

# Suture and the Narration of Subjectivity in Film

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**Abstract** To begin with, the essay identifies shortcomings in classical suture theory's approach to film's narration of consciousness. This approach, which has been widely influential in film theory, grew out of work by Jean-Pierre Oudart, Jacques-Alain Miller, Daniel Dayan, Stephen Heath, and Kaja Silverman and emphasizes a Lacanian drama of absence. This model of suture has also been the focus of important criticism by scholars like David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. My alternative paradigm of embodiment and multiple consciousnesses, what I call deep intersubjectivity, emerges from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, with contributions from Oudart's own phenomenological observations, and seeks to return the body (including its politics) to suture and to film narrative. The fundamental image drawn from Merleau-Ponty is the chiasmus, the film version of which is the shot/reverse shot sequence. I conclude with close readings of two moments from Michael Roemer's 1964 film about African American life, *Nothing but a Man*: they illustrate how suture enables the narration of intersubjectivity in film, in its embodiments (including the political) from violation and humiliation to evasion, opacity, and sometimes a recuperation, even if incomplete, of community, however temporary or partial.

I want to accomplish three tasks in this essay: first, to identify shortcomings in classical suture theory's approach to film's narration of subjectivity; second, to offer a new model for a phenomenology of suture and narration; and third, to apply that model to two paradigmatic sequences from Michael Roemer's film about African American life, *Nothing but a Man* (1964). Classical suture theory needs rethinking because its widely influential view of subjectivity and narrative in film is significantly misguided. Its

primal story has been a tale of absences: absence of selfhood, of discourse, of subjectivity, of an illusory Observer who could make us whole. But, in my alternative view, suture is another example of the narrative practice of what I call deep intersubjectivity; as narrative form in film it is in fact not about the trauma of emptiness but about formations of consciousnesses. Recasting suture in new phenomenological terms can have broad value for narrative theory and film. This essay will suggest a reframed approach to narrators, narration, implied viewers, flesh and blood viewers, and, most importantly, to characters, in particular to webs of multiple consciousnesses represented in film stories.

### 1. Suture and Film Narrative

The surgeon drew a six-inch dotted line with a marking pen across a sleeping patient's abdomen and then, to my surprise, had the nurse hand me the knife. It was, I remember, still warm from the sterilizing autoclave. The surgeon had me stretch the skin taut with the thumb and forefinger of my free hand. He told me to make one smooth slice down to the fat. I put the belly of the blade to the skin and cut. The experience was odd and addictive, mixing exhilaration from the calculated violence of the act, anxiety about getting it right, and a righteous faith that it was somehow good for the person. There was also the slightly nauseating feeling of finding that it took more force than I'd realized. (Skin is thick and springy, and on my first pass I did not go nearly deep enough; I had to cut twice to get through.)

Atul Gawande, 2002

What a thrill—  
My thumb instead of an onion.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
Dead white.  
Then that red plush.  
Sylvia Plath, 1965

Suture has been a significant topic in meditations on the representation of subjectivity in film narrative; the process of editing, of stitching together pieces of film, became, in the hands of suture theorists, more than simply a device of continuity editing, that is, more than a subset of conventional editing strategies for telling stories efficiently in film time and space. Instead, suture theory came to presume and frame an ontology of the human subject. This account suffers from significant blind spots, which have nar-

rowed film theory's options for understanding subjectivity, and especially subjectivities, in narrative. My alternative approach to suture begins with an observation about what is missing from most writing about suture in film narrative: the cut, the wound; the body and its blood. The image of suture in medicine calls attention to the fullness of bodies practicing and practiced upon, to embodied consciousnesses acting and reacting in a web of relations that only begins with the blade, the taut skin, the "plush" red blood, and the institutions of discipline and licensure represented in Atul Gawande's supervising surgeon. It is a narrative of embodied subjectivities that *intend*; it is a narrative of intervention, and almost always of the interventions of several consciousnesses, in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called a chiasmus, an interweaving of bodies and subjectivities. To understand the importance of this embodiment and intentionality, we need to return to our starting point—classical suture theory and its theory of lack.

The story of the idea of suture in film narrative, in the powerful and influential series of writings that began in the 1960s, has been a story of absence and evasion. I will begin with Jean-Pierre Oudart because he was the first, in a pair of essays in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1969, to use a notion of suture to explore the nature of film narrative. His idea of suture, however, as a gap in discourse, draws explicitly on Jacques-Alain Miller's article "La suture (elements de la logique du significant)" presented to Lacan's seminar on February 24, 1965 (Miller 1978 [1966]: 23); so, in another sense, Miller is the beginning. Because the publication of Oudart's articles in 1969 became a seminal event in several stories, each with a different dominant theme, I have a multiply plotted tale to tell with crisscrossing threads that will resemble a screenplay by Quentin Tarantino or Alejandro Inarritu.

One story thread tracks the theme of discourse in Lacanian thought as it influences film theory; it reaches back to the Miller article that Oudart cites and continues in Stephen Heath's (1978) expansion of Oudart's idea of suture, with ripples throughout feminist film criticism in writers like Laura Mulvey (1989 [1975]) and Linda Williams (2004). The second plot strand recounts the emergence of suture theory in English, with its interpellation of Althusser and ideology. This story line begins with Daniel Dayan's widely read essay in *Film Quarterly* (1974), the first text in Anglo-American film theory to draw attention to Oudart's work, even before it had been translated into English. Dayan took an important and influential step in attributing an ideological function to the gap in discourse that Lacanian analysis saw suture as mystifying. Dayan's essay provoked an important response from William Rothman in *Film Quarterly* (1975) and another critique by Barry Salt, also in *Film Quarterly* (1977). Subsequently, in 1978, *Screen* collected translations of Miller's 1965 essay and Oudart's 1969 ar-

ticles and added the response to both by Heath. In the years since 1978, this canon of core articulations has gathered a large body of commentary, including “friendly” extensions, often by feminist critics like Kaja Silverman (1983) and Judith Halberstam (2001), who followed Dayan’s Althusserian lead. This canon has also accumulated critiques of its fundamental assumptions—especially of its ideology of ideology and its psychoanalytically inflected notion of passive spectatorship—by writers like David Bordwell (1985) and Noël Carroll (1996). Silverman tells the first chapters of these stories, from Miller to Heath, elegantly and extensively in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983: chap. 5).

A third narrative would situate Oudart’s study of suture, and its particular example of shot/reverse shot edits, within a history of theorizing about montage, from Eisenstein to Bazin. One relevant example of Eisenstein’s (1998: 87) approach is his 1929 essay “Beyond the Shot” and his argument with the “Kuleshov school” over its view that a montage of shots is a “series . . . in a chain,” in contrast to Eisenstein’s notion of “montage as a *collision* . . . of two factors [that] gives rise to an idea.” The Kuleshov effect, with its argument about viewers connecting visual fields, bears an uncanny resemblance to Oudart’s notion of looking at, or mis-looking at, the Absent One.<sup>1</sup> An appropriate example of Bazin’s (1967: 33) thought is his identification of “shot/reverse shot” as a “characteristic procedure” of pre-1940 films that “the shot in depth introduced by Orson Welles and William Wyler” challenged. Bazin’s (*ibid.*: 38) dislike, expressed in the same essay, for “chopping the world up into little fragments” provides a proleptic gloss on the issues of suture: should film narrative, as it cuts and juxtaposes pieces of film, emphasize fragments or larger wholes?

Yet a fourth narrative might emphasize the phenomenological elements in Oudart that, before the articulation of reception theory in the 1970s and 1980s, began to speculate on the construction of consciousness in film. It does not occur to Oudart to distinguish between implied and real or flesh and blood viewers, for example, so that some of his analysis of spectatorship is confusing, a little premodern, so to speak, to our ears. Oudart’s (1978 [1969]: 41, 45) analysis of the phenomenology of watching explicitly describes the experience of flesh and blood viewers: “the spectator experiences with vertiginous delight . . . he is at the cinema”; or “the specta-

1. Since I discuss the Kuleshov effect in section 2 of this essay, a brief definition is in order: the famous experiment intercut a shot of the same neutral face with different objects in an eyeline match, so that the resulting strips of film presented the same face looking at a baby, a coffin, for example, or a meal. When these different strips of film were exhibited to various audiences, they interpreted that face as happy, sad, or hungry. The Kuleshov effect has become a shorthand for the notion that editing creates interpretations.

tor recuperates his difference, an operation by which he is himself placed outside the frame.” Yet Oudart’s (ibid.: 41) account of experiencing gaps in film also focuses on that spectator’s “mode of participation,” on the conventions by which “the spectator’s imagination” functions inside the text. Even though the spectator of interest to classic suture theorists was primarily the flesh and blood spectator, Oudart’s essay opens the door to a study of the structures of consciousness *within* a text as well as to a study of the structures of consciousness reading or viewing the text in the extrinsic world.<sup>2</sup> Oudart’s (ibid.: 39) essay is incomplete, because it never provides a taxonomy of “the variations of angle” of the camera and the gaze that they construct, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. The essay fails to do so partly because Oudart’s goal is not systematic in a narratological way. Nonetheless, his keen eye for structures of consciousness represented in film narrative adds important angles to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity that frames much of this essay. As I seek to rewrite suture theory for film narrative, I will return to these four threads to explore missteps along the way and also to acknowledge promising elements in earlier theoretical texts.

From the first, Oudart theorized suture as a narrative device in film that promoted an illusion that comforted spectators by closing a gap in their experience of film’s space and narrativity. The nature of the gap, the nature of the illusion, and the nature of the comfort varied among writers following Oudart along the first, Lacanian, pathway; but the interest in gaps and their mystification remained largely constant. For Oudart, who begins with a phenomenological study of montage, it is the shot/reverse shot chain which reveals how suture forms subjectivity in film narrative, because any visual field in a film frame implies a consciousness from which it could arise. “Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field, the place of a character who is put there by the viewer’s imaginary, and which we shall call the Absent One” (ibid.: 36). This “representation,” however, is “burdened with a lack—the lack of someone,” and so, for Oudart (ibid.: 38, 37), the logic of the shot sequence is to provide, in the second shot, a comforting source for what the screen sees in the first shot: “suture” is “the abolition of the Absent One and its resurrection in someone.” Or, as Dayan (1974: 30) later rephrased the notion, “the reverse shot has ‘sutured’ the hole opened in the spectator’s imaginary relationship with the filmic

2. The distinction between implied and real viewers matters in my argument because, as will become clearer later, I take the position that film narrative, like other narratives, constructs an implied viewer. Later I use Peter Rabinowitz’s (1998 [1987]: 21–29) term “authorial audience,” which is similar to Wolfgang Iser’s (1974) older term “implied reader” (or viewer) for the reception that a text’s conventions seem to assume.

field by his perception of the absent-one.” So, in *Vertigo*, Hitchcock’s camera does not simply record Madeleine’s odyssey driving through San Francisco’s streets; lest the gaze become unmoored, “decentered” (in Oudart’s word), Hitchcock frames Madeleine’s Jaguar specifically inside another car window and consistently returns to Scottie’s hands and face to “resurrect” the consciousness that owns this visual field (Oudart 1978 [1969]: 38).

Rothman (1975: 46) then replied to Dayan that this model ignores the common practice of beginning the sequence with a *prior* establishing shot that banishes absence before it is suggested: “in fact the point-of-view shot is ordinarily (that is to say: *always*, except in special cases) part of a three-shot (viewer/view/viewer) sequence.” In the essay which probably represents the high-water mark in suture’s colonization of film form, Heath (1978: 66) replied that Rothman’s correct observations do not “render the concept of suture . . . no longer pertinent; rather, they suggest a necessary displacement” of suture into other film functions. Heath’s argument is that Rothman, like Salt, “narrows the field of debate” by referring to a “very strictly defined point-of-view shot succession,” as if the ontological absence at the core of film could be erased by that extra establishing shot, and so (says Heath) Rothman misses the point. Suture is really about much more than shot/reverse shot cutting. Suture functions in a “multiplicity” of “layerings and times and advances” (of which multiplicity shot/reverse shot sequences are only one example), and the deeper function of suture is to articulate “the organization and hold of the look and looks in film” (ibid.: 66–67).

However untenable the larger claims Heath made for suture, he was correct that Oudart survived Rothman. The power of the idea of absence in Oudart’s model of gazing at gazing was irresistible. Despite the accuracy of Rothman’s observations about an establishing shot before the first perspective shot, Oudart’s notion of absence as prior to any narrative origin for a strip of film remains important, because this idea reflects an attractive ontology of the self, which his essay cites from Jacques-Alain Miller’s reflections on suture. Miller seeks to extend Lacan’s thought, in which suture “stitches over,” so to speak, the subject’s experience of absence (of many kinds, but particularly the subject’s experience of exclusion from the very discourse that forms its illusions of selfhood). One of Miller’s images is especially analogous to Oudart’s use of the reverse shot: it (“the o member of the series” of numbers) is “the standing-in-place” in that series of signifiers (again, numbers, in Miller’s own example) which “suture[s] the absence (of the absolute zero).” For Miller, “the restored relation of the zero to the series of numbers” figures “the subject’s relation to the signifying chain.” But the restoration is fragile and temporary; suture confesses

the truth of the subject's position, which is "its exclusion from the discourse which internally it intimates" (Miller 1978 [1966]: 32). Suture has become a figure of absence.

The evasion this account identifies is deep and pervasive: the reverse shot of the gazer (Scottie at his steering wheel in *Vertigo*) sutures over that profound wound in our being, the absence of the truly Absent One, a shadowy Observer for whose gaze we need a safe, diegetic source: suture, in other words, provides film spectators with the illusion of an origin for what they see. Film's construction of seeing needs to be naturalized. More importantly, the construction of seeing seeing needs to be naturalized. The project, in Dayan (1974: 27) and those who follow him in the subplot of interpellation, is to mislead the passive film viewer (implied or flesh and blood). This understanding of the gap in Oudart leads Dayan to predict only "entrapment" for the interpellated viewer. Silverman (1983: 231–32) turns the screw even more subtly on that viewer:

Suture can be understood as the process whereby the inadequacy of the [viewing] subject's position is exposed in order to create the desire for new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack. . . . The viewing subject's position is a supremely passive one, a fact which is carefully concealed through cinematic sleight-of-hand.

This intense promotion of the viewer as "supremely passive" in Dayan and Silverman provokes some of the strongest and most effective criticism of their account of suture from writers like Bordwell and Carroll, who believe that viewers can be, and usually are, deeply active. In rare cases, Silverman admits, films like *Psycho* and *Lola Montes* defamiliarize the deceptions of suture. *Psycho* is an especially poignant example, from its opening relentless zoom shot (with no reverse shot to locate its origin) to the loss of Marion's gaze and the viewers' forced relocation to Norman: "What *Psycho* forces us to understand is that we want suture so badly we'll take it at any price, even with the fullest knowledge of what it entails—passive insertions into pre-existing discursive positions (both mythically potent and mythically impotent); threatened losses and false recoveries; and subordination to the castrating gaze of a symbolic Other" (ibid.: 212–13). But *Psycho* is the exception. Normally, film's "multiple cuts" produce not only a plenitude that is illusory but a "castrating coherence" which violates again the already abused subject (ibid.: 205).

Even Oudart (1978 [1969]: 38) believed that his viewer was "burdened with a lack" when experiencing a shot, a visual field, with no source. Consequently, that viewer will yearn for the resurrection of the Absent One in order to escape the "real terrorism of the sign," experienced when "signi-

fication actually penetrates the spectator as a sovereign speech” (ibid.: 43). Denied this resurrection, Oudart’s viewer must settle for the reverse shot, which identifies a source for that shot within the film’s diegesis. Silverman’s subjects, however, face a much bleaker outlook. For her, the film viewer is twice a victim. First, the viewers’ “inadequacy”—that lack at the core of all identity—gets exposed in order to stimulate a desire for compensation, for repair of the self; and then the narrative product for sale conveniently turns up promising what is hopeless, to “make good that lack.” For the viewer who yearns for wholeness, this promised but hollow plenitude is another betrayal: hence, in Silverman’s eyes, it is paradoxically a “castrating coherence.” To extend the Lacanian theme that gaps call for sutures that only emphasize the ironies of absence, in Miller (1978 [1966]: 33), the logic of suture is “the logic of the signifier, a displacement whose effect is the emergence of signification.” The signifier is another gap, whose suturing is always already too late.

To turn the screw a final time: because the logic of suture includes the displacement effect of signification, one of those effects is “the consciousness of the subject, [which] is to be situated on the level of the effects of signification” (Miller 1978 [1966]: 33). That is, consciousness is another example of a displaced signified. So a reader like Halberstam (2001: 296) can approach the complexities of transgendered identities in the film *Boys Don’t Cry* (2001) as an example of destabilized subjectivities constructed by conventions like shot/reverse shot cutting. “The inadequacy of the [transgendered] subject’s position” is “a precondition of the narrative,” an inadequacy that Halberstam, citing Silverman, finds enunciated by suture: in one example, “this shot/reverse shot involving the two Brandons now serves both to destabilize the spectator’s sense of gender stability and also to confirm Brandon’s manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated.” Halberstam’s reading of subjectivity illustrates the staying power of classical suture theory. In this logic of suture, subject positions, that is, human consciousnesses, have become an effect of an effect of a displacement of an absence.

The configuration of the absence varies from Oudart and Dayan to Heath or Silverman. But I want to emphasize here a common thread in these classic suture theorists: suture as an *evasion* of the experience of absence they offer to film characters, to implied viewers, and particularly to real-world film spectators. Because that absence, that abyss, is so disturbing, film characters and viewers fasten desperately on these deceptive consolations: on the “tricks” of editing, especially, by which “the cinematographic level fools the spectator” (Dayan 1974: 30, 31). For those who are not fooled, suture is then about the interpellation of subjects into film nar-

rative and its “discourse without an origin” (ibid.: 31), and for Dayan and Silverman, true to their Althusserian roots, the interpellation of subjects into ideology.

Criticism of this understanding of suture began to surface in the 1980s. Much of this dissent concentrated on the extensive debt of classic suture theorists to Lacanian psychoanalysis; this debt led them to read actual audience response as a “repression” of “ghostly operations in the spectator’s unconscious” (Carroll 1996: 414–15). In contrast, writers like Carroll and Bordwell suggested other models for audience experience, for which no resort to psychoanalysis was necessary. Instead, “our normal experience of films” gives viewers “certain strategies for comprehending a shot chain, not only in virtue of familiarity with films, but also perhaps even more importantly, on the basis of knowledge of a broader culture that employs narrative, simile and metaphor in ways that can be mimed in editing” (ibid.: 415). For Bordwell (1985: 112), his “Constructivist” model of perception sees viewers as “already ‘tuned,’ prepared to test spatial, temporal and ‘logical’ schemata against what the shot represents”; again, no recourse to psychoanalysis is necessary to explain how viewers understand a shot chain.

Oudart’s suture becomes for Bordwell a useful, if somewhat murky, early effort to map film spectators’ cognition of space in film texts. Bordwell stresses each shot in Oudart not as a “*point of vision*, only as an offscreen *field or zone*”; Bordwell’s imagery for the importance of this sequence is not phenomenological (vision) but topological (field or zone). The purpose of this sequence is cognitive: “Oudart wants to prove that this backing-and-filling movement, this process of stitching across a gap, helps narration construct space” (ibid.: 111). As a corollary, Oudart’s method “plays down narration” because in the shot/reverse shot sequence “there is no place for the narrator to hide,” and with no “phantom narrator,” there is no “invisible-observer account whereby the camera is the eye of an observer” (ibid.). Bordwell sees in Oudart a support for his project to erase narrators from cinematic narrative.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, my own reading of Oudart will find in his examples a model for a layering of consciousnesses in film that supports a return to the idea of narrators in film (counter to Bordwell’s project) and also to the idea of implied viewers (in contrast to the focus on real audiences in classical suture theory).<sup>4</sup> In order to model spectator activity better, Bordwell (1989: xiv) later added to his “principles of

3. For more on the return of the narrator in film, see pages 298–99 and note 14.

4. In theory, the insights about spectators in both classical suturist and cognitive models can apply to implied viewers, but in practice both approaches concentrate on flesh and blood spectators, at a cost, especially in classical suture theory: a focus on real effects on flesh and

cognitive psychology” another explanatory matrix, “rational-agent social theory” in his model for a “constructivist theory of interpretation.” Despite Bordwell’s cognitive use of Oudart, he recognizes in a backhanded kind of way the phenomenological complexity of Oudart’s early study of multiple frames that record multiple looks in film. For my part, I acknowledge in Oudart a suggestion of the nested frames of consciousnesses responding to consciousnesses in narrative that I call deep intersubjectivity (see Butte 2004: chap. 1).

The differences between Bordwell and Carroll, on the one side, and Oudart, on the other, are in part differences in the work they seek to do: their projects and their foundational logics reflect deeply different topics and kinds of evidence. Bordwell (1985: 111) praises Oudart’s work as “a start toward characterizing the viewing activities that the spectator often engages in—anticipation, recollection and recognition of the spaces which narration represents.” But Oudart’s project is not systematically narratological, nor is it cognitive in Bordwell’s topological sense. That is, it does not seek to outline a series of activities and processes in a carefully reasoned taxonomy. Nor is it about space and protocols for making sense of it by viewers; it is about layers of experience. Alongside Oudart’s interest in Lacanian discourse and the defamiliarization of signifiers, his other fundamental purpose is phenomenological, to describe layers of consciousness, initially as presented inside a story and then also, more clumsily and with more ontological apparatus, outside the story. Bordwell, Carroll, and Salt sought outcomes from Oudart’s account of experience in and of film that it was never designed to provide.<sup>5</sup> Dayan and Silverman and other Althusserian students of film as ideology have also misread (or underread) Oudart, seizing on the Lacanian threads in his essays at the expense of their phenomenological richness.

I wish to dissent from the model of suture as absence, but my dissent does not emerge from cognitive psychology’s reading of readers (or spectators), as in Bordwell, Carroll, or Salt, or from their expectations of a narratological poetics in Oudart. Instead, I want to restore the body and its consciousness to suture by way of a phenomenological understanding of film narrative linked to Merleau-Ponty’s early reflections on film (which anticipate his critique of Lacan) and to his late notions of chiasmus. Along

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blood viewers in the real world distracted suture theory from attending to the phenomenological and formal complexity of narrative texts.

5. Salt (1977: 50) surveyed a sampling of films from the 1930s and 1940s and produced a chart with percentages of angled shot/reverse shot sequences. He concluded that these shot chains are a small number of total shot transitions in mainstream films and do not require much study.

the way, this approach will acknowledge certain similar elements in Oudart as well. Something else, however, is missing in classical suture theory: a full respect for and attention to the narrative text (and here my criticism shares common ground with Bordwell, Carroll, and Salt, who also wanted to study the body of the story closely). Suture theory came to be about the phenomenology of film spectatorship in flesh and blood audiences. In virtually every instance, an account of experience represented by suture inside film narrative slips quickly into an account of the experience of the film's real-world spectator that serves to illustrate some angle of psychoanalytic film theory as a theory of reception.

As a result, suture theory abdicated its opportunity to contribute to a poetics of film narrative, as it could well have done, even from its Lacanian foundation. For example, when Dayan discusses Lacanian "psychoanalysis [as] a theory of intersubjectivity" and wants to see film as a "tutor-code" for ideological formation, the intersubjective linkage he maps occurs from screen to audience, not within the film narrative. For Dayan (1974: 31), the payoff to suture theory is an understanding of what happens in the cinema audience, not inside the film narrative: "Falling under the control of the cinematographic system, the spectator loses access to the present." For critics like Bordwell, Carroll, and myself, such ideologically driven psychoanalytic theories of reception are abstract and tendentious as well as rhetorically naive in practice (no students of Wayne Booth hereabouts). Suture theorists had turned away from a poetics of film narrative and at the same time came to seem irrelevant in their work on extrinsic reception. In the words of Robert Burgoyne, "the analytic category of the audience, with its concrete historical and contextual dimensions, has in large part replaced the psychoanalytic category of the spectator in current theory" (Stam et al. 1992: 86).<sup>6</sup> These words from 1992 are still true. The study of real-world audiences and spectators has fallen to cultural studies scholars, for whom empirical and archival research are the route to understanding flesh and blood readers, and narratological work has never returned to suture.<sup>7</sup> As one sign of which way the wind is blowing, the latest edition (sixth) of the canonical anthology *Film Theory and Criticism* (Baudry and Cohen 2004) dropped two of the three suture essays (Rothman and Silverman, retaining only Dayan) that it had published since at least 1992.

The move from a focus on film narrative to its effects on real-world spectators in suture theorists is unfortunate, because it disables a useful set

6. See page iv for identification of Burgoyne as the author of this quotation.

7. An example of the study of real audiences is Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994: v), which tellingly is dedicated to "all women who wrote to me with their memories of Hollywood stars of the 1940s and 1950s."

of questions and analytic tools which can help us think about what often is at stake in film narrative: how it represents the formation of human subjectivities (including, yes, a film's flesh and blood spectators as well as its implied viewers). Oudart's essays themselves enact the movement away from the text but only after significant analysis of consciousnesses represented within a text. It has been easy to overlook the intersubjective implication of Oudart's formulation: "Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field, the place of a character who is put there by the viewer's imaginary, and which we shall call the Absent One" (Oudart 1978 [1969]: 36). Although Oudart becomes most interested in the inner life of his spectator in the theater, he still begins by noticing the construction of an intrinsic subjectivity—"a character"—as source of the first "filmic field." Furthermore, the logic of the second shot (even if it is the third, as Rothman [1975] says) does not erase this first subjectivity represented in a text but, on the contrary, multiplies subjectivities.

Oudart's focus on the spectator's experience of emptiness does not erase these representations. Neither does Dayan and Silverman's analysis of narrative as ideology. Since, like Seymour Chatman, I want to reclaim an implied narrator for these shots, and will assume an implied spectator inside the text also, I will argue in section 2 that the result of these shot sequences is not a suturing of absence but a suturing of presences (Chatman 1990: chaps. 5 and 8).<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Suture Revised: Merleau-Ponty and Deep Intersubjectivity

In this endeavor to recover what was always already implicit in the image but denied by theorists, suture now is a narrative of embodied consciousnesses in scenarios of cutting and stitching and sometimes loss and sometimes healing. This model will return to suture those implications, originating in medical practice, of "aboutness," of intentionality and intersections in the world, which shaped Atul Gawande's opening story about practicing surgery. That "aboutness" will surprise those for whom phenomenology wears the aura of idealism.<sup>9</sup> But as Laura Doyle has argued, a phenome-

8. My own interest in intersubjectivities in narrative concentrates on the formal dimensions of the text, including its cues for its authorial audience *inside* a film's diegesis. "Intersubjectivity" certainly can also include links to real-world audiences, from particularly gendered or ethnically identified or competent and informed audiences to other audience groups whom empirical study can learn much about and who are necessary to create the narrative which otherwise is only a signal. Those intersubjectivities, however, lie outside the scope of this essay.

9. *Phenomenology* is a word that often suggests various transcendental idealisms about human consciousness: the notion that identity expresses itself transparently in various signifiers and

nology of suture in the tradition of Merleau-Ponty need not be essentialist or transcendental. Doyle (2001: xvii–iii) acknowledges the traditional accusation that the phenomenology of Husserl, for example, presumes a deeply ideological “transcendental subject,” enabled by naturalized class, gender, and racial privileges. Such an idealist phenomenology would not provide a useful antidote to the drama of Lacanian absence; for suture as an idealist narratological strategy would replace one emptiness (of the Lacanian signifier) with another (the transcendently Human). In contrast, Doyle (ibid.: xxv) offers her claim for a politically intelligent phenomenology, which seeks to “name . . . how it is that we live a not-at-all simple coexistence with others, an involuted resistance to and with ourselves and others, a knowing of, against, and through others” which “does not merely recolonize the world in the image of those who can afford to dream of their own harmony with it.” In her book, Doyle’s own example illustrates such a “knowing of, against, and through others” by way of tales of terrorized consciousnesses in prison narratives: she thus explains how “witnessing” is there “an intersubjective, intercorporeal form of involuntary agency” (ibid.: 96).

Like Doyle, I promote a phenomenological strategy—in this case, directed toward a poetics of film narrative—that is neither entirely contingent nor transcendental. Ideology still matters in this model, and interpellation still occurs—Dayan and Silverman were not entirely wrong—but in an interworld of consciousnesses that are by no means “supremely passive,” in Silverman’s (1983: 232) words. Oudart’s essays themselves offer a rich vein of phenomenological observations which in fact turn away from absence and the passive. Particularly important is his emphasis on the necessary obliqueness of camera angles for the suturing of deeply intersubjective consciousnesses in film narrative (Oudart 1978 [1969]: 37, 39, 45). That

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texts, or that identity’s essence transcends class, gender, and ethnicity, or that intersubjectivity is not problematic because minds can grasp directly the experiences of other selves. A similar idealism has seemed to tarnish what I call first-wave phenomenological narrative readings in, for example, Georges Poulet (1970: 59), who claimed that “because of the strange invasion of my person” that occurs when he reads, “I am the subject of thoughts other than my own”; and in J. Hillis Miller’s works of the 1950s and 1960s, like *The Disappearance of God* (1963). My framework grows out of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of such transcendental phenomenology, a critique which nonetheless seeks to describe a deeply embodied intersubjectivity. See Butte 2004: chap. 1 for a review of these issues and for more on deep intersubjectivity and my effort to read narrative by way of a phenomenology neither transcendental nor Derridean, but still attentive to poststructuralist critiques. Two prior efforts in this direction deserve mention: Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), which, despite its thoughtful readings of Merleau-Ponty, is somewhat compromised by a Husserlian idealism, and Wheeler Winston Dixon’s *It Looks at You: The Returned Gaze of Cinema* (1995), which is not.

obliqueness will be particularly helpful in redirecting our thinking toward what really matters about suture in film, that is, the narration of intersubjectivity in all its rhetorical and ideological complexity.

What, then, would it mean to consider film's narration of human consciousnesses by way of the devices of suture? I continue to refer to "consciousnesses," because one goal of this essay is a deeper understanding of how stories narrate consciousnesses as perceiving (however partially and often erroneously) the gestures of other consciousnesses responding to their own gestures in layers of perceptions of perceptions perceived in this narrative practice of deep intersubjectivity. Two different yet complementary notions from Merleau-Ponty suggest how we could frame suture's narration of subjectivities. The first notion, or cluster of notions, occurs in his 1948 essay on film, in which he claims (in an eerie anticipation of Stanley Cavell) that film is a natural topic for philosophical reflection.<sup>10</sup> The key thread in "The Film and the New Psychology" is the wholeness, simultaneity, and relatedness of human perceptions. Merleau-Ponty's (1964b [1948]: 48) first illustration of this relatedness comes not from film, but from everyday experience: "A sick person contemplating the wallpaper in his room will suddenly see it transformed if the pattern and figure become the ground while what is usually seen as ground becomes the figure." His conclusion: "Such a perception of the whole is more natural and more primary than the perception of isolated elements" (ibid.: 49). Merleau-Ponty's major example of this principle is the experiments in editing that we usually attribute to Lev Kuleshov (but Merleau-Ponty attributes to Pudovkin): "the meaning of the shot depends on what precedes it in the movie, and the succession of scenes creates a new reality which is not merely the sum of its parts" (ibid.: 54-55). Merleau-Ponty then recalls a sequence from the film *Broadway Melody*, in which two actors on stage address first their audience, in a medium shot, and then each other, sotto voce, in a close-up. He concludes from this example of the Kuleshov effect, "The expressive force of this montage lies in its ability to make us sense the coexistence, the simultaneity of lives in the same world" (ibid.: 55). And so, for Merleau-Ponty, film understands "the common feature of presenting consciousness thrown into the world" (ibid.: 58).

This conception of montage, achieved of course by suturing strips of film together, helps Merleau-Ponty explain a notion of human consciousness and intersubjectivity which anticipates his critique of the mirror stage

10. For Cavell's claim that film and philosophical interrogation are natural companions, see *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1979) and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981).

in Lacan's thought.<sup>11</sup> Since classic suture theory owes much to a version of Lacan, this critique will clarify what is different in the idea of suture I am offering. Here is one fragment from Merleau-Ponty's (1964a [1960]: 136–37) restatement of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage:

To use Dr. Lacan's terms, I am "captured, caught up" by my spatial image. Thereupon I leave the reality of my lived *me* in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious, or imaginary *me*, of which the specular image is the first outline. In this sense I am torn from myself. . . . The general function of the specular image would be to tear us away from our immediate reality; it would be a "de-realizing" function.

In reply to Lacan, Merleau-Ponty (*ibid.*: 139–40) argues that, "in the case of the specular image, instead of a second body which the child would have and would be located elsewhere than his tactile body, there is a kind of *identity at a distance* . . . the body is at once present in the mirror and present at the point where I feel it tactually. . . . The two aspects that are to be coordinated are not really separated in the child."

This notion of the child as already one body echoes closely Merleau-Ponty's (1964b [1948]: 56) account of the representation of consciousness in film, in what he calls "the ensemble" of images and music in time. What Lacan saw as separation, a fragmentation of feeling in the child before the always impossible promise of fullness in the mirror, is for Merleau-Ponty connectedness in the body that is "at once present in the mirror and . . . where I feel it." Sutured pieces of film illustrate the same principle of "coexistence" and "simultaneity" that Merleau-Ponty sees in the child's body. The construction of montage in film, that is, sutured narrative, is another example of how human consciousness works for Merleau-Ponty (*ibid.*: 51): "I do not think the world in the act of perception. . . . The objects behind my back are not represented to me by some operation of memory or judgment; they are present, they *count* for me, just as the ground which I do not see continues nonetheless to be present beneath the figure which partially hides it." Merleau-Ponty's example is almost exactly contrary in structure and function to Jacques-Alain Miller's for the ensemble of suture. For Merleau-Ponty, the objects behind one's back that one does not remember are present in one's consciousness, in contrast

11. Lacan's (1977 [1966]: 6) influential 1949 seminar on the mirror stage emphasized the experience of a small child, at twelve to eighteen months, before its mirror image as one of the "*meconnaissances* that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy." This illusion born of the mirror seduces the child because the image's wholeness promises more than the small child's experience of its own "fragmented body" and leads in fact to the "assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (*ibid.*: 4).

to Miller's (1978 [1966]: 32) series of numbers/signifiers, whose suturing confesses the subject's "exclusion from the discourse" that nonetheless constitutes it. Here lies the usefulness of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of coexistence: it offers an alternative to those notions of exclusion and loss that are fundamental to classic suture theory in film narrative. In Merleau-Ponty (1964a [1960]: 139), "identity at a distance," whether in the body of a child before a mirror or in film's spliced sequences, is a sign of the linkages in consciousness, however oblique and imperfect, not of its gaps, as it is for Miller and Dayan and Silverman.

For Merleau-Ponty, the Kuleshov effect is another reminder that consciousness, intersubjectivity, and narrative are ensemble acts that add up to more than a sum of their parts. This "more than" sounds an alarm bell to skeptics, and Merleau-Ponty himself consistently criticized the idealism of earlier phenomenologies. I do not want at all to claim for film narrative's representations of sutured consciousnesses a full presence to themselves or to others. Merleau-Ponty's own notions of slippage and absence will become clearer in our discussion of chiasmus, but here as there I want to steer a middle course between an archaic transcendentalism and a Lacanian absence. I certainly want to avoid the skepticism of Emmanuel Levinas (1990: 59), who critiqued Merleau-Ponty's image of reciprocity in hands touching hands touching hands in this way:

One may especially wonder, then, whether such a "relation," the ethical relation, is not imposed across a *radical separation* between the two hands, which precisely do not belong to the same body, nor to a hypothetical or only metaphorical intercorporeality.

For Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm, whether or not ethical, is neither hypothetical nor metaphorical. Of course, two persons' hands do not belong to the same body, but when they touch, each touching the other's touching as an embodied and mirrored intention, their linkage is neither only a metaphor nor only a hypothesis. It is an example of chiasmus.

The second idea to help us reconceptualize suture's work in film narrative is indeed Merleau-Ponty's late notion of chiasmus; and together with the approach to perceptions as simultaneous and interconnecting/constructing, it provides a new understanding of suture in film narrative. Chiasm is originally a rhetorical device, X-shaped, so to speak, like the Greek letter *chi*, which features the reversibility of symmetrical grammatical elements, as in this example: "Flowers are lovely, love is flowerlike." In Merleau-Ponty's thought, chiasm becomes an image for the interweaving between the partially reversible perceptions of two (or more) consciousnesses. That is, chiasm is a paradigm for embodied intersubjectivity. His

late essay “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (1964) offers the often-cited image: “There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching.” Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 143) continues: the circle that includes seeing others see oneself seeing “betray[s] the solipsist illusion . . . that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished [only] by oneself.” Although this self-transcending, this “going beyond,” is not a self-delusion, neither does the circle of perceptions achieve a pure transcendence of subjectivity, as Merleau-Ponty’s (ibid.: 264) notes to his essay explain: the chiasm “1. does not realize a surpassing, a dialectic in the Hegelian sense; 2. is realized on the spot, by encroachment, thickness, *spatiality*.” Neither solipsist nor transcendentalist: the image of chiasmus expresses quite precisely Merleau-Ponty’s sense of consciousnesses, of intersubjectivity, in the world; the thickness and spatiality of crisscrossing threads anchor each self in its body but also touch the other body, whose gestures mirror back one’s gestures to oneself in a chain of intercorporeal responses that cannot be entirely hypothetical, entirely a delusion.

Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1955]: 200) is the poet of such ambiguities, of a human “interworld” (Merleau-Ponty’s word for an imperfectly joined web of experiences) in which subjects are never entirely present nor entirely absent to each other. An image from *Signs* expresses this complexity. “There is said to be a wall between us, but it is a wall we build together, each putting a stone in the niche left by the other” (1964c [1960]: 19). Or in an earlier essay: “There is woven between us an ‘exchange,’ a ‘chiasm between two destinies,’ in which there are never quite two of us, and yet one is never alone” (1970 [1953]: 82). Chiasm as suture, suture as chiasm. One further image opens up this possibility even more clearly: “Chiasm . . . : the insertion of the world between the two leaves of my body / the insertion of my body between the 2 leaves of each thing and of the world” (1968 [1964]: 264). I argue that suture in this view is an interleaving of embodiments (even in terrifying versions: shame, violation, annihilation) in a reversal of the absences of classic suture theorists. I add shame and violation, because Merleau-Ponty usually figures intersubjectivity as “espousal,” and that optimism needs muting in the face of the aggression that human presences, however truly yet partially chiasmatic, can wreak on each other.<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray (1993: 183) emphasized the dark side of the chiasm in her reading of Merleau-Ponty: “weaving the visible and my look in this way, I could just as well say that I close them off from myself. The texture becomes increasingly tight, taking me into it, sheltering me there but imprisoning

12. See Butte 2004: 24–28 on the quarrel between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre over intersubjectivity as espousal or shame.

me as well.” Imprisonment, absence, and Silverman’s “castrating coherence,” unweaving as well as interleaving, are always possible in a corporeal interworld, whether perceived in the real world or in a narrative text. But they are not the only possibilities.

I propose that suture in film articulates such a chiasmus of consciousnesses and embodiments, a chiasmus that is implicit in film’s narrative practices and to which classical suture theory was blinded by its absorption in the Lacanian drama of absence. In this understanding of the representation of consciousnesses in film, even cutting apart may be a deeply intersubjective narrative. A suture that enables the narration of both unweaving and interleaving is nonetheless about threading subjects, not about triumphant emptiness.

### 3. Suture as Chiasmus in *Nothing but a Man*

To explore suture as chiasmus in what I intend as an exemplary exercise, I have chosen two brief sequences from a film which is almost entirely two-shots and three-shots, in extended shot/reverse shot sequences of the kind so important to Oudart and other classical suture theorists. The film is *Nothing but a Man*, Michael Roemer’s brilliant 1964 study of the struggles of one African American couple in the tumultuous early 1960s in the rural American South. The film is austere in a way that is effective but deceptive, because its formal style, apparently simple in shape and materials, deepens vertiginously on reflection. I want to make large claims for these two sequences: that understanding suture in two forms (one for each sequence) illuminates *presence*, not absence, in the frame, and illuminates the narration of multiple consciousnesses in the context of intense personal, social, and political violence.<sup>13</sup>

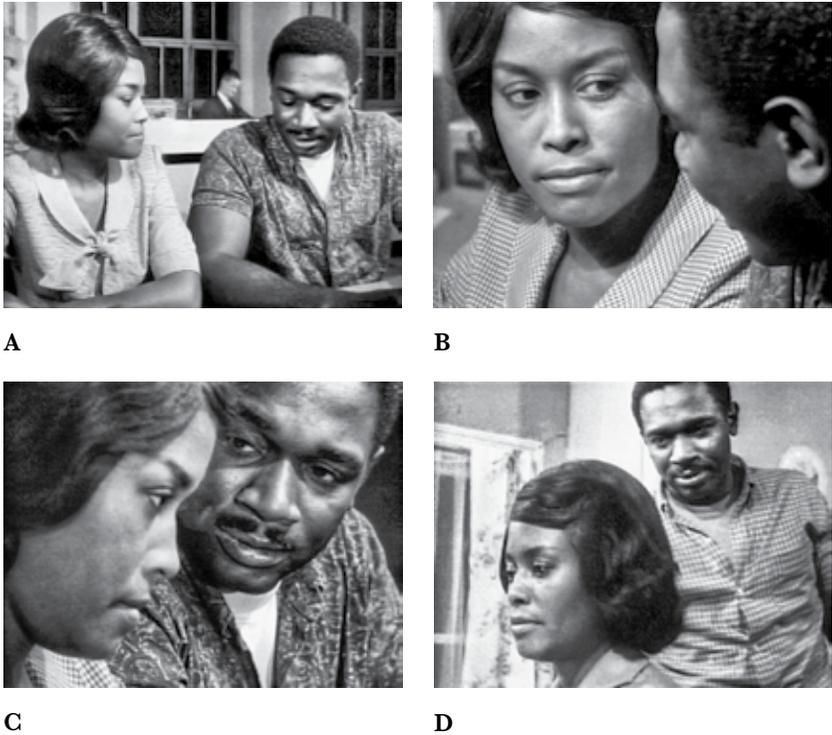
The tensions that threaten to erupt inside the frames of *Nothing but a Man* had parallels outside those frames. The film was shot in Cape May, New

13. Let me set the scene briefly for readers who have not seen this film or have not seen it recently. Duff (played by Ivan Dixon) is a skilled African American worker on the railway. He meets the local preacher’s daughter Josie (played by Abbey Lincoln), who is a schoolteacher, while working near a small town not far from Birmingham, Alabama. Duff, a veteran who has lived in the North, is tough, angry, rebellious, and the father of a small boy, whom he has left in unsavory circumstances in Birmingham. After a rare visit to see the boy and his own alcoholic, angry father, Duff meets Josie in the Birmingham bus station and proposes marriage. Josie’s father opposes the marriage, fearing Duff’s anger and difference in class. After the marriage, Josie and Duff continue to struggle with the racism of the Jim Crow South, whose violence simmers under the surface of their lives. (Josie remarks that the last lynching occurred only eight years earlier.) Duff loses various jobs, despite his effort to be less confrontational. After his father’s death, and with Josie’s encouragement, Duff brings his son to live with them.

Jersey, between June and September 1963; in June, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was killed in Jackson, Mississippi; in August, Martin Luther King led the massive demonstration in Washington, where he delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech; on September 15, a bomb killed four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. According to Jim Davidson’s account of the production, each of these events challenged the cast and crew to maintain focus on the film. Nor was segregation dead in New Jersey: “The black cast and crew remember precisely where they stayed, in their own hotel, the Planter,” which may have been the first black-owned business in Cape May (Davidson 1998: 14). As a result, “the Planter was their oasis in a Jim Crow setting. ‘I went into restaurants where I was not served,’ [Ivan] Dixon says. ‘With my whole family, six or eight people’” (ibid.).

This film, and the two scenes I have chosen, are designed to make the case against cinema as gaps and the case for phenomenological readings that acknowledge embeddedness in class, race, gender, and history. Our first sequence will offer, in its apparently uncomplicated structure, an almost categorical denial of the claims to emptiness or castration in earlier suture theory that I discussed in sections 1 and 2 of this essay. Instead, we will find layer upon layer of narration, voice and consciousnesses, as this brief scene, a marriage proposal, becomes a dance of subjectivities that are fearful yet attentive to each other, hostile and yearning. These are the structural elements: eighty seconds of film, eight shots: four are two-shots that are the same medium close-up of our lovers, Josie and Duff (shot A). Simple as the framing seems to be, between them in the distance (in the bus station) is a middle-class middle-aged white man in coat and tie. The other four shots are divided evenly: two of Josie with Duff partially out of focus on the right edge of the frame and turned toward her (shot B) and two of the classic reverse shot, Duff facing the camera with Josie on the left edge of the frame looking down (shot C). Here is the scene’s dialogue, with the shot selection on the right. The cuts between shots (say, from A to B) occur at the beginning of the line of dialogue marked on the right with “A,” “B,” or “C” (see figure 1).

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| Duff: Y’know, I been thinking. How ’bout us gettin’ married?         | <b>A</b> |
| Josie: What do you mean?   |          |
| Duff: Just what I said. (Pause.) Don’t look so scared.               | <b>B</b> |
| How about it?  | <b>A</b> |
| Josie: What happened, Duff?  |          |
| Duff: Look, baby, I don’t know about you,                            | <b>C</b> |
| but it’s the right thing for me, I just know it is. What do you say? |          |
| Josie: Don’t push me, Duff.  |          |



**Figure 1** Sequence from Michael Roemer's 1964 film *Nothing but a Man* (38 min./58 sec.-40 min./40 sec.)

Duff: Wouldn't be no picnic for you. I ain't exactly housebroken.	<b>A</b>
Josie: What about that girl?	<b>B</b>
Duff: She ain't nothin' to me. That's all over. Baby, I'm asking you to <i>marry</i> me.	<b>C</b>
I guess you want a big scene.	
Josie: No—but a small one. (tight smile)	
(Bus announcer's voice: "Now boarding . . .")	<b>A</b>
(Roemer 1964: 38 min./58 sec.-40 min./40 sec.)	

The argument that suture is chiasmus as deeply intersubjective narrative hinges on the extended reciprocal exchange between subjectivities in their perceptions in this scene of the other's perceptions (an interleaving, not an un-leaving, of words and gestures). The architecture of the scene involves the interweaving of specific close-ups that link consciousnesses by means of their reciprocal gestures, strung like beads on the rigorous geometry of the sequence's eyeline matches. (Every edit cuts to the next shot on the line of a gaze from the first shot.) The unspoken feeling beneath both

voices is fear, and here as elsewhere Duff watches Josie's tightness (B) as we watch her watching him watch her trying to understand and manage that fear (C). For Josie to marry Duff means rebellion and danger, abandoning the protections of her father's laboriously constructed world and accepting risks she would face inside and outside Duff's home: inside, because Duff, as he admits, "ain't exactly housebroken," and outside, because as a privileged, attractive, educated African American woman, Josie knows that white people are always watching her. Note that Duff says "Don't *look* so scared," not "Don't be scared" (emphasis added). The danger is showing fear in the midst of such intense supervision in their world (and not just from white people: there are also fathers, schoolchildren, former lovers). In the matrix of Jim Crow and shot/reverse shots, Duff and Josie never touch; the space in the master shot (A) is open between them, with white Birmingham in the interstices. Yet they look and return looks and return looks yet again, answer and do not answer, across that space *inside* the frame (A) and across the frames that divide them (B and C): the result is a partial grasp by each of the other's grasp of their fear, even if unnarrated ("What happened?"), undefined (what is Duff refusing to promise when he says he isn't "exactly housebroken?"), and underdramatized (how is a marriage proposal to be taken seriously if its agent rejects the genre's requirements for the big scene?).

The relations between shots, the formal devices of suture, also embody a chiasmus of consciousnesses. The layering of subjectivities *within* each frame is mirrored by the suturing together of shots. Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 264) described chiasmus as a process of mutual interleaving: "the insertion of the world between the two leaves of my body / the insertion of my body between the 2 leaves . . . of the world." In our sequence, Roemer's editing inserts close-ups (shots B and C) between master shots (shot A) and master shots (shot A) between close-ups (shots B and C); furthermore, the edges are not tightly aligned, because slippage between consciousnesses is fundamental to intersubjectivity in the world, as Merleau-Ponty always argued. Remember his line, "There is woven between us an 'exchange,' a 'chiasm between two destinies,' in which there are never quite two of us, and yet one is never alone" (Merleau-Ponty 1970 [1953]: 82). The misalignments, of depth cues and graphic matches and intentionalities, matter, but the slippage between consciousnesses in this scene is only partial. Roemer's editing hides and reveals, and so do Duff and Josie. Duff does not answer Josie's question "What happened?" (as if his meeting with his son would explain the marriage proposal), and Josie does not ask again: silence responds to silence as an accepting gesture. Duff accuses Josie of needing a theatrical display ("I guess you want a big scene"), and she disagrees

but agrees, modifying his claim (“Well, a small one”). Roemer alternates points of view as Josie and Duff negotiate their intimacies without achieving a single-threaded story or a transcendental union of subjectivities.

Josie and Duff are still two deeply separate subjects, with different narratives and experiences of fear and even different grammatical conventions. The act of hope in this film is to position these two characters on either side of that white man; they have lived enormously different experiences of gender and race, and yet their film suggests a threading across the gap, a chiasmus of gazes and stories. This sequence could have offered in microcosm, as it were, the distrust and fear between the Prince and the Princess from *The Golden Bowl*, between Dewey Dell and Darl from *As I Lay Dying*, or between Nicole and Mitch Stephens in *The Sweet Hereafter* (Russell Banks’s or Atom Egoyan’s); but Josie and Duff build their wall, to cite Merleau-Ponty’s image again, with greater mutual understanding, each putting their stone in the niche left by the other.

The design of this sequence is chiasmatic in more ways than I have claimed so far, because it weaves together representations not only of Josie’s and Duff’s intentionalities but also of an editing—a suturing—consciousness. With three threads in the tapestry of intersubjectivity here, we have moved even further away from Oudart’s absence. This claim for three consciousnesses works for Roemer’s film if one takes the position on film narration, as I do, that all shots imply a narrating agency or consciousness (call it the extradiegetic narrator, the enunciator, or whatever) and that each shot and suture in this sequence not only represents Josie and Duff’s perspective but also expresses a third perspective about Josie and Duff and their world. In other words, I see several layers of consciousnesses in this scene, including a narrating agency’s further consciousness and implied commentary.<sup>14</sup>

14. For a review of the debate over implied narrators in film, see Stam et. al. 1992: 103–13. My position is similar to Nick Browne’s (1975: 38) in “The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of *Stagecoach*” on the authority that narrates: “Certain formal features of the imagery—framing, sequencing, the prohibition and ‘invisibility’ of the narrator—I have suggested, can be explained as the ensemble of ways authority implicitly positions the spectator/reader.” I also find Seymour Chatman’s (1990: 124–25) considered response to David Bordwell persuasive: “My only real criticism [of Bordwell’s theory of film narration] is that it goes too far in arguing that film has no agency corresponding to the narrator and that film narrative is best considered as a kind of work wholly performed by the spectator. Bordwell allows for film a ‘narration’ but not a narrator.” Chatman then argues for some “authority” (using Browne’s word) as an origin for film narrative, though it need not be conceived as a person; personification for film narration is a heuristic move that Bordwell (1989: 168) continues to critique in *Making Meaning* as another “trick of the interpretive trade.” In the context of literary narrative, Daniel Gunn (2004: 36–37) makes an argument similar to Chatman’s about free indirect discourse, a strategy that some narratologists see as “autonomous” or “impersonal” but that for Gunn is in fact an expression of “narratorial subjectivity.”

The third agency of consciousness, the camera in Roemer or the narrating subjectivity in a late Henry James novel, for example, adds a second twist to the chiasmus, as if the figure of the crisscross were crisscrossed again. A narrating subjectivity shapes the exposure of consciousnesses in the curiously intimate yet distanced narration of shot/reverse shot editing. An example from James's *What Maisie Knew* will be useful to illustrate how an invisible hand (or perhaps not so invisible) arranges a series of mirrors to reveal consciousnesses responding to each other. There, James's storyteller frames Maisie's framing of Beale's framing of her. The example occurs in the scene in the Countess's elegant rooms, where Beale has taken Maisie after snatching her away at the Earls Court Exhibition: "While they sat together, there was an extraordinary mute passage between her vision of this vision of his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision" (James 1985 [1897]: 150).

In a similar way, each close-up in our sequence from *Nothing but a Man* also works to expose consciousnesses but, as it were, from behind a screen, as subjects respond in a network of gestures to each other. Roemer's second close-up (C) frames Josie at the edge of the *mise-en-scène* as she watches Duff make his marriage proposal; the camera's implied viewers watch too, not as if they were Josie but in alignment with her, like James's reader aligned with Maisie but sheltered behind the "she" of James's indirect narration. Earlier, in (B), Roemer's viewer filtered Duff's desire through Josie's startled glance; now her posture, angled partly away from the camera's gaze, casts her as a safely surrogate receiver, so that the scene's audience gets to watch her watching Duff watch her, without risking *her* risk (that direct encounter with his gaze). In the same way that James's audience participates intimately in Maisie's feelings from a safe distance, the oblique shot/reverse shot sequence allows the camera to be both subjective and objective at the same time. It can do so because the shot is framed at the edge by the observer's body, which is illogically included inside the shot that seems to represent the field of vision of that observer.

In this plenitude that it articulates and yet partly evades may lie some of the magic of the oblique shot/reverse shot posture for the film's authorial audience: it eavesdrops, watches, but asymmetrically so, *not* targeted by a 180-degree reverse shot, which would implicate that audience because *it* would have to look Duff in the eye.<sup>15</sup> The pleasure the shot offers comes from watching the reciprocity to reciprocity, the response to a response to

15. This shot, in which the observed subject who returns the observer's look also looks into the camera's eye and the cinema audience's, is quite rare because so powerfully confrontational. Think of the moment Thorwald sees Jeff watching him across the courtyard at the end of *Rear Window*.

a yet earlier response between Josie and Duff, in the narrative construction of deep intersubjectivity that the narrative's audience can watch safely, protected by that 30-degree camera angle.

That oblique angle of the reverse shots is one of the oddest features of suture as chiasmus, one that no critic has taken seriously enough. It suggests a strange relationship between the shot's implied narrating agency and its ideal audience. The anomaly lies in the fact that the shot/reverse shot sequence typically appears to represent the perspectives of two characters, yet almost none of these sequences swivel exactly 180 degrees from each other. Silverman (1983: 202) observes the illogicality of the angle: "Often we are shown the shoulders or head of the character through whose eyes we are ostensibly looking." Silverman (*ibid.*) notes that "a loose application" of the convention is, however, more "successful" in its "approximation of 'reality'" than a strict application, and then, without offering any explanation of "success" or "reality," she, like everyone else, moves on.<sup>16</sup> The frequent use of illogical framing and oblique angles in the shot/reverse shot chain strike me as fundamentally important features of this practice in several ways. Like free indirect discourse or thought in print narrative, they allow the authorial audience to be closer to a character's interiority but also distanced, inside a character's perspective but also outside it, just over her shoulder.<sup>17</sup> The distance defines a safe niche for the tale's audience, removed at least one degree from the anger and violence and intimacy in a story. The framing of shoulders and the oblique angles also announce the presence of multiple consciousnesses: the character observing, the character observing the observing, and the narrating agency that so artificially frames all that observing.

The architecture of this chiasmus is indeed yet one further gesture by the film's "narratorial subjectivity" in a move to interpret, to proffer its narration as a *version*, a commentary. As James's enunciator chooses when to shift consciousnesses and colors his world with imagery and rhetorical choices, suture in *Nothing but a Man* embodies a rhetoric too. That narrating subjectivity, that suturing consciousness, which I agreed above is always at

16. Bordwell (1985: 110) simply denies that these shots represent character consciousness; Browne (1975: 35–36) says they do but sees the "angle" of reverse shots as symptomatic of an interpretative stance the viewer is invited to take *on* the character; Salt (1977: 50–51) says that, since "this device is an obvious way of securing audience involvement" with a character, it "is really in need of no further explanation."

17. The important point here is not the *content* of free indirect narration, whether inner speech, discourse, thought, consciousness, unconsciousness, "perspective." I want to draw attention to the stance of narration, the "over the shoulder" position of the narrative voice (or eye), shielded by the indirection of "free indirect" or the oblique shot/reverse shot conventions.

work, however “figural” or “objective” the narrative seems to be, frames the framing inside which Josie and Duff try to weave their own interworld. In this film and this scene, intimacy and supervision collide; racial violence gets braided with family and sexual energies in ways that the film’s formal design explores. For example, the film’s editing frames these moments of intimate struggle (B, C) with the master shot (A), reminding the audience of that white man separating Josie and Duff. Or when Duff admits that he’s hardly “housebroken yet,” in the master shot (A), and Josie returns to her wound, “what about that girl?” (the mother of Duff’s child), Duff’s look is hidden from us, in the out-of-focus face at the edge of the reverse shot (B). Roemer chooses to let his viewer see Josie’s pride (for once she doesn’t look down) and lets Duff compose his reply without an embarrassing reverse shot. What is Duff’s self-definition (“housebroken” usually applies to pets)? How does dignity compose itself in this Alabama bus station? Yet another example of the architecture-as-commentary is the timing of the final shot (A again), inserted two beats after Josie’s quip about the “small scene” that lets both of them off some kind of hook. That spacing is the enunciator’s comment on this process of negotiation over commitment and boundaries: the film breathes deeply, steps back a little, takes heart, and then returns to the frame shot to notice Josie’s anxious look at Duff: the resolution is only temporary, and that white guy with the tie still lurks in the background between them.

Suture explores the threads of the chiasmus that crisscross inside and between frames, in complex patterns of subjectivities and their narratives. Unlike the first example, my second scene from *Nothing but a Man* is one long painful shot of Josie and Duff. It comes late in the film, immediately after Duff’s confrontation with Josie’s father (the minister), who has just said he knew the marriage would fail, and Duff has replied: “Well, at least she ain’t married to no white man’s nigger. You been stoopin’ so long you don’t know how to stand straight. You’re just half a man” (Roemer 1964: 1 hr./8 min./20–40 sec.). In this second scene, Josie and Duff are both visible in the frame for the entire shot, so that there is no escape for the audience from the torment they experience together. The scene confirms the nature of intersubjectivity as chiasmus precisely in the absence of suture. The edges are all inside the frame as Roemer recalls here Duff’s anger, Josie’s fear, and their vulnerability to humiliation and violence.

Duff: How come you don’t hate their guts?

Josie: I don’t know. (Pause) I guess I’m not afraid of them.

Duff: You were plenty scared that night in the car.

Josie: Just of getting hurt. They can’t touch me inside.

Duff: Like hell they can't. They can reach right in (stands up: D) with their damn white hands and turn you off and on.

Josie: Not if you see them for what they are, Duff.

Duff: Jesus, baby, you so full of talk. But you ain't never really been a nigger, have you, living like that in your father's house? So just shut your mouth.

(Turns his back to Josie.)

(Roemer 1964: 1 hr./8 min./55 sec.–1 hr./10 min./5 sec.)

Our vocabulary of chiasmus allows us to say something about the absence of suture here and its consequences. In this extraordinary scene, the threads of power and violation spread out before the viewer, with no evasion, no faces hidden, no obliquely angled reaction shot to serve as a screen. Nor do Josie and Duff find any release from their frame together; their response is resolutely to avoid seeing each other see the other. Once again Josie is afraid, but now she is deeply alone, even by Duff's side (or back, as he moves away). The force of that white man in the interstices of our earlier frame shot now surfaces, as *Nothing but a Man* studies the inter-orientations of racism. A narrative of embodied consciousnesses will trace the body through the matrices of class, gender, and race, but especially race, as Duff well understands (remember, Ivan Dixon was refused service in white restaurants while making this film). Josie claims not to be afraid, deep inside; Duff doesn't buy that claim for a moment. "They can reach right in with their damn white hands and turn you off and on." For Duff, her body blindness is a product of a different class experience. "But you ain't really never been a nigger, have you, living like that in your father's house."

One undertone of this scene with no cuts, no suture, is the closeness of bodies to each other inside a film frame, a closeness which terrifies and promises, sometimes (as here) at the same time. When Duff turns away from Josie, his angry words hanging ominously in the air ("So just shut your mouth"), there is no sense in which the space between their backs is empty. We remember that Merleau-Ponty (1964b [1948]: 51) observed, in his film essay, "The objects behind my back are likewise not presented to me by some operation of memory of judgment: they are present, they *count* for me." In the absence of a sutured montage, the space between Josie and Duff counts with such intensity because a blow would bridge it so easily, and the film's audience remembers that Duff hit Josie once before.

Shot/reverse shot sequences are full of intentionalities and subjectivities, I have argued, and they also help us understand the narration of consciousnesses in a scene where suture is visibly absent. These two brief sequences from *Nothing but a Man* can be taken to offer representative strategies by

which suture narrates subjectivities, that is, intersubjectivity, as presences, not absences. Such narrative sequences in film share some common ground with intersubjective narratives in other forms, and suture in film stories is not uniquely different from sutured consciousnesses in prose fiction, for example: hence my comparison of oblique angles in shot/reverse shot chains and free indirect narration in *Nothing but a Man* and *What Maisie Knew*. A thorough comparison of the features of suture in film and in other narrative forms is another project, however. For now, my goal is to build a phenomenological framework that restores an understanding of presence and subjectivity to suture in film narrative. These webs of sutured shot/reverse shots are not only not about emptiness, they—to the contrary—articulate complex systems of subjectivities that move in intricate Mobius strips of interconnecting consciousnesses (that is, deep intersubjectivity).

#### 4. The Politics of Suture, Again

*Nothing but a Man* was the right film for this essay not only because its austere style lays bare the strategies of suture, especially shot/reverse shots, but also because it challenges a phenomenology of narrative in film to work out the political and ideological implications of that phenomenology to avoid the predilection of some phenomenologists, including some students of narrative, for the transcendental and ahistorical.<sup>18</sup> Laura Doyle (2001: xxv) pointed us in this direction in that call to understand our “involved resistance to and with ourselves and others, a knowing of, against and through others.” Doyle’s language already images political life as chiasmus (“of, against and through others”), and so it is not a large step to claim a significant politics for chiasmus and suture in film narrative. The threads of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmus also trace the matrices of power. Some observers, like Raymond Aron, have argued that Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology recommitments the sins of his philosophical tradition—individualism, transcendentalism, essentialism—and so rules out a truly radical politics and even an adequate attention to the weight of history.<sup>19</sup> If Aron was right, then phenomenological narrative theory also risks an ahistorical recourse to transcendental notions of universal subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and suture. But despite some strands of idealism that

18. See note 9 for this context. A recent study of Merleau-Ponty discusses the elements in his work which provide “the basis of the feminist invocation *and* feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty” (Olkowski 2006: 4).

19. See Laurie Spurling 1977: chap. 4, where she cites Aron and argues that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of agency is fully consistent with Marxist activism.

threaten to erase the specific marks of class or gender, Merleau-Ponty's work sought to locate bodies in specific space and time to avoid idealizing universals. A narrative theory grounded in Merleau-Ponty will seek to explore the politics implicit in the practice of suture. Such politics will range across the variety of human arrangements; the point here is simply that because suture is embedded in the social life represented in a narrative, it *will* carry political implications.

For Merleau-Ponty, history and politics are loops of experience that touch in a chiasmus and yet are isolated. This imagery recurs insistently in his account of the weight of history in his experience in *Humanism and Terror* (1969 [1947]), when he describes his difficult situation, torn between the betrayals of the Moscow trials of the late 1930s and American imperialism: "Thus we find ourselves in an inextricable situation. The Marxist critique of capitalism is still valid. . . . On the other hand, the Revolution has come to a halt: it maintains and aggravates the dictatorial apparatus while . . . abandoning the humane control of the State. It is impossible to be an anti-Communist and it is not possible to be a Communist" (ibid.: xxi). On the one hand, and on the other: it is impossible to be this, or that; the self is split, but is embedded in this moment: there is no extrication, no espousal across the gaps. Yet *Humanism and Terror* also offers one of Merleau-Ponty's (ibid.: 188) most hopeful explanations of politics as deep intersubjectivity:

Doubt and disagreement are facts, but so is the strange pretension we all have of thinking the truth, our capacity for taking the other's position to judge ourselves, our need to have our opinions recognized by him—in short the experience of the other person as an *alter ego* in the very course of discussion. The human world is an open and unfinished system, and the same radical contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the inevitability of disorder and prevents us from despairing of it.

Human consciousnesses perceive each other perceiving each other. That is the loop of chiasmus and suture at their most constructive: "our capacity for taking the other's position to judge ourselves, our need to have our opinions recognized by him." Here as elsewhere Merleau-Ponty's hopefulness about the Other, as partner in this deep intersubjectivity, drives the politics of his phenomenology toward espousal, while, for example, Sartre's suspicion of the Other warns of shame and violation.

The politics of absence may be a useful place to conclude, especially because absence is fundamental in the Lacanian paradigm for suture, which has been so influential in film theory. In this essay, absence has become less empty, whether the absence within sutured film frames or within the *unsutured* film frame, because both are examples of Merleau-Ponty's inter-

world of intending bodies. Once again Merleau-Ponty and Sartre provide paradigmatic moments—in this instance, for reconceiving absence in dramatically different yet equally post-Lacanian terms. Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* begins with the missing, those “friends whose names we would inscribe here were it permissible to make witnesses of the dead,” including one who, “after his men had been taken prisoner by the militiamen, went into the village to share their fate since he could do nothing more for them. . . . Then it will not seem strange if we, who have to speak about communism, search in darkness and mist for those faces that have gone from the earth” (ibid.: xlvi–vii). In contrast, when Sartre struggles to come to terms with the sudden death of Merleau-Ponty, he reviews their years of comradeship at *Les temps modernes*, the joint discovery of Husserl, the bitter disagreement over Stalin and concludes, without suture, in an astonishing image of pain and loss. “It was us, we two, who loved each other badly. There is nothing to be concluded from this except that this long friendship, neither done nor undone, obliterated when it was about to be reborn, or broken, remains inside me, an always open wound” (Cohen-Solal 1987: 439). For Merleau-Ponty, it is possible to place a stone in the niche vacated by the other; for Sartre, it is not. The open wound remains. Yet despite their different notions of intersubjectivity, for neither Merleau-Ponty nor Sartre was emptiness empty.

Instead, absence is attachment and wound. The same doubleness—attachment and wound—fills the gaps in the chiasmatic frames that narrate Duff and Josie's difficult intersections in *Nothing but a Man*. African American life in 1960s Alabama knits together visibly the personal and the political; both promote attachments that wound. This marriage bears the weight of many hopes and fears, both personal and political, as Duff the lost son finds his son and he and Josie refuse to abandon the South: they *will* make their lives here, together, all of them. The same link, between attachment and wound, haunts the accounts of cutting flesh with which I began, in Gawande and Plath. Suture as form and theme may well figure importantly in other narrative practices, but these examples point to the same conclusion about its fundamental importance in film narrative. Suture is one narrative strategy in film by which stories suggest what can be stitched together and what cannot, and what is at stake in either case.

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