrumentation closely follows it. Meanwhile, Sumney’s singing repeatedly shifts its register, as its mood varies between longing, anger and sarcasm, and resignation. Throughout the swirl of the music, our attention always comes back to Sumney’s singing, which is to say his embodied breathing.

Visually, the “Virile” music video is stylized in ways that open up the message of the lyrics, but without literalizing them, or forming them into a narrative. The subdued lighting of the meat locker, alternately

reddish and bluish, sets off, in contrast, the sheen of Sumney’s dark skin. (It’s only recently that cinematographers have learned to overcome the built-in white bias of the cinematic apparatus, in order to light black peoples’ skin properly – Latif 2017). Sumney’s dancing moves through a variety of gestures and postures; it is highly energetic and dynamic, as it both enacts what we might call the character armor of normative masculinity, and pushes to break free of it. If Sumney’s dancing expresses a conflict between Beauty and Brutality, it demonstrates the difficulty – no less than the necessity – of escaping from the latter. The video continually reminds us of death and carnivorous predation: we have taken life from the animals now reduced to slabs of meat, and this violence is very nearly our implicit religion.

We might see Sumney’s dancing, and the video as a whole, as expressing the struggle of life against death – and in particular, against the violent putting-to-death that characterizes hegemonic masculinity and virility. But Sumney also reminds us that life itself is finite. Indeed, this is part of what makes normative masculinity’s pretensions of mastery so absurd. The slabs of meat, no less than the ladybugs and the CGI swarms, remind us how life always gives way to other life. The music video is a living demonstration – as Sumney sings in the chorus – of how “the virility fades,” and how efforts to “amp up the masculine” are futile.

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## Austin Svedjan

# Speculum Sexualis: Voyeuristic Pessimism, or the Body at a Distance

*speculum, n.*

1. *A surgical instrument of various forms, used for dilating orifices of the body so as to facilitate examination or operations.*
2. *A mirror or reflector (of glass or metal) used for some scientific purpose. (“speculum”)*

We are all, to varying degrees of intensity and devotion, voyeurs. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud depicts the maximal outlier of these degrees in the “scopophile,” a sexual subject who, finding “pleasure in looking,” becomes perverse insofar as that looking supplants the “normal sexual aim” (23). However, in contrast to the other inventoried “aberrations” avoiding the genital contact of het-

erosex (mouths, asses, feet), Freud includes scopophilia as a “fixation of the preliminary sexual aim” (21). Voyeurism, then, is not one of many possible misdirections of erotic attention toward other objects of affection, but rather a lingering over a sexual relation’s inciting interest—a relational nonstarter.

Perhaps it is this Freudian scopophile that Luchino Visconti had in mind while directing the

1971 adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, wherein Dirk Bogarde's Gustav von Aschenbach is best remembered for the resolute gaze he affixes to the object of his—exclusively voyeuristic—longing: the Polish youth Tadzio (Björn Andrésen). Reflected in many of the film's steadily approaching shots of him, Aschenbach's time on-screen is predominantly dedicated to displaying his attentions to Tadzio, who is usually just out of view. From the more circumstantial instances of benign curiosity that decorate the film's onset to the voyeuristic fidelity which eventually comes to monolithically organize Aschenbach's life, we are made to watch his watch, not as a means to identify with Aschenbach but instead to be ever aware of his gaze's propagation. In the film's alternating shots of Aschenbach's voyeuristic desire and the distant Tadzio, Visconti places the film's spectator in the circuit between the two, imbuing every scene with a stifling potential that leaves the possibility of a bodily resolution to Aschenbach's voyeuristic pursuit ever opaque.

However relentless, to both Freud and Visconti, this looking ultimately leads us nowhere relationally. Aschenbach never bridges the haptic gap between Tadzio's body and his; never speaks to him in order to confess, much less confirm, his presumed desires. Indeed, as D. A. Miller has recently reminded us, more appalling than the tenacious distance between Aschenbach and Tadzio for the film's spectator is the "implied permanence of the arrangement. As in some cruel myth, or preemptive *contrapasso*, the two lovers can never touch, never talk...Thus does love come to [Aschenbach], as the eroticization of avoidance." By eroticizing avoidance and, as a friend accuses him of in the film, "keeping distance," the recurrent look cements itself as the gravitational aim of Aschenbach's (non)relation to Tadzio, through which all other peripheral desires may only orbit.

Contrary to the voyeuristic distance of Aschenbach, and recalling my opening maxim, Freud suggests that, outside of perversion, "visual impressions" concurrently exist as "the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (22). Thoroughly roused: this look, no longer set at an eroticized distance, would facilitate the tactual union of bodies in relation. Much like Visconti's Aschenbach, the protagonists of Xavier Dolan's 2010 film *Les Amours Imaginaires* also take

pleasure in looking at their mutual object of desire. The camera fastens to the two friends, Francis (Dolan) and Marie (Monia Chokri), as they look upon their aspirational lover Nicholas (Niels Schneider). Though no longer passionately set at a distance, the voyeuristic rivals grow intimately close with Nicholas, seemingly on track toward a sexual relationship indebted to, but noticeably not imbedded in, scopopic excitement. Similar to the oscillation of "will-they-won't-they" that pervades *Death in Venice*, the central tension of Dolan's film that lends the narrative its kinetic commencement is the question of for whom this relationship, free from threat of premature fixation, will be realized. Like Dolan's protagonists, we are made close readers of the most minute of acts made by Nicholas, hoping to capture the nature and direction of his unknown desire in our crosshairs.

For instance, when our trio takes a trip into the country together, Nicholas insists on teaching Francis the *correct* way to eat a roasted marshmallow (he eats them too fast), as "a marshmallow's like a striptease." Nicholas places the marshmallow, still attached to the stick, on Francis's tongue. Their eyes remain fixed on each other while Nicholas walks Francis through the steps of proper marshmallow consumption. It is a scene, one immediately notices, charged with fellatious eroticism. Much like Francis, our curiosities pique at the possibility of reciprocity offered in this moment, mirrored by the beguiled stare Francis answers Nicholas with. It's these suggestive, yet stubbornly uncertain, gestures that permeate the film, often employing the sensual experience of the character's body as guarantor of the gesture's seductive aim.

While less intense and certainly less devoted than the hyperbolized scopophilia of Aschenbach, the voyeurism of this variety equally facilitates an imagining of its object. Though we are aware that Francis and Marie are fantasizing about being with Nicholas—each of their longing glances read more as an invitation than Aschenbach's one-sided visual interest—Dolan makes this erotic imaginary explicit during a party that Nicholas hosts. Sitting at the far end of the room while their fellow partygoers engage in interactions that may at once be called love, affection, lust, and amity, our pair of voyeurs watch as Nicholas

dances with his mother. The music changes tracks, the ambient light dims, the room only lit by the recurring strobe. Dolan fixates on the eyes of our impassioned fabulists, every recurrent flash of light alternating between Nicholas and the respective voyeur's scene of fantasy: for Marie, Michelangelo's *David*, for Francis, the homoerotic sketches of Jean Cocteau. Similarly, after Nicholas stops returning his calls, Francis frantically buys marshmallows from a convenience store, ardently ripping the bag open and shoving one in his mouth before leaving. Dolan again lets us in on the scene playing out in Francis's imagination, as Francis attempts with palpable desperation to return to the potential relation epitomized by their prior,



bodily, moment together. Francis's lips tighten, the fantasy proving not enough. The film's narrative, a chain of these imaginative scenes seemingly answered by Nicholas, culminates, however, in the moment we and Francis demand, the same moment that Aschenbach eternally forestalls: realization.

When Francis professes his love to Nicholas, we expect that Nicholas will reciprocate. Like Francis himself, we've been trained for the last hour and a half to be an expert interpreter of every gesture, every excitingly long hug, every look that fixates a bit *too much*. After Francis finishes his confession,

Nicholas undermines the formulaically amorous scene with as much comedic as tragic effect: "How could you think I was gay?" Likewise, Marie writes a love poem—rife with all the impassioned cachet the form grants—that goes unanswered. Running into Nicholas sometime later and, forgoing her initial attempts to blame the poem on a mistaken addressee, she asks, "What would you say if, I'd sent the poem to you?" Nicholas, hurrying toward his apartment, answers that he'd "still have something on the stove." Nicholas subverts our voyeurs' expectations of reciprocation or, at the very least, of understanding their affection. Dolan makes clear in these scenes that Francis and Marie's respective fantasies were doomed

“What the voyeur is looking for,” Jacques Lacan argues in his seminar on fundamental psychoanalytic concepts, “is merely a shadow, a shadow behind a curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence” (*Seminar XI* 182). Considering that what lies “behind [the] curtain,” continually eludes our total comprehension, fantasizing is the mechanism that facilitates the knowledge of another by glossing over knowledge’s gaps. This may be one of the many avowals Lacan implies in his axiom “There is no sexual relationship” (*Seminar XVII* 116). Indeed no relationship avoids being two shadows miscommunicating from behind their curtains. Consequently, what we, Francis, and Marie perceive when looking at Nicholas is only ever a silhouette refracted by a screen of our own making. Mercédès Baillargeon, in a similar reading of Dolan’s film, notes that “the Self...is always already a fantasized Self, reflected back by a fantasized Other” (181). It is here that we see the definitional singularity of the “speculum” promised by my epigraph emerge: as we peer into the bodies around us, searching for the knowledge of another that we necessitate to concretize our relation with them, we inevitably find only our own idealization reflected back to us. As subjects bound to the borders of our own consciousness, endlessly arbitrated by our imaginary and symbolic interpellations, we are inevitably curbed by what Lauren Berlant has called “the impossibility of getting the account precisely right” (66). Rather than push too hard on this structuring incoherency and thereby confront our own inseparability to nonknowledge, we fantasize over the gaps. Put another way, we colour in—ever-pedantically within the lines—the bodies we bear in relation with a crayon we ourselves have made. Francis and Marie, misrecognizing their fantasies as Nicholas’s reciprocation, collide with the contingency of their own knowledge. We might consider, when a lover touches us, to what does our enjoyment respond? Is it the haptic sensation alone? I would hardly describe the plethora of bodily interactions experienced in a day—the graze against the shoulder of another patron of the café, the brush of knuckles when both reaching for “DOOR CLOSE” on an elevator—as similarly euphoric. We might offer that our enjoyment responds, then, to their intention: I feel pleasure because I believe this person has touched me with

the aim of inducing pleasure. But how do we know this? How do we know they do not merely have an itch, to which the friction of our skin serves as the most immediate remedy? Even if we ask them this and they confirm their purpose, how do we know for sure?

Dolan, as it were, seems to be in on this particular joke. In an early scene, our trio read separately in a bookshop. “This is so beautiful,” Nicholas whispers poignantly before stepping into the frame’s foreground, bridging the distance between the two voyeurs, and quotes Lacan as if reciting Rimbaud: “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*” (*Seminar XI* 103). What is foundationally unsatisfying is precisely the reciprocation that Francis and Marie demand, the reciprocation they attempt to read as naturally signified in each of Nicholas’s aforementioned gestures. In their reading of every gesture as sign, Francis and Marie presume their affections reciprocated, even assured. Yet fundamentally they are not seen from the same place (or with the same look) from which they see Nicholas. Baillargeon concurs in her assertion that Dolan’s film admits “that there is no substance behind the illusion of [love]” (174). This admission, she adds, illustrates “the failure to create meaningful relationships with others, which are typically cornerstones of our understanding of attachment and intimacy” (174). While Baillargeon’s reflection on the failure to occupy relations meaningfully confronts the anxieties of Francis and Marie, she nevertheless mimics them in the slippage she creates between illusion’s failure and lack of meaning. From where, exactly, does the immediacy of a relation’s salience to its illusory realization arise? What Baillargeon mistakes for “meaning”—the fatal misapprehension that she, Francis, and Marie share in making—is the demand for a relationship’s disillusionment. Although Francis and Marie close the physical distance between their bodies and Nicholas’s, they ultimately prevent a “meaningful relationship” by conflating meaning itself with the absence of fantasy; they demand the real thing. Though, as Berlant notes, “problems of radical incoherence and relational out-of-synchness...threateningly traverse the subject and the world” (66). In spite

of their fleshy proximity, there remains a distance that nevertheless saturates their relation.

If we find ourselves in the same double bind as Francis and Marie of a relationality, that is to say, a kind of closeness necessarily interposed by distance, then we might do well to return to Aschenbach, Miller’s miserable “keeper of distances.” Like his Québécois counterparts, he also fantasizes the object of his desire through a voyeuristic relation. Yet, while Francis and Marie attempt and fail to consummate their relationship with Nicholas, which would corroborate the fantasies that Dolan’s film exposes as constituting the relationship itself, Aschenbach, as we have already noted, avoids that consummation. But if he refuses to attempt the same leap over nonknowledge undertaken by Francis and Marie, it is not because he is fundamentally keen on avoiding the possible reciprocation, but perhaps because he expects his fantasy will inevitably go unfulfilled. Similarly, attempting to conceptualize sex without “the fantasy, and so the optimism, of a successfully realized relation” (2), Lee Edelman urges us to “account for the disturbance of imaginary reality by a Real with which we can never have a relation” (28). While Aschenbach’s keeping of distance accounts for Edelman’s polemic, it does not embrace fantasy on the optimistic belief that relation will eventually be realized. Rather, it proliferates fantasy in lieu of that relation, eroticizing the very avoidance of that relation’s realization, rendering not a “sex without optimism” but a sex *with* the pessimism of that relation’s everlasting suspension.

Armed with this new frame of relationality, let us briefly undertake one of the most tenuous of interpretive practices: taking our character at their word. In a relatively late scene, Aschenbach, having just been smiled at by Tadzio moments before, sits alone on a bench and confesses aloud: “I love you.” What does this utterance mean in the context of Aschenbach’s keeping of the distance between his body and Tadzio’s? While critics like Miller presumably view this moment as only emblematic of distance’s poignant tragedy, a hermeneutic of pessimism suggests relational unity as already conceded, compelling us to read “love” here as more of distance’s extolment than lament. “Love,” Sam See convincingly argues, “is the pleasure of ignorance: the pleasure of renouncing our desire

to fill the hole of knowledge, to make knowledge whole, to master those to whom we bear relation” (196). Insofar as Aschenbach derives his pleasure from the fantasies he crafts of Tadzio and thereby forestalls the knowledge, the “mastery” of Tadzio that Francis and Marie correspondingly demand of Nicholas, Aschenbach’s “eroticizing of avoidance” resonates with a “pleasure of ignorance.” Taken this way, a way which could not be more opposed to critics like Miller, Aschenbach’s love finds its realization *only* because of the nonknowledge structuring the distance between him and Tadzio.

Consider the following scene: At dinner, Tadzio and Aschenbach place themselves at opposite ends of the hotel’s veranda as busking musicians perform for the hotel’s guests. While the band plays inches from them, our pair remain staring at each other, relishing in the pure potential, the pure ignorance, the pure *love* that occupies the distance between them. If the keeping of this distance, of renouncing a desire for a complete, yet persistently inaccessible, knowledge fashions Aschenbach’s love, not only do these scenes—which make up the majority of the film—gain a new affective import, but the titular ending does as well. Aschenbach stays in Venice despite the obvious correlation between a looming epidemic and his failing health only to further pursue his singular pleasure of looking upon Tadzio. *Death in Venice*’s voyeurism, in this way, functions as akin to a crescendo that never ends but only continues to rise. The film ends with Aschenbach’s prophesied demise, sitting in a chair on the Lido, watching his distant lover in the ocean, his life a final oblation to love.

Recalling my initial charge of voyeurism’s universality—the fantasy we craft over those gaps of nonknowledge in any and all relations—Aschenbach’s love, a love *dependent* on nonknowledge, offers the potential for releasing ourselves from that double bind of attempting to be close in spite of distance. While some scholars like Tim Dean might see Aschenbach’s keeping of distance as synonymous with an “[a]bstraction [that] enables the maintenance of a hygienic distance from the messiness of embodied desire” (621), the distance Aschenbach keeps is less tied to the body itself as it is to a demand for relation’s realization that is popularly fastened to the body.



As in an oft-quoted interview, Luce Irigaray might charge Aschenbach as having an “eye [that] objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations” (50).<sup>1</sup> But, in doing so, such a claim would only act to limit bodily relations to the most explicit of haptic interactions, returning voyeurism to the same place Freud left it. Thus, challenging the very possibility of realization, Aschenbach’s voyeuristic pessimism dethrones the figural body and the optimism of realization that it is made to symbolize enshrined at the center of contemporary sexuality studies. In Dolan’s final

scene, Francis and Marie stare at a new object of desire, an uncanny facsimile of Nicholas. Though they may “smell, taste, touch and hea[r]” this new object, Dolan suggests their fate to repeat the same clash with nonknowledge so long as they look through the speculum of another and demand anything other than themselves reflected back. Aschenbach, instead, invites us to gaze through the speculum longer, to take pleasure in our fantasies, to pessimistically renounce our demand for their actualization—to fall in love.

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1. Translation cited in Pollock: 70.

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