

FEMMES FATALES

Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis

Mary Ann Doane

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CHAPTER THREE

*Veiling Over Desire:
Close-ups of the Woman*

Psychoanalysis has consistently adopted a stance of suspicion in relation to the realm of the visible, intimately bound as it would seem to be to the register of consciousness. The psychical layer Freud designated perception-consciousness is frequently deceived, caught from behind by unconscious forces which evade its gaze and which are far more determinant in the constitution of subjectivity. Stephen Heath goes so far as to specify the birth of psychoanalysis as a rejection of vision as a mode of organizing and apprehending psychical phenomena. Freud's most important move, from this perspective, lies in the displacement from the "look" to the "voice," from the visible to language. Charcot analyzed hysteria with the aid of a series of photographs depicting women in various stages of the disease. For Heath, this series of photographs is a pre-figuration of the cinema—a cinema which is thus placed ineluctably on the side of the pre-Freudian. Freud rejected the photographic techniques of Charcot in favor of the analytic session in which contact with the patient was achieved through speech, association, interpretation of linguistic lapses. According to Heath,

Charcot sees, Freud hears . . . Psychoanalysis is the anti-visible; significant in this respect, moreover, are Freud's distrust of projects for rendering analysis on the screen and, conversely, the powerful social desire to bring that same analysis into sight, the fascination of so many films with psychoanalysis.¹

The visible and its relation to knowledge are problematized in psychoanalysis, ensured in the cinema, polarizing the two discourses. In much of film theory, psychoanalysis becomes the superior, intelligent discourse of which cinema is the symptom, the guilty mechanism of that cultural constitution and reconstitution of subjectivity as imaginary coherence and security.

On the other hand, the fascination with psychoanalysis on the part of film theory is linked to the centrality and strength of its reliance on scenarios

of vision: the primal scene, the "look" at the mother's (castrated) body, the mirror stage. Psychoanalytic theory would appear to be dependent upon the activation of scenarios with visual, auditory, and narrative dimensions. Yet, the visible in no way acts as a guarantee of epistemological certitude. Insofar as it is consistently described as a lure, a trap, or a snare, vision dramatizes the dangers of privileging consciousness. In Lacan's analysis of the eye and the gaze, the gaze takes on an unconscious dimension and is significant in that it "escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness."² There is a hole in the visible. What consciousness and the cinema both fail to acknowledge in their lust for plenitude is that the visible is always lacking. This failure is then subject to formulation by psychoanalysis as the elision of castration. According to Lacan, "To go from perception to science is a perspective that seems to be self-evident . . . But it is a way that analytic experience must rectify, because it avoids the abyss of castration."³ This abyss is most evident, of course, in the scenario whereby castration anxiety is generated as an effect of the look at the woman—a scenario in which what is involved is the perception of an absence rather than a presence, a negative perception or, in effect, a non-perception. For what the subject confronts is the woman's "nothing-to-see." At first glance, then, sexual differentiation in psychoanalysis seems to hinge on the visibility or invisibility of the sexual organs, the phallus taking on prominence because it is most easily seen. Yet, the phallus actually becomes important only insofar as it might be absent, it might disappear. It assumes meaning only in relation to castration. Vision remains precarious. As Jacqueline Rose points out, the phallus must be understood in its relation to vision as a "seeming" or an "appearing" rather than as an essential value: "The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value . . . And if Lacan states that the symbolic usage of the phallus stems from its visibility (something for which he was often criticized), it is only in so far as the order of the visible, the apparent, the seeming is the object of his attack. In fact he constantly refused any crude identification of the phallus with the order of the visible or real."⁴

Such a position seems to justify situating psychoanalysis as a metalanguage with respect to the cinema which forces its spectator to consent to the lure of the visible. For the classical cinema is the opposite of psychoanalysis in that it depends on the axiom that the visible equals the knowable, that truth resides in the image. Yet, while it is clear from the foregoing arguments that psychoanalysis does not trust the visible, denies its appeal to certitude, and does not, in effect, believe in love at first sight, neither does the cinema at all moments. An investigation of these moments of

slippage between vision and epistemological certitude in the cinema can illuminate something of the complexity of the relations between truth, vision, and the woman sustained by patriarchy. For the subtextual theme recurrent in filmic texts, which resists the dominant theme whereby vision is constantly ratified, is that appearances can be deceiving. And surely they are most apt to deceive when they involve a woman. The seductive power attributed to the figure of the femme fatale in film noir exemplifies the disparity between seeming and being, the deception, instability, and unpredictability associated with the woman. While the organization of vision in the cinema pivots around the representation of the woman—she is always aligned with the quality of to-be-looked-at-ness—it is also the case that in her attraction to the male subject she confounds the relation between the visible and the knowable.

A site where the classical film acknowledges the precariousness of vision and simultaneously seeks to isolate and hence contain it is the close-up of the woman, more particularly, the *veiled* woman. For the veil functions to visualize (and hence stabilize) the instability, the precariousness of sexuality.⁵ At some level of the cultural ordering of the psychical, the horror or threat of that precariousness (of both sexuality and the visible) is attenuated by attributing it to the woman, over and against the purported stability and identity of the male. The veil is the mark of that precariousness. Clearly, one can trace a poetics or theoretics of the veil in the texts of literature, psychoanalysis, and philosophy as well as the cinema, but in the cinema it is most materially a question of what can and cannot be seen. Only the cinema need give the uncertainty and instability of vision visible form. Ultimately, however, the cinematic activation of the veil serves to demonstrate that doubting the visible is not enough. Psychoanalysis' distrust of the visible is not a guarantee of its use-value for feminism, of an alternative and non-convoluted conceptualization of sexual difference. In fact, a psychoanalytic discourse, a philosophical discourse, and a cinematic discourse are more likely to converge at certain points in attaching the precariousness of vision (in its relation to truth) to the figure of the woman or the idea of the feminine—or to make it ineluctably bound up with sexual difference.

Despite the perhaps apocryphal Billy Bitzer story in which D. W. Griffith's purported discovery of the close-up is resisted as a violent fragmentation of the human body ("We pay for the whole actor, Mr. Griffith. We want to see *all* of him"),⁶ the close-up has become crucial in the organization of cinematic narrative. And with the formation of a star system heavily dependent upon the maintenance of the aura, the close-up became an important means of establishing the recognizability of each star. At moments it almost seems as though all the fetishism of the cinema were

condensed onto the image of the face, the female face in particular. Barthes describes this phenomenon in relation to the face of Garbo: "Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced."⁷ The scale of the close-up transforms the face into an instance of the gigantic, the monstrous: it overwhelms. In the dystopia of *Blade Runner* (1982), a giant video close-up of an Oriental woman oversees, haunts the Los Angeles of the future. The face, usually the mark of individuality, becomes tantamount to a theorem in its generalizability. In the close-up, it is truly bigger than life. The face is that bodily part not accessible to the subject's own gaze (or accessible only as a virtual image in a mirror)—hence its over-representation as *the* instance of subjectivity.⁸ But the face is not taken in at a glance—it already problematizes the notion of a pure surface since it points to an interior, a depth. The face is the most *readable* space of the body. Susan Stewart traces the process by means of which the face becomes a text.

If the surface is the location of the body's meaning, it is because that surface is invisible to the body itself. And if the face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of, it is because the eyes and to some degree the mouth are openings onto fathomlessness. Behind the appearance of eyes and mouth lies the interior stripped of appearances . . . The face is a type of "deep" text, a text whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alterations between a reader and an author who is strangely disembodied, neither present nor absent, found in neither part nor whole, but, in fact, *created* by this reading. Because of this convention of interpretation, it is not surprising that we find that one of the great *topoi* of Western literature has been the notion of the face as book.⁹

The face, more than any other bodily part, is *for* the other. It is the most articulate sector of the body, but it is mute without the other's reading. In the cinema, this is evidenced in the pause, the meaningful moment of the close-up, *for the spectator*, the scale of the close-up corresponding less than other shots to the dictates of perspectival realism. And this being-for-the-gaze-of-the-other is, of course, most adequate as a description of the female subject, locked within the mirror of narcissism. Stewart suggests why it is the woman who most frequently inhabits the close-up in various discourses of the image.

Because it is invisible, the face becomes gigantic with meaning and significance. . . . The face becomes a text, a space which must be "read" and

interpreted in order to exist. The body of a woman, particularly constituted by the mirror and thus particularly subject to an existence constrained by the nexus of external images, is spoken by her face, by the articulation of another's reading. Apprehending the image becomes a mode of possession. We are surrounded by the image of the woman's face, the obsession of the portrait and the cover girl alike. The face is what belongs to the other; it is unavailable to the woman herself.¹⁰

Lacan also refers to this idealist "*belong to me* aspect of representations, so reminiscent of property."¹¹ From this perspective it is not at all surprising that the generalized social exchange of women should manifest itself in the cinematic institution as a proliferation of close-ups of the woman—established as the possession of the gaze of a man through glance-object editing.

What is most intriguing here, however, is the frequency with which the face of the woman in the close-up is masked, barred, shadowed, or veiled, introducing a supplementary surface between the camera or spectator and the contents of the image. When attempting to decipher the rationale of the veil, it is crucial to acknowledge that it has at least several different functions. The veil serves as a form of protection—against light, heat, and, of course, the gaze. To "take the veil" is to become a nun, to seclude oneself in a convent. Most prominently, perhaps, the veil's work would seem to be that of concealing, of hiding a secret. Garbo, as a well-known instance, has recourse to the veil in order to conceal an aging and disintegrating beauty. In Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Germany Pale Mother* (1980), an idyllic mother-daughter relationship is broken by the postwar return of the father, and the resulting neurosis of the mother is evidenced by a paralysis of one side of her face which she desperately attempts to conceal. Here, the veil is used to hide the scar of historicity, etched upon the woman's face as a hysterical symptom. In Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), a marginal female character uses a scarf to veil a facial scar obtained when she saved the male protagonist's son from a fire. The existence of the scar acts as a reminder of the deed and is used by the woman to maintain an emotional hold over the man. At a certain point in the film, however, she is caught without the veil and it is revealed that she has no scar (its disappearance, she guiltily explains, is a result of plastic surgery obtained years before). The veil in this instance functions to hide an absence, to conceal the fact that the woman has nothing to conceal, to maintain a debt, and thus to incite desire.

Yet, in all these instances of concealing, covering, hiding, or disguising, the veil is characterized by its opacity, its ability to fully block the gaze.

When it is activated in the service of the representation of the seductive power of femininity, on the other hand, it simultaneously conceals and reveals, provoking the gaze. The question of whether the veil facilitates vision or blocks it can receive only a highly ambivalent answer inasmuch as the veil, in its translucence, both allows and disallows vision. In the cinema, the magnification of the erotic becomes simultaneous with the activation of objects, veils, nets, streamers, etc., which intercept the space between the camera and the woman, forming a *second screen*. Such a screen is no longer the ground of the image but its filter. This is particularly the case in the films of directors who are explicitly and insistently associated with the photography or the narrativization of the woman—directors such as Max Ophuls and Josef von Sternberg. In the first image of Marlene Dietrich as Concha Perez in Sternberg's *The Devil Is A Woman* (1935), the sight of her face is doubly obscured by a filigreed mask which surrounds her eyes and an elaborate tufted veil which encages the head (figure 3.1). The disguise is partially motivated by the fact that the *mise-en-scène* is that of the carnival, authorizing as well the masking of the figure of her potential lover in the reverse shot (figure 3.2). He, however, has a supplemental, political motivation for concealing his face, hiding his identity in order to avoid detection (he is very vaguely situated as a "revolutionary" who is sought by the police). But his disguise does not change throughout the film; it at least has the attribute of stability, anchored as it is by the desire to hide. The various disguises, masks, and veils of the Marlene Dietrich character, on the other hand, take on the arbitrariness of the signifier in their apparent lack of any motivation beyond that of pure exhibitionism, pure show. The tropes of the mask, fan, and veil are here the marks of a dangerous deception or duplicity attached to the feminine (figures 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7). In *Dishonored* (1931), Dietrich assumes a masquerade when she works as a spy for her country—this is an honorable disguise—but in the beginning of the film when she is literally found in the streets and at the end when she reverts to the status of prostitute, she is veiled. And the excess and incongruity of the veiled woman is condensed onto her gesture of lifting the veil to apply lipstick as she faces a firing squad.

In Sternberg's films, politics is generally an afterthought, but it is always there, lurking in the background, articulating a discourse of femininity with a discourse of power. In *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), a seductive, provocative femininity is the pure distillation of power in the figure of Catherine the Great. In a scene with a powerfully situated priest who offers her political aid, Catherine claims, "I have weapons that are far more powerful than any political machine" and this statement is followed by the gesture of raising a veil to her face so that only the eyes are visible (figure



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2

3.8). In a subsequent scene, Catherine's antagonistic idiot husband has her surrounded by his Hessian troops and uses his own sword to play dangerously with the bodice of her dress. Her response is to take the veil of the earlier scene and push it over his sword (figure 3.9). In this and other scenes, the politico-military realm is baffled by femininity. The film produces a fantasy of power in which femininity conquers the sword and becomes the



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4





Figure 3.6



Figure 3.7

foil to the phallus. Yet, the limits of that alleged feminine power are also represented by the iconography of the veil. In a scene in which Marlene Dietrich once again appears to demonstrate her control over the male, she literally plays with the veil (figure 3.10) as she instructs one duped male lover to travel down a secret passage from her bedroom in order to admit his rival. But in the course of the scene, the camera moves closer and closer



Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9

to Dietrich, she gradually lies back on the bed, and the veil covers the screen (figures 3.11, 3.12, 3.13). The film traces a movement from a moment where the woman controls the veil, moves in and out of its folds in order to lure the male, to a tableau where her very stillness mimics her death in representation, her image entirely subsumed by the veil.

Apart from any intradiegetic motivation, the woman is veiled in an appeal



Figure 3.10



Figure 3.11

to the gaze of the spectator. And the veil incarnates contradictory desires—the desire to bring her closer and the desire to distance her. Its structure is clearly complicit with the tendency to specify the woman's position in relation to knowledge as that of the enigma. Freud described female sexuality as “still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity.”¹² In the discourse of metaphysics, the function of the veil is to make truth profound, to ensure



Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13

that there is a depth which lurks behind the surface of things. The veil acts as a trope that allows one to evade the superficial, to complicate the surface by disallowing its self-sufficiency. But what the veil in the cinema makes appear to be profound is, in fact, a surface. The function of the veil here is to transform the surface of the face into a depth, an end in itself. While the face in Stewart's analysis is a kind of “deep text,” revealing a “depth

and profundity which the body itself is not capable of," the addition of a veil as secondary or surplus surface results in the annihilation of that depth which hides behind the face. The veil, in a curious dialectic of depth and surface, reduces all to a surface which is more or less removed, more or less accessible. It is not a privileged depth, interiority, or psychology of the woman which is inaccessible but her sexualized, eroticized, and perfected surface, the embodiment of pure form. Thus, the woman comes to confound the topology of Western metaphysics, its organization of space and hierarchization of depth and surface in their relation to truth. This process has not gone unrecognized. In a temporary deviation from this discussion of the cinema, I would like to explore some of the ramifications of this confused topology in certain texts of philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Nietzsche's attempt to dismantle a philosophy of truth and to undermine the security of knowing produced what is perhaps the most striking analysis of the veil—an analysis which coincides with the beginning of a sustained philosophical attack on metaphysics. And the woman figures prominently there. Furthermore, two recent texts, by Derrida (*Spurs*) and Irigaray ("Veiled Lips"), return to Nietzsche's text in order to extricate a logistics of the veil. Nietzsche both reinscribes and criticizes philosophy's topological system linking the woman, truth, and the veil. In his writing there is quite definitely a sense in which the movement of truth resembles the veiled gesture of feminine modesty. The veil produces the differentiation between surface and depth required by truth but it also presupposes the necessity of concealing and hence the moral opposition between decent and indecent. Nietzsche extends the metaphor of clothing in the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*: "We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and 'know' everything."¹³ By securing truth's position as a question of decency vs. indecency as it concerns the clothed or unclothed state of the body, Nietzsche aligns it more surely with the figure of the woman—a woman who refuses to or cannot or ought not be known. In preparation for this disclaimer of the desire to know (i.e. to unveil) the truth, Nietzsche alludes to a poem by Schiller entitled "The Veiled Statue at Saïs" in which a young man, "impelled by a burning thirst for knowledge," travels to Egypt and confronts a veiled statue of Isis.¹⁴ He is told that the veil conceals the very form of truth, but also that there is a divine decree prohibiting its disturbance. The youth transgresses, pulls aside the veil and looks. Yet, the sight of truth—head-on—induces death. There is no "other space" to counterpose to Plato's cave. The philosophical gaze must be blocked, indirect, difficult. Reminis-

cent of the structure of fetishism in which the gaze finds itself consistently displaced in relation to the horror of absence, this gaze also aligns or misaligns itself with the body of a woman, in this case, Isis, the sorrowing wife and eternal mother.

Nietzsche's claim to philosophical superiority in this preface rests on his attempt to differentiate between the "we" ("we, artists") of the passage and "those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons" (38). On the contrary, Nietzsche allies himself with the Greeks who knew how to "stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*" (38). The real does not lurk behind the surface: it resides on that surface or exists as a play of surfaces. In this valorization of the surface, Nietzsche elaborates an anti-hermeneutics whose ultimate aim is the collapse of the oppositions surface/depth, appearance/reality. Nietzsche would like to distance himself from the enterprise of metaphysics.

Yet, this demolition of the dichotomy of surface and depth in relation to truth does not signify the definitive loss of the category of deception. As one of Nietzsche's commentators, Eric Blondel (who characterizes Nietzsche's "ontology" as "feminine" or "gynecological") points out, in his philosophy

the notion of a truth *beyond* appearance, underneath or behind the veil, is rendered null and void. It is certainly true that life deceives us with her ambiguous apparitions: but she deceives us not because she conceals an essence or a reality beneath appearances, but because she has *no* essence and would only like to make us think that she does. Her "essence" is to appear.¹⁵

Deception, from this point of view, is not defined as the non-coincidence or incompatibility of surface and depth (appearance and the truth), but as the very posing of the question of truth and its hiding place—the gesture indicating truth's existence. Deception, far from distorting truth, operates a double negation by, as Derrida will point out in another context, concealing the secret that there is no secret. Furthermore, it is not accidental that in the quote from Blondel the pronoun "she" plays such a major role in delineating the operation of this mode of deception. For in Nietzsche's view, woman epitomizes the pretense of essence. Her great talent lies in the area of deception or dissimulation, in what would appear to be the very opposite of truth: in giving herself, as Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*,

she "gives herself for" (317), that is, plays a part, produces herself as spectacle. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche compares her to the actor who dons a mask for every occasion and whose "essence" is ultimately subsumed by the mask. Confronted with the demands of a vocal feminist movement, Nietzsche seeks shelter in the idea that woman does not *want* truth, reinforcing her association with dissimulation.

We may in the end reserve a healthy suspicion whether woman really *wants* enlightenment about herself—whether she *can* will it—

Unless a woman seeks a new adornment for herself that way—I do think adorning herself is part of the Eternal-Feminine?—she surely wants to inspire fear of herself—perhaps she seeks mastery. But she does not *want* truth—her great art is the lie, her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty.¹⁶

The desire to know can only be a new piece of clothing for the woman, a new surface, something with which to play at seduction. Only this will make feminism palatable for Nietzsche.

Deception and dissimulation are hence not negative categories in Nietzsche's work, since they align themselves with the work of the anti-metaphysical philosopher. Nevertheless, they also place the woman as the privileged exemplar of instability. Luce Irigaray criticizes Nietzsche for situating femininity as "the simulacrum which introduces the false into the true."

So she who is always mobile renders him the possibility of movement in remaining, for him, the persistence of his being. Truth or appearances, according to his desire of the moment, his appetite of the instant. Truth and appearances and reality, power . . . she is—by virtue of her inexhaustible aptitude for mimicry—the living support of all the staging/production of the world. Various veils according to the epochs of history.¹⁷

Derrida is more generous to Nietzsche, claiming that his alliance of the woman with the artist or the actor represents an instance of his determined anti-essentialism. In this sense, she becomes the ruin of philosophy, an activity which Derrida can only approve: "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself . . . And the philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that untruth is 'truth.' Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth."¹⁸ Woman is truth only insofar as it diverges from itself, is not reducible to the evidence of self-presence, multiplies its surfaces, and

produces frames within frames. Always "averting," it is anything but straightforward. Just like a woman. For Derrida, woman incarnates the *mise-en-abyme* structure of truth.

This deception attributed to the woman does not, however, connote hypocrisy on her part. Her dissembling is not a conscious strategy. She has no knowledge of it or access to it as an operation. And this unconsciousness of the woman, her blindness to her own work, is absolutely necessary in order to allow and maintain the man's idealization of her, his perfection of her as an object. According to Nietzsche,

Given the tremendous subtlety of woman's instinct, modesty remains by no means conscious hypocrisy: she divines that it is precisely an actual naive modesty that most seduces a man and impels him to overestimate her. Therefore woman is naive—from the subtlety of her instinct, which advises her of the utility of innocence. A deliberate *closing of one's eyes to oneself*—Wherever dissembling produces a stronger effect when it is unconscious, it *becomes* unconscious.¹⁹

The philosopher-voyeur sees quite well that the woman "closes her eyes to herself." She does not *know* that she is deceiving or *plan* to deceive; conscious deception would be repellent to the man and quite dangerous. Rather, she intuitively or "divines" what the man needs—a belief in her innocence—and she *becomes* innocent. Closing her eyes to herself she becomes the pure construct of a philosophical gaze. Becoming unconscious of any knowledge she might have concerning truth as dissimulation, as surface, she becomes instead its representation, its idea. As Derrida points out, "It is impossible to resist looking for her" (71). Woman is situated as the substrate of representation itself, its unconscious material.

In this way, Nietzsche deprives the woman of subjectivity. Or, it could be said that women attain subjectivity only when they become old, and the recurrent image of the old woman in Nietzsche's work corroborates his own philosophy. For the old woman knows more than the metaphysicians: "I am afraid that old women are more skeptical in their most secret heart of hearts than any man: they consider the superficiality of existence its essence, and all virtue and profundity is to them merely a veil over this 'truth,' a very welcome veil over a pudendum—in other words, a matter of decency and shame, and no more than that."²⁰ A woman is granted knowledge when she is old enough to become a man—which is to say, old enough to lose her dissembling appearance, her seductive power. And even then, it is a kind of "old wives" knowledge, not, properly speaking, philosophical. For the most part, the figure of the woman is the projection

of Nietzsche's own epistemological desires, his will to *embody* the difficulties, the impossibilities of what remains a tantalizing Truth. This is how the woman comes to represent a variety of often contradictory notions: truth, dissimulation, superficiality, even "calm." Overcome in *The Gay Science* by the philosophical tumult of ideas, Nietzsche envisages the woman as a sail floating in the calm distance: "When a man stands in the midst of his own noise, in the midst of his own surf of plans and projects, then he is apt also to see quiet, magical beings gliding past him and to long for their happiness and seclusion: *women*" (124). But if one gets too close to the sailboat, the magical silence is broken by the chattering, babble, and incoherency of the woman: "The magic and the most powerful effect of women is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this requires first of all and above all—*distance*" (124). Proximity reduces her (its) value. She (it) can seduce only from a distance. Or behind a veil. Nietzsche here gives us the *mise-en-scène* of the philosophical hypostatization of Woman.

Woman as a truth which is difficult to win, as semblance, as the mistress of the lie and dissimulation or seductive deceiver, as residing in the realm of appearances—there is no doubt that Nietzsche invokes "worn" metaphors in the service of an anti-traditional, anti-metaphysical discourse, in an attempt to collapse the opposition between appearance and reality and, consequently, that he revalues the notions of "appearance," "surface," "dissimulation." But the worn metaphors carry with them a problematic haze of associations and the revaluation of the woman-image is not always distinguishable from an idealization. One is forced to pose the question: Why is it the woman who must represent either truth or its fading, its disappearance—especially in relation to an erotics of the veil?

The veil poses difficulties for both Nietzsche and Derrida insofar as it drags along its metaphysical baggage, but neither of them will reject the trope altogether. According to Derrida, Nietzsche recognized the fragile structure of truth in its relation to the veil and both refuse to perform either the gesture of veiling or that of unveiling. Derrida prefers the image of *suspending* the veil:

"Truth" can only be a surface. But the blushing movement of that truth which is not suspended in quotation marks casts a modest veil over such a surface. And only through such a veil which thus falls over it could "truth" become truth, profound, indecent, desirable. But should that veil be suspended, or even fall a bit differently, there would no longer be any truth, only "truth"—written in quotation marks. (59)

To suspend means to hang from a single point of support in space, to interrupt, to defer. The woman perpetually defers the question of truth. It remains, precisely, suspended. In *Spurs*, the term "woman" functions as a point of comparison to style, writing, inscription, particularly inasmuch as the notion of "writing" in Derrida's work always signifies the undoing of metaphysical oppositions. The attempt is clearly to introduce a division between any question of the woman and an ontological question. Nevertheless, it is still the woman who figures the very resistance to the ontological question.²¹

The question of the woman suspends the decidable opposition of true and non-true and inaugurates the regime of quotation marks which is to be enforced for every concept belonging to the system of philosophical decidability. The hermeneutic project which postulates a true sense of text is disqualified under this regime. (107)

In a quite Nietzschean gesture, Derrida takes up and employs the worn-out tropes of femininity—instability, indecisiveness, dissimulation—and yet injects them with a new and more positive value for the sake of his philosophical operation. The woman is used to destabilize the hierarchy of values of metaphysics and the eroticism of such an operation is not lost. The voyeurism continues: "It is impossible to resist looking for her."

Nietzsche manipulates and works within the problematic wherein the woman is a trope of truth. Yet, believing in truth is, from his point of view, a common mistake of philosophers. The woman, on the other hand, who represents truth, has no use for it herself. Derrida reiterates this idea in claiming that the philosopher must emulate the woman, who does not believe in truth or castration. He locates three types of proposition about the woman in Nietzsche's text. In the first, the woman is a figure of falsehood, against which the man measures his own phallogocentric truth. Here, she is castrated. In the second proposition, she is the figure of truth, but plays with it at a distance through a guile and naiveté which nevertheless ratify truth. Here, she is castrating. In the first two types of proposition in Nietzsche's text, the woman is "censured, debased and despised." Only the third type of proposition is conceived outside the bind of castration. Here, the woman is an "affirmative power, a dissimulatress, an artist, a dionysiac" (97). Derrida succinctly outlines the desire of Nietzsche: "He was, he dreaded this castrated woman. He was, he dreaded this castrating woman. He was, he loved this affirming woman" (101). And Derrida would like to be Nietzsche being the woman. According to Irigaray, "Ascribing his

[Derrida's] own project to her, he rises from the abyss—or the *abyss*.²² Woman-truth, woman-lie, woman-affirmation—it is quite striking that the woman comes to represent all these things, as though affirmation, the most highly treasured category, could somehow not be *thought* except in and through the figure of the woman. She enables the philosophical operation, becomes its support.

In Derrida's text, the woman no longer figures the veiled movement of truth but the suspended veil of undecidability. She comes to represent the limit to the relevance of the hermeneutic question. Derrida's skepticism about that question, about the project of interpretation in general, is focused in his consideration of Nietzsche's marginal unpublished note, "I have forgotten my umbrella." For its secret, its hidden meaning beneath the veil of a surface, may be that it has no secret. The note is therefore like the woman insofar as "it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds. Its limit is not only stipulated by its structure but is in fact intimately confused with it. The hermeneut cannot but be provoked and disconcerted by its play" (133). The woman becomes even more tantalizing, desirable, and like the umbrella, something you do not want to forget. The veil ensures that this is not a question of visibility, of the visible as a guarantee or measure of certitude. For, as Derrida admits, "Nietzsche himself did not see his way too clearly there" (101). Nevertheless, he managed. In both Nietzsche's and Derrida's texts, the woman becomes the site of a certain philosophical reinvestment—this time in the attempt to deconstruct truth. She remains the fetish of philosophy.

From this point of view, Lacan's appeal to the trope of the veil might seem more desirable for feminist theory inasmuch as it hovers around not the woman but questions of representation and the phallus. Yet, it is still contaminated a little by the problematic of truth and deception or fraud. The veil is the privileged content of the *trompe l'oeil* constituted by painting: it fools or deceives the human subject. In the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios invoked by Lacan, Zeuxis, challenged by his rival, Parrhasios, produces a painting of grapes which attracts birds who attempt to pick at them. But when Zeuxis demands that Parrhasios draw aside the veil which covers his painting, he is startled to find that the veil itself is painted. Lacan uses the story to establish a distinction between the "natural function of the lure" (the painted grapes) and that of *trompe l'oeil* (the painted veil): "If one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it."²³ This painting elicits the desire to touch, to transgress the barrier of representation and to posit its "beyond" or "depth," prompted by the extent to which the surface posits something "other." Plato's objection to painting is therefore

not based on its illusion of equaling its object but on the fact that the "*trompe-l'oeil* of painting pretends to be something other than what it is" (112). Lacan's analysis of the story constitutes a complication of vision, marking it with absence so that the picture takes on the mechanism of language.

In the process, vision is destabilized; it becomes less sure, precisely because it is subject to desire. Parrhasios's painting demonstrates that "what was at issue was certainly deceiving the eye (*tromper l'oeil*). A triumph of the gaze over the eye" (103). *Gaze* here signifies the excess of desire over geometral vision or vision as the representation of space through perspective. In the geometral relation of perspective, the subject is centered as the master of representation; visual space is mapped and controlled. The gaze, on the other hand, indicates that the "I," no longer master of what it sees, is grasped, solicited, by the depth of field (that which is beyond). Zeuxis, subject to desire, seeks to know what is beyond the surface/veil. The trick is that the surface is all there is to be seen. There is dissimulation or deception here but, as in Nietzsche's text, it does not consist of a distortion of the truth behind appearances but a mere gesture toward that "beyond."²⁴ And while, according to Nietzsche, it is the woman who exemplifies the instability of the visual and the pretense of essence, in Lacan's analysis it is representation—the picture—which pretends to be something other than what it is.

However, this theoretical move is not, in fact, a desexualization of the dialectic of appearance and reality, the veil and the beyond. For behind the veil lurks the phallus. The gaze and desire are in tandem because the field of the visible always registers (is always inhabited by) a lack: "The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see" (104). The gaze is hence the *objet a* in the scopic dimension. Symbolic of lack, it is clearly inscribed in a phallic order. Furthermore, in Lacan's work the veil itself is, most strikingly, reserved for the phallus. Torn from the woman's face, it is located elsewhere. I am thinking, of course, of the often quoted statement in which Lacan claims that "the phallus can play its role only when veiled." For Rose, this appeal to a procedure of veiling is evidence of Lacan's demotion of the realm of the visible: "He constantly refused any crude identification of the phallus with the order of the visible or real and he referred it instead to that function of 'veiling.'"²⁵ The disorganization of the field of perception—its destabilization—is attributed not to the woman but to the phallus. Now it is certainly possible to develop the argument that the phallus is not a masculine category, that it is a signifier and not equivalent to the penis (the consistent strategy of those who argue that Lacanian psychoanalysis is useful for

feminism), and therefore that we are not confronted with a situation in which the psychoanalyst snatches the veil from the woman in order to conceal his own private parts. Far from being exhausted by its masculine status, the phallus would appear to be to some degree feminized in Lacan's text. The woman's relation to the phallus is that of "being" rather than "having" and the mother is sometimes "phallic." Or one could subscribe to Jane Gallop's analysis of the grammatical categories of gender and note that the phallus, in a slip of the type, is modified by "la" rather than "le" or that "voile" as Lacan uses it, is both feminine (as "sail") or masculine (as "veil"). For, in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," Nietzsche's sailboat in the distance glides through Lacan's text and becomes the privileged example of metonymy: "thirty sails." As Gallop points out, "'Voile' for 'sail' is derived from 'voile' for 'veil' and it may be just this sort of slippage between a masculine and a feminine term that is at play in Lacan's notion of the phallus, which is a latent phallus, a metonymic, maternal, feminine phallus."²⁶

But even Gallop acknowledges that "the masculinity of the phallic signifier serves well as an emblem of the confusion between phallus and male which inheres in language, in our symbolic order,"²⁷ and concludes her reading of "The Meaning of the Phallus" with a return to the penis (the knot). It might be useful, then, to turn our attention to an examination of what the role of the phallus is and therefore why the veil is necessary. The phallus takes on meaning in relation to the differential function of language and the corresponding structure of signifier/signified. The entire sentence reads, "All these propositions merely veil over the fact that the phallus can only play its role as veiled, that is, as in itself the sign of the latency with which everything signifiable is struck as soon as it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of the signifier."²⁸ The veil over the phallus points to the necessity of a division between the latency of the signifiable and the patency—the materiality—of the signifier, a splitting in language as well as a splitting of subjectivity. The phallus, as the signifier with no signified, indicates the perpetual deferral of meaning, its failure to coagulate. Behind the veil, which must remain in place, lies a series of linked terms: lack, the gaze, the *objet a*, the phallus. There is no doubt that Lacan attempts to disrupt the spatialization of the classical philosophical dialectic between surface and depth, appearance and being. The "beyond" is a function of desire and hence de-essentialized, but not entirely negated. Rather, the surface/depth dichotomy is reformulated as a splitting, a fracture, necessitated by the subject's relation to language and the unconscious. If there is a truth in Lacanian psychoanalysis it is a truth of language and the contribution of language to the constitution of subjectivity. But it is a truth which,

like Nietzsche's, is particularly evasive, slippery. For that which is latent—the signifiable—is also always deferred, out of reach, subject to a metonymic displacement. Like a woman, the phallus—in a perpetual demonstration of the inadequacy of language with respect to meaning—plays its role only when veiled. Neither the woman nor the phallus seems to be capable of completely escaping the problematic of truth, even if it is defined in its very inaccessibility, in its resistance to the purely visible, or as belonging to the order of language. Whether or not the phallus is feminized, truth, in the Lacanian text, insofar as it concerns a question of veiling, is usurped for the phallus, no longer figured explicitly through the woman, who nevertheless comes to represent an absolute and unattainable state of *jouissance*. Both Derrida and Lacan envy the woman they have constructed.

There is, at one point in *The Gay Science*, a reference to a female figure who might disturb or disconcert this phallogocentric staging of truth (or its destabilization) and representation with respect to procedures of veiling and unveiling. It is a reference Nietzsche does not develop. He writes, "Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*?"²⁹ There is nothing more about Baubo, only this vague reference to her name in relation to truth and what it allows or disallows in the realm of vision. The translator and editor, Walter Kaufmann, adds, however, a footnote which transforms Nietzsche's citation into something of a dirty joke: "*Baubo*: A primitive and obscene female demon; according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, originally a personification of the female genitals." In Greek mythology, Baubo is a minor character in the story of Demeter, the goddess of fertility, whose daughter Kore (renamed Persephone after the abduction) was stolen and raped by Hades, Lord of the Underworld. Demeter fled Olympus and wandered throughout the world for years, in the guise of an old woman, searching for her daughter. One day, as she was resting in the shade of a tree in Eleusis, Baubo offered her a drink of barley-water and mint. In her grief, Demeter refused the drink and, in response, Baubo lifted her skirts to reveal her pudenda. A drawing of a boy's face (Iacchus—a mystic name for Dionysus) appeared on the lower part of her body, and Baubo, with a gesture of her hand, made it seem to grimace, provoking Demeter to laugh, breaking her mourning. The laughter freed Demeter, and she accepted the drink from Baubo. Afterward, she managed to free her daughter Persephone from the underworld for three-fourths of the year. In the remaining one-fourth, when Persephone resides with her husband in the underworld, Demeter's sadness is reflected in the coldness and barrenness of the earth.

In Peter Wollen's brief but fascinating analysis of the myth, Baubo's exhibitionism is interpreted as a potential alternative to the castrating display

of the Medusa: "[Baubo's] display is to another woman and its effect is to provoke laughter and to end grief and mourning (brought about by mother-daughter separation at the hands of a man, Pluto) . . . Demeter is shown the 'Truth,' but is it just a joke? It is not shameful, not horrifying, but funny, comical, laughable." The laugh, outside the semantic and "on the edge of language," breaks the hold of a phallogocentric grammar.³⁰ Sarah Kofman also interprets Baubo as a figure who resides outside the regime of phallogocentrism, undermining its logic. Through a number of links, including the inscription of Dionysus's face on Baubo's body, Kofman makes the claim that Baubo is a feminine double of Dionysus. And Dionysus, nude but also the god of masks, "erases the opposition of veiled and non-veiled, masculine and feminine, fetishism and castration."³¹ Both Wollen and Kofman point out that the story of Baubo is told in the texts of the early church fathers. Kofman observes that these texts are censored and qualified with obscurities, seemingly confirming the notion that Baubo exemplifies the marginalization of the woman's story as well as the woman's genitals within a patriarchal discourse.³²

The myth of Baubo finds an interesting—and similarly porno-graphic—echo in Lacan's work. Lacan is fascinated with anamorphosis and its inverted use of perspective. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, he makes it the center point of a large part of his analysis of the gaze and claims that it is evocative of that which "geometrical researches into perspective allow to escape from vision" (87). Anamorphosis gives a glimpse of this excess; its fascination is a fascination with the annihilation of the subject. But the scenario he constructs to illustrate anamorphosis, immediately before the better-known analysis of Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, is rather strange, almost fantastical, and, like the myth of Baubo, invokes a notion of body-writing:

How is it that nobody has ever thought of connecting this [anamorphosis] with . . . the effect of an erection? Imagine a tattoo traced on the sexual organ *ad hoc* in the state of repose and assuming its, if I may say so, developed form in another state. How can we not see here, immanent in the geometrical dimension . . . something symbolic of the function of the lack, of the appearance of the phallic ghost? (87–88)

The preferred space of inscription for anamorphosis becomes the phallic organ. The apparently alternative conceptualization of the female genitals in Baubo's story is here recuperated, revamped. For the male subject's body allows him to do it better. Lacan, envious of the woman, appropriates her picture-making activity, her body-writing, and inscribes it on the phal-

lus. After all, anamorphosis would seem to prefer a masculine space, as in the Holbein painting.

Yet, Lacan has to go to certain contortions in order to write on the penis/phallus. When the metaphor of writing is invoked, the phallus is usually conceptualized as the tool which writes, the pen, rather than the surface of writing. Lacan seems to be uncomfortable with the specification of the penis/phallus as mere ground, space for inscription (a traditionally "feminine" characterization). Perhaps this is why the reference to the phallic organ as the site of anamorphosis is so brief, laconic, and almost immediately displaced by the analysis of the Holbein painting. Here the phallus is no longer the ground for anamorphosis but its central figure. The phallus is *in* the picture—the picture no longer *on* the phallus. Such a move allays any fears about the complete feminization of the phallus, particularly since the *mise-en-scène* of the Holbein painting is so insistently masculine.

The male theorist's relation to the woman, in general, seems to oscillate between fear and envy of the feminine. Lacan attributes to the phallus qualities formerly specified as feminine—veiled, it connotes visual instability, deception. The phallus symbolizes the failure of meaning, the fact that it is mere semblance. If "the status of the phallus is a fraud,"³³ as Rose points out, it is fraudulent in much the same way that woman represents untruth or dissimulation in Nietzsche's text. Lacan reverses the usual terms of sexual difference in relation to the visual field. In Nietzsche the precariousness of vision is incarnated in the woman, while the man is a point of stability (in relation to the will to know, to philosophize, if not in relation to knowledge itself—Derrida's "It is impossible to resist looking for her"). In Lacan, the necessary destabilization or deception of the visual is a function of the phallus, while the woman, in some sense, comes to represent the immediacy and security of the visible. This immediacy is a result of the *jouissance* attributed to her:

As for Saint Theresa—you only have to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.³⁴

As Stephen Heath points out, the "more" of the woman's *jouissance* in Lacan's work compensates for the absence which she represents in relation to the scenario of castration.³⁵

And one could add that the price to be paid for visual immediacy and the "more" of *jouissance* is the absence of knowledge. Lacan explains that

while the woman is "not all" in relation to the phallic function and "excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words," she nevertheless has a supplementary *jouissance*.

There is a *jouissance* proper to her, to this "her" which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it—that much she does know. . . . As I have said, the woman can love in the man only the way in which he faces the knowledge he souls for. But as for the knowledge by which he is, we can only ask this question if we grant that there is something, *jouissance*, which makes it impossible to tell whether the woman can say anything about it—whether she can say what she knows of it.³⁶

Jouissance presupposes a non-knowledge or even an anti-knowledge. It is linked to the realm of the mystics and hence, at the very least, divorces the register of knowledge from the register of discourse. The woman cannot say what she knows; that knowledge may exist but it always resides elsewhere. Since psychoanalysis, however, is in itself a form of anti-epistemology insofar as the unconscious subverts the possibility of a stable knowledge, the woman here becomes emblematic of the subject who is duped by the unconscious, of the non-knowledge of the subject. It is almost as though there were an obligatory blind spot as far as the woman is concerned which is compensated for by an *over-sight*, a compulsion to see her, to image her, to make her revelatory of something.

Nietzsche's woman, closing her eyes to herself, and Lacan's woman, who doesn't know (who has *jouissance* without knowledge), have something in common. Yet, knowledge, like truth, is a peculiar term in the work of both Nietzsche and Lacan. The subject's position outside of knowledge is not necessarily to be lamented. In these theories, therefore, it is a question not so much of depriving the woman of subjectivity (a term psychoanalysis problematizes in any event), as of making her a privileged trope, a site of theoretical excess, an exemplar of the philosophical enterprise. In Derrida's work, this is manifest in his positioning of the woman as affirmative and Dionysiac, the figure of undecidability, and the point of impasse of the hermeneutic question. Clearly, Lacan's theoretical assumptions about subjectivity and his strategic moves distance him significantly from Derrida's deconstructive efforts, and their differences should not be minimized. But Lacan's phallocentrism and Derrida's anti-phallocentrism (or hymenism) ultimately occupy the same discursive register as far as the fate of the woman is concerned. Is there that much difference between the affirmation beyond castration of the Derridean woman and the *jouissance* of the Lacanian

woman? *Affirmation* and *jouissance* both indicate a certain "beyond" in their respective theories, a beyond which seems to represent, interestingly, the very limit of what is theorizable.

The theoretical limit is tantalizing, seductive in its very inaccessibility. But the term which seems to most adequately describe the relation of the philosopher/psychoanalyst to the woman here is envy. And it is Lacan who gives us a clue to a possible deciphering of this envy. The scenario he invokes in order to depict envy as a way of looking is that of the child at the mother's breast.

The most exemplary *invidia*, for us analysts, is the one I found long ago in Augustine, in which he sums up his entire fate, namely, that of the little child seeing his brother at his mother's breast, looking at him *amare conspectu*, with a bitter look, which seems to tear him to pieces and has on himself the effect of a poison.

Lacan claims that this envy has nothing to do with the child's desire for what the brother has—the milk or the breast or the mother as possessions. In this sense, it differs from jealousy. Rather,

such is true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction, *Befriedigung*.³⁷

Lacan initially interprets the envy as that of brother for brother—male subject for the apparently total gratification and contentment of another male subject. But the fact that it is an "image of a completeness closed upon itself" which prompts the envy would seem to suggest instead that it is the woman—the mother—who is the object of the envy. For in psychoanalytic theory the woman is depicted, in her narcissistic self-sufficiency, as the being who most fully embodies a "completeness closed upon itself." In effect, what the male subject of theory here envies is the woman whom he has constructed as inhabiting a space outside his own theory—nevertheless supporting that theory through her very absence. "You only have to go and look" to see that she is not of this world. As Lacan himself points out, the Latin *invidia*—envy—is derived from *videre*, to see. What we witness here is the displacement of vision's truth to the realm of the theoretical vision. The psychoanalyst sees immediately that to see the woman is to envy her, to recognize that what she represents is desirable.



Figure 3.14



Figure 3.15

The "seeing" is often on the side of the theory which hopes to disengage itself from the visible, from the seeing/seen nexus.

The idea that the visible is a point of crisis seems to be conveniently forgotten when theory contemplates its own limits. On the whole, however, Lacan's analysis of vision, hovering around the "phallic ghost" and lack, does seem to emphasize the precariousness of vision, as Rose suggests.



Figure 3.16



Figure 3.17

But it is not always necessary to be able to see or to be able to see clearly in order to maintain the given symbolics of a patriarchally ordered sexual difference. Distrusting the visible or geometral optics and valorizing anamorphosis for its departure from a pictorial realism or its annihilation of the centered subject of perspective do not suffice. This insufficiency is, once more, demonstrated by the function of the veil, where the philosophical and

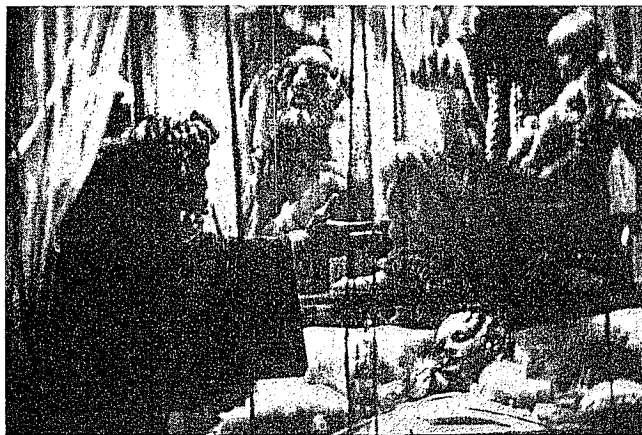


Figure 3.18

the cinematic organization of vision in relation to desire appear to coincide. The veil's curious dialectic of vision and obscurity, of closeness and distance, is evidenced, again, in Sternberg's work which, in its sheer concentration upon the surface of the image, recapitulates many of the themes and difficulties of the philosophical discourse. Although Sternberg is fond of interposing veils, screens, and streamers between the camera and Marlene Dietrich, he would also like to get as close to her as possible. Early in *The Scarlet Empress*, in her marriage scene, Catherine appears predictably enough in a wedding gown (figure 3.14). What is not predictable, however, is the insistence of the camera upon positioning itself closer and closer to her face as the scene progresses, until the very texture of the veil becomes marked (figures 3.15, 3.16, 3.17). An even more striking instance of this tactic occurs later in the film. Catherine has just given birth to a baby boy, heir to the throne. She lies in a bed surrounded by veils and is presented with a gift, a necklace, from the queen (figure 3.18). Again, as she examines the necklace the camera reduces its distance from her (figures 3.19, 3.20). As Sternberg's camera gets closer to the woman, she almost disappears, the outline of her face grows indistinct, and her place is taken by the surface or texture of the image, the screen.

As the camera increases its proximity to the veil, the veil and the screen it becomes seem to become the objects of desire. The veil mimics the grain of the film, the material substrate of the medium, and becomes the screen as surface of division, separation, and hence solicited transgression. In



Figure 3.19

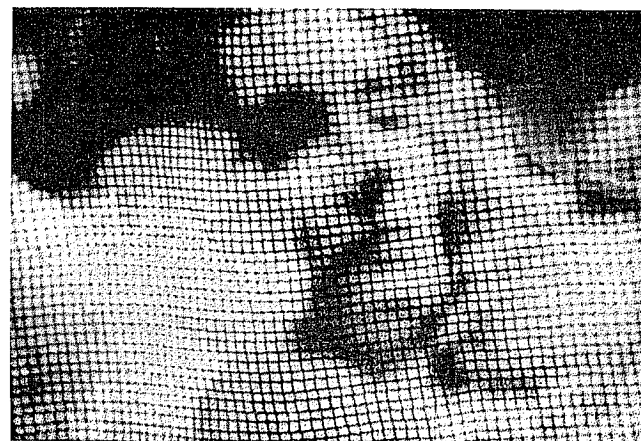


Figure 3.20

mimicking the grain of the film, this gesture *might* be viewed as deconstructive par excellence, for it indicates the woman's status as the substrate of representation. The woman is revealed as no longer simply the privileged object of the gaze in the cinema but the support of the cinematic image. Yet, I would argue that the marking of the image in this way, the foregrounding of the grain, the positioning of the woman as screen—all of this merely



Figure 3.21

heightens the eroticism, makes her more desirable, stimulates the envy of the filmmaker ("Marlene is me," Sternberg once said). The image of Dietrich indicates that even when the woman is no longer fully visible, she is the support of its seduction of the spectator, its provocation. And I think one could ask similar kinds of questions about the desire of the philosopher or the psychoanalyst who appeals to the woman as a form of theoretical proof—the desire to reveal her status as support, substrate of truth/untruth or representation, and simultaneously to maintain her "operation," because she can indeed be so representative of so many things even if she doesn't understand them herself. The question is why the woman must always carry the burden of the philosophical demonstration, why she must be the one to figure truth, dissimulation, *jouissance*, untruth, the abyss, etc., why she is the support of these tropological systems—even and especially anti-metaphysical or anti-humanistic systems.

It is not surprising that the confused topology of Western metaphysics finds a perfect site for its inscription in a classical cinema which organizes its appeals to scopophilia around the figure of the woman as distanced surface. That topology takes on the burden of defusing the philosophical insecurity associated with the instabilities, the contradictions, and the limits of its own discourse—defusing them by projecting that instability in relation to truth onto the woman.³⁸ It is at once more striking and more disconcerting, however, that the anti-humanist and anti-metaphysical discourses associated with poststructuralism are inexorably drawn to the same necessity of

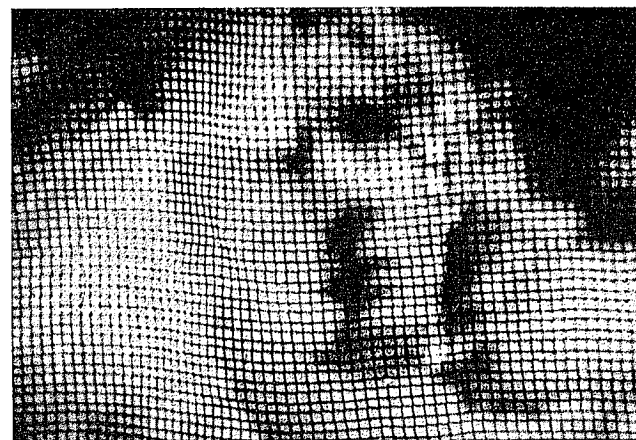


Figure 3.22

troping the woman (although here she is revalued and becomes the signifier of what is most desirable in theory—or at its limits).

It might be useful to imagine what Dietrich's return look might be, from behind the veil (figures 3.21, 3.22). Usually, the placement of a veil over a woman's face works to localize and hence contain dissimulation, to keep it from contaminating the male subject. But how can we imagine, conceive her look back? Everything would become woven, narrativized, dissimulation. Derrida envies that look. He loses himself in her eyes. It would be preferable to disentangle the woman and the veil, to tell another story. As soon as the dichotomy between the visible as guarantee and the visible as inherently destabilized, between truth and appearance, is mapped onto sexual difference, the woman is idealized, whether as undecidability or *jouissance*. The necessary incompleteness or failure of the attempt to leave behind the terms of such a problematic is revealed in the symptomatic role of the woman, who takes up the slack and becomes the object of a desire which reflects the lack that haunts theory. What I have attempted to suggest here is how we might begin to understand the philosophical and psychoanalytical envy of the woman through examination of a desire which always only seems more visible in the cinema.