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VOYEURISM, THE TEMPORAL READER AND THE ABSENT VIEWER

Abstract: The essay discusses voyeurism in the construction of subjectivity through reading and watching acts. It polemicalizes the subject's connection with the voyeuristic consumption of distinct objects: a book and a film. Although they both presuppose visual consumption, there is a difference in the way desire moves about them and, consequently, in the way pleasure is constructed. The issue is discussed by focusing on a passage from the captain William Jesse's 1844 book *The Life of George Brummell* (a nineteenth-century biographical piece on the legendary dandy of the Regency England) and a scene from the Harry Beaumont's 1924 silent film *Beau Brummell* that, in a fashion, dramatizes Jesse's work. Through them, the paper problematizes the issue of the voyeuristic subject (namely, the issues of gaze, desire and pleasure) in reading and watching acts, but it also points to a truly vertiginous labyrinth of voyeurism within the narratives themselves.

Key words: voyeurism, reading, watching, desire, film, literature, eroticization of intermittence

Gaze 1: I read a book and I take pleasure in the act. As I flip the pages and trace continuous, seemingly endless lines of characters and spaces, it is as if I disappear from my own view, as if I obliterate myself from the process of reading. Then I decide to give myself even more to this consuming practice, so I become oblivious of the time passing and neglect the space I occupy; I even forget my body that enables this act. After a while, my body feels uncomfortable as it reacts to the continuous reading in an awkward position: my neck aches and my shoulders are stiff. But I do not feel it; I literally *forget* myself reading.

This erasure of my physicality conceals me, like a cloak. I am ready to consume the book unhindered, unsuspected and unacknowledged. I gaze into the words and the mental images they create, and I revel in how the text exposes itself to me, how it gives its interiority, its intimacy to my sight – it obviously denudes itself for my pleasure. My gaze reads, penetrates and consumes the graphism of the page, finding a unique visceral pleasure in this intrinsic act of textual voyeurism.

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If, in reading, I am being erased from my own perception and my body is being forgotten and ostracized through the act, where am I as the voyeur reader? I am in the text, for sure, but what position do I inhabit? How do I constitute myself through the text? How do I constitute myself through the voyeuristic act of reading?

Gaze 2: I am at the cinema and the room is dark. I look around and see all the previously loud and clear faces receding into blurry, dark (almost ominous) shapes, accentuated and contrasted by the stream of light coming from the projector. There are particles of dust in the air (the only exposed objects in the hall) and I feel shrouded and disguised by the light. I am in a crowd of people, but still alone; everyone in the hall is insulated by the darkness and the pressing light coming from behind. Thus hidden, I turn to the screen and let myself be taken by it. As time goes by, I become accustomed to the anonymity of the cinema in which no one can see me, in which I cannot see myself (at least not as I am, or as I can see myself outside, in the light) so the screen becomes my personality and my corporeal and semiotic playground. I delve into the film and forget the body and the eyes that are looking. I become a spectating subject, but only at the expense of my physicality. In order to inhabit the screen, I am obliged to *forget* myself.

Thus, I am hidden once again. I skulk in the darkness, finding voyeuristic pleasure in my invisible, concealed state and in the exposure of the simulated world. I appropriate the film, I consume its narration and digest its composition, but to do so I have to disappear and constitute myself within it.

If, in the act of viewing, I am being erased from my own perception and my body is being forgotten and ostracized from the act, where am I as the voyeur viewer? What position do I inhabit? As I watch the film, is the gaze I direct towards the screen mine, or do I just inhabit some previously scripted role, specifically designed so I would lose and forget myself in it?

Who is watching? Who is reading?

This paper discusses voyeurism in the construction of subjectivity through reading and watching acts. It has not been conceived too broadly, so as to cover the whole spectre of different reading and watching practices. Narrowly speaking, I intend to polemicize the subject's connection with the voyeuristic consumption of distinct objects: a book and a film. There is a pleasure in both these acts, and it is my intention to show that, though they both presuppose visual consumption, there is a difference in the way desire moves about them and, consequently, in the way pleasure is constructed.

I plan on discussing the issue in question by focusing on a passage from the captain William Jesse's 1844 book *The Life of George Brummell* (a 19th-century biographical piece on the legendary dandy of the Regency England) and a scene from the Harry Beaumont's 1924 silent film *Beau Brummell* that, in a fashion, dramatizes Jesse's work. *Through* them I will try to problematize the issue of the voyeuristic subject (namely, the issues of gaze, desire and pleasure) in reading and watching acts, but I will also point to a truly vertiginous labyrinth of voyeurism *within* the narratives themselves.

I do not think that two "texts" can be more different. In the sphere of historical determination, the former is Victorian, the latter painfully modern; in the sphere of genre, Jesse's book is a popular biography, while Beaumont's film is a romance; in the sphere of thematization of George Brummell's image, they contrast each other sharply, Beaumont's adaptation being more akin to Clyde Fitch's 1890 play *Beau Brummell* than to Jesse's gossipy stile; most importantly, they are separated by the very nature of the media, one graphic and the other visual.

As different as these two pieces on George Brummell can be, I invite them to face one another through one particular, and for this essay crucial, instance: voyeurism. Although, evidently, a text is read and a film is watched, which makes it impossible to properly collapse them at the semiotic level of consumption, both media are consumed *visually*, putting the subject into the position of a voyeur: of a hidden, self-obliterating intruder into the privacy and lives of others. Nevertheless, the way voyeurism is constructed differs immensely, as do the role and workings of the mechanisms of desire. Thus, I would like to pose a question: if the consuming subject is voyeuristically involved with the text and the film in different ways so that his/hers desire functions differently, do these media construct the consuming subject differently? And if they do, how?

Voyeurism

The common understanding of voyeurism is partly expressed by the Oxford English Dictionary's definition: "[t]he practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity". Although this definition covers the visual part of the problem succinctly – the pleasure one gains from the act of watching, from the gaze – and includes the innate exhibitionism on the part of the looked at object, what lacks here is the essential *secrecy* of the voyeuristic act, so important to its image in popular culture.

Imagine saying “voyeurism” to a random group of people and noting their first mental impressions: most of the (culturally western) subjects would immediately project an easily predictable series of images: a man hidden behind a bush or a keyhole, a woman undressing oblivious of the lusty gaze that follows her around; the creepy man behind binoculars peering at the opposite building hoping to catch a glimpse of other people’s privacy. These images are sure to be highlighted by sexual tension, need for gratification, desire, secrecy and to conduce to the feelings of invasion, intrusion and probing. A certain amount of shame, as well as fear, would be connected with this stream implying that one of the central nodes of the popular ideas of voyeurism is *self-concealment* of the spectating subject. The voyeur takes pleasure in watching others, but only in safety of his/her own properly protected privacy. Between the voyeur and the object of looking there has to exist a barrier (or a screen) that would spatially hinder the gaze and protect the voyeur from exposure. It could be binoculars, a window frame, widow glass, keyhole or screen; a physical line has to be crossed for an act of looking to be voyeuristic. This line is what makes the voyeur desire his/her object and it is what keeps desire moving forward, because, as Lacan (1978: 182) explains, what voyeur is “trying to see [...] is object as absence, [...] a shadow behind a curtain”.

This easily predictable series of images is a conceptual miscegenation of psychiatry/psychoanalysis and popular culture/film. The fact that voyeurism (as a recognized mental issue), cinema and psychoanalysis are all born almost at the same instant is of no small importance either.

Voyeurism as a psychological issue has been discussed in psychiatry and psychoanalysis at least since Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where he describes voyeurism (scopophilia) as a component instinct that forms a part of “normal”¹ sexual development. However, “this pleasure in looking [scopophilia] becomes a perversion [...] if, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplants it” (Freud 1989: 251). In Freud, voyeurism is considered as a part of fore-pleasure that in normal sexual development eventually turns into a sexual intercourse (since in scopophilia the eye corresponds to an erotogenic zone (Freud 1989: 257)), but it becomes a perversion if this change does not occur and the preparatory act in question takes place of the normal sexual aim (Freud 1989: 282). Perverse voyeurism is a neurotic disorder, since it results from a partial repression of the sexual instinct (Abraham 1988: 169), and it leads to a displacement of the sexual aim: what the voyeur really wants s/he cannot have, so the focus is moved to more easily obtainable goals.

¹ Freud went to some lengths to explain that “normal” refers only to the (culturally) “common” and its opposite is not necessarily “pathological”.

Freud's interpretation remained fundamental for the later critical approach to voyeurism.² After Freud, the explanation of voyeurism as a consequence of the infantile desire to look persisted, as well as the focus on the importance of the object/goal/aim substitution. Among other theories (Freud's courtship disorder theory, social learning, biological, sociobiological theories), psychoanalysis continued arguing that voyeurism represented a defence against the voyeurs' own latent exhibitionism, or a fixation on experiences that aroused castration anxiety (Fenichel 1943 and 1999 [1946]: 319-20; Hirschfeld 1948: 516-524; Saul 1952; Allen 1967; Allen 1962: 150-161; Abraham 1988: 169-234).

In psychoanalytic texts on voyeurism from the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of the critical concealment of the spectating subject (voyeur) is diminished.³ A voyeur is one who compulsively watches the nakedness and exposure of others (or the excretory functions, as in Freud (1989: 251)), and not a self-forgetting spectator, hidden behind a bush, window or screen. This aspect of voyeurism gains immense popularity in popular culture (from there to be acknowledged in the official psychiatry/psychoanalytic textbooks), and was most notably acknowledged in the field of film practice and theory.⁴

As far as the theory is concerned, film has naturally been considered a voyeuristic medium due to its revolving around a "mechanic eye" of the camera, as well as around the screen that spatially and visually organizes the act of viewing as through a keyhole (Denzin 1995: 3; Metz 1982: 64; Mulvey 2009: 704; Pollock 1995: 44). Although visual technology, most notably photography, played a crucial part in the formation and production of modern identities (Zimmer 2011: 428; Tagg 1993; Lalvani 1996; Pollock

² For an extensive review of the psychiatric literature on voyeurism up to 1976, see Smith 1976. For a review of different approaches to voyeuristic disorder and the connected literature, see Lavin 2008.

³ Although the accent on the looking at others' nudity remained, the secretive nature of the voyeur's act is today incorporated into the official nosography of voyeurism, as it can be seen in DSM-5 (2013: 686), where diagnostic criteria of voyeurism are a "recurrent and intense sexual arousal from observing an unsuspecting person who is naked, in the process of disrobing, or engaging in sexual activity, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors".

⁴ Jonathan Metz (2004) compellingly shows how the psychiatric and popular concepts of voyeurism interacted through the second half of the twentieth century: the idea, taken from Freud, that the voyeurs displace their interests from unconsciously suppressed objects to "those that may better serve as reassurances" (418) was the basic assumption in psychiatric textbooks of the 1950s, but due to its promotion in popular print culture from the 1970s it delinked from any association between voyeurism and the unconscious. According to his reading, there is a connection between the psychiatry's growing insistence on symptoms that highlighted the voyeur's actions and observations and paid no mind to his intentions, and the general normalization of the voyeurism in popular culture (visible in the prevalence of reality TV).

1995: 51), cinema introduced a multi-perceptual immersion of the subject with the represented material.

Within the film history, voyeurism could be traced all the way back to the early cinema (*As Seen through a Telescope* (1900), for example) and *noir* detective films of the 1920s and 1930s, but it is during the 1950s and 1960s that it started being treated in its own right, which gave birth to works such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) that generally revolved around the use and intrusive nature of photography.⁵ The interest in cinematic voyeurism persisted through the Cold War espionage films and, with the advance of information technology, it led to surveillance cinema. However, it is in the highlights of the 1950s and 1960s that cinema started crossing the disciplinary gap between film and psychiatry/psychoanalysis.

Counter to the voyeur viewer, the notion of the voyeur reader has so far received little or no attention.⁶ If voyeurism is considered in connection to text, it is invariably explored at the level of the given text's narrative, and not at the level of the reading practice *per se*.⁷ In other words, either the question posed is how voyeurism is presented in the narrative, or how the reader is put into the position of a voyeur with respect to that narrative.

Though these are valid questions to ask of a text and they also form a part of this essay, I plan on slightly shifting the focus. What I want to ask is the following: is it possible for a reading practice (of any text) to be constituted voyeuristically due to its *visual* (*voir*, "to see") approach to a *graphic* medium? Are there intrinsic and distinct pleasures in this act that shape the reading subject differently than in the case of film? Although I do use the technique of case study in this text, I am interested in the reader as voyeur *in general*, regardless of the text. Consequently, I will start

⁵ On the role of photographer in the mention titles, see Gartenberg 1990.

⁶ Notable, and for my discussion appropriate, texts are few. There are two I found profoundly important and useful: Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* and Joel Rudinow's "Representation, Voyeurism and the Vacant Point of View". Although Barthes does not focus solely on the visual consumption of text, he introduces a visceral, physiological (we could almost say hormonal) pleasure to the act of reading and polemicalizes the importance of temporality in reading. Further, his concepts of "the edge" and "eroticization of intermittence" play a part in my analysis.

Rudinow's essay is more closely related to my concern. He discusses the "transformation of the Point of View [within a text] into one which cannot be identified with, or as the point of view of any actual consciousness, since no consciousness can be actually so situated" (184). He calls this Point of View "vacant", due to its self-erasure and impossibility, and this concept plays a role in my thinking about the "absent voyeur/viewer" in film. Unfortunately, although it starts from a similar place as mine, his analysis leads the notion of voyeurism away from the reading practice *per se* and into the structure of a text itself.

⁷ See, for instance, Berendsen 1984; Colquitt 1986; Ladimer 1977.

my analysis from the voyeuristic mechanisms within the analysed passage/scene, so as to pull the voyeurism out of them and onto the level of the reading/watching acts.

It seems that there is a general sentiment that voyeurism has no business dealing with the text, the reader and the gaze. I would like to argue against this notion, turning this paper into a vindication of the voyeur reader.

Voyeurism within the Text

The Life of George Brummell (1844) is a two-tome biographical piece that captain William Jesse, otherwise an unknown author, wrote on the famous George Brummell, to history and literature known by the title of “Beau”. The work itself received mixed reviews: some critics asked why there should be any need for a two-tome volume on the person who invented “the starched neckcloth [... and whose] genius amounted to [no] more than an appalling impudence” (*Littell’s Living Age* 1844: 333), while others claimed that if it were so, “we should have a Brummell every day in the week”, that volumes are “amusing” and that “the life of Brummell could not have fallen into better hands” (*The Spectator* 1844: 421).

The biography, however, had a very interesting afterlife, crossing the ocean back and forth. In 1890, the American playwright Clyde Fitch turned it into a play titled *Beau Brummell*;⁸ in 1913, James Young furthered this transformation/reiteration of the biographical by turning the play into a 10-minute silent film; in 1924, Harry Beaumont remade the Young’s film creating new *Beau Brummel*; thirty years later, in 1954, Sem Zimbalist remade both previous versions into a historical technicolor drama *Beau Brummell*; and finally, in 2006, Ian Kelly adapted it into the TV film *Beau Brummell: That Charming Man*.

As for George Brummell (1778–1840) himself, he was a star of the aristocratic Georgian society, and he remained famous for his exquisite and trendsetting wardrobe, for his irresistible physical looks and caustic, sarcastic witticisms that made him the ruler of the British *crème* society of the first decades of the nineteenth century (Jesse 1886; Jesse 1886a; D’Aurevilly 1897; Boulenger 1907, Monvel 1908; Jerrold 1910; Beerbohm 1922; Moers 1960; Laver 1968; Sima 1982; Nelson 2007). He was the prince

⁸ Although the life of George Brummell was fairly known due to his star-like popularity, Jesse’s biography was one of the two important and influential accounts of him at the time, the other being Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Du dandysme et de George Brummel*, published in French in 1845, but translated into English by Douglas Ainslie as late as 1897.

of the Regency dandyism and *arbiter elegantiarum* that turned male fashion of the period on its head, and was a close friend of the Prince Regent, which gave him an opportunity to walk among and make important connections with the aristocracy. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, George Brummell was a sort of today's celebrity, or starlet: a socially visible and influential figure that produces nothing, but grounds all of its social capital on the self-image that projects into society.

That image is precisely where the whirlwind of voyeurism I am to discuss starts: it is the essence of Brummell's life, Jesse's biography, Fitch's play and all the subsequent film adaptations, as well as this essay. The true dandy, according to Brummell's opinion, was the one who attracts attention by the spotlessness of his visual appearance without acknowledging it: to acknowledge it would be vulgar and unacceptable. On the other hand, the world yearned for the image Brummell projected, and was incessantly delegated to the role of his unacknowledged audience by the game of open/hidden/desired looks. Brummell's body was a convergence point of voyeuristic and exhibitionistic acts.

This is the first layer of the voyeuristic maze in both materials (the book and the film): voyeurism of the very theme/object (Brummell) the future biography, play and films would complicate immensely and make it increasingly more convoluted and reflexive. For already with the first full-length work on Brummell (Jesse's biography), the voyeurism of the object gains another layer.

In 1832, Jesse has finally met Brummell he would end up writing about, and he left the following account of the event:

In the morning visits that I sometimes paid him at his lodgings, the door of his bedroom being always left a little open to carry on the conversation, the secrets of his dressing-table were, much to my entertainment, revealed in the glass upon the mantelpiece of his *salon*. I think I see him now, standing without his wig, in his dressing-trousers, before the glass, going through the manual exercise of the flesh-brush [...] (Jesse, *The Life of George Brummell*, Vol.1, 1886[1844]: 68)

Although we could say that literary biography, as a genre, is in itself of voyeuristic nature (due to its obvious tendency to lead the biographer's eye towards the keyhole of the biographed life and reveal its intimate intricacies), it is I, the reader, that in this paragraph am being dragged, by the might of the biographer's pen, into the voyeuristic act of Jesse's looking. The door of Brummell's room is for the sake of conversation left ajar, but my gaze (as well as my desire) finds a way into the interior and finds pleasure in revealing the "secrets of his dressing table" (of his body-care), as Jesse

says. However, his body is not accessible directly, but in the mirror that reflects it *and* through the door left ajar, and it is there that my voyeuristic gaze (that might and might not be the same as the biographer's) refracts and approaches Brummell from the position of a desire barred several times.

What we find in this passage is the essence of the "voyeuristic project", as defined by Rudinow (1979: 176): there is a sharp *asymmetry* between the spectating subject and the consumed object, where the object is (seemingly) helplessly exposed to the hidden voyeur.⁹

This is the second, third, fourth and maybe fifth, layer of voyeurism: voyeurism of the genre of literary biography, voyeurism of the biographer who himself appears in his own text and hence duplicates the voyeuristic act (his literary avatar secretly looks at Brummell, while he looks at himself looking at Brummell in the act of writing about it); but there is also my own voyeurism, as I am, by the act of reading, put in front of that door and desire the spectated object I am several times barred from (by the surface of the mirror, by the door, as well as by the physicality of the paper I am holding while I voyeuristically take pleasure in the text and in the object described in it). This one paragraph of *The Life of George Brummell* poses a question not only about the voyeuristic nature of Brummellian dandyism, but about the voyeuristic nature of a biographic text, and of text as medium: but above all, it poses a question of the position of the spectating subject standing in front of the text and participating in/constructing the voyeuristic act of reading.

Voyeurism within the Film

If we now turn to the Beaumont's 1924 silent film adaptation, we shall see that the posed questions are continuously multiplying, and that the issues of biography, voyeurism and the spectating subject are here refracted through the nature of the film medium.

⁹ I say seemingly, because we are told by the biographer that the door were left ajar on purpose (for the sake of conversation). However, Brummell's (historically and literarily constructed) image allows us to assume that there was a conscious wish to be seen, and that the door was left ajar for the purpose of visual spectacle. This would, however, lead the analysis to Brummell's exhibitionism that many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts agreed was inseparable from voyeurism (Bergler 1944 and 1957; Fenichel 1933; Saul 1952; Allen 1967; Abraham 1988; Freud 1989), which falls outside the scope of this essay.

Mieke Bal (1995), in her famous essay "Reading the Gaze: The Construction of Gender in 'Rembrandt'" (later turned into a book), shows that it is possible to break free from the general assumption that voyeurism has to reduce itself to spectator's power over the visually consumed object. Registering this notion as the opposite extreme of the Jakobsonian model of communication, she demonstrates the futility of their binarism. She proposes the position of the focalizer as a solution that, by double mediation between discourse and image, undermines the gaze and blocks voyeurism.

*Beau Brummel*¹⁰ was the first reiteration in the Brummel(l) film streak, the second reiteration of the Fitch's play, and at least the third recreation of the Brummell's biography. Seen from this perspective, the viewer is drawn into an eighty-year old restructuring and rewriting of Brummell's life.

In 1795, George Brummell (John Barrymore), a young captain in the Tenth Hussars is in love with Margery (Mary Astor), a tradesman's daughter. Her father wants better prospects for her and marries her to Lord Alvanley (Brummell's close friend in real life). Embittered and hurt, Brummell decides to conquer society by using his "charm, wit and personal appearance" and transforms himself into a dandy. Due to a series of fortunate events, he meets the Prince Regent, enjoys a few decades of splendour and influence, falls out with the Prince, succumbs to enormous debts, leaves England for France and dies there in madness and despair. Unlike the remake of 1954, Beaumont's *Brummell* is far closer to the one written by Jesse, though still diverging in narrative from both Fitch's play and Jesse's biography.

In dealing with voyeurism in film and text, I started from the then obvious assumption that voyeuristic pleasure permeates the very nature of the film medium and is always present, even when the film does not deal with the topic itself.¹¹ Film is produced using the "looking machine" (as Pollock (1995: 44) calls it), utilizes visual narration as well as techniques of visual penetration of the represented reality (zooming, for instance) that are the very essence of the voyeuristic act.¹² The early cinema exploited the trope of unacknowledged voyeurism and "caught in the act" stories quite often, due to the general fascination with the probing powers of the camera (Zimmer 2011: 6; Zimmer 2015: 428-433; Denzin 1995: 8). *As Seen through a Telescope* (1900), *Grandma's Reading Glasses* (1900), *Naughty Grandpa and the Field Glass* (1902), or *Photographing a Female Crook* (1904) are only some examples. However, this unnamed/unacknowledged voyeurism was also prominent in the period of feature silent film (to whose very end Beaumont's *Beau Brummell* belongs) that superimposed image over sound (Denzin 1995: 14; Metz 1982: 701). In the darkness of the first cinemas, the viewers were unexpectedly invited to an intense peepshow of others' lives, a show in which the screen turned into a keyhole, and the image into the object of the voyeur's desire.¹³

¹⁰ The film title wrongly spells out Brummell's name with only one "l". The 1954 remake corrected this.

¹¹ Norman Denzin (1995: 10, n.4) calls this type of cinema "reflexive-voyeuristic", namely "any mainstream, popular film which critiques from within its own political ideology, refuses the demands of narrative closure, and positions the voyeur (and the spectator) in the unstable position of doubting what has been seen".

¹² On zooming as sadistic and masturbatory practice, see Padva and Buchweitz 2014.

¹³ There are different interpretations of the phenomenon. Denzin (1995: 14) describes

Therefore, in this context, the subject such as Brummell's voyeurism seemed as an obvious choice and Beaumont's *Beau Brummel* checked multiple boxes of voyeuristic pleasure: firstly, it was a *film*, whose very nature is voyeuristic; secondly, it was a *silent* film, whose imposition of image over sound made it even more suitable for an analysis of voyeurism; thirdly, it was a *Brummell* film, whose very personality was created through the intersecting lines of voyeurism and exhibitionism; and finally, it contained a *mirror scene* which could be a match to the one found in the biography.

In this scene (14.11'-15.29'), we witness Brummell's transformation from an army officer into a gentleman of the world, as he readies himself to conquer society. He stands in front of a mirror, adjusting his figure, bodily dialoguing with his mirror image and producing his dandiacal body in the process. There is no trace of a biographer secretly watching him through the door left ajar, but my initial assumption (rooted in the common prejudice that a film has to be more voyeuristic than a book, and the act of watching more voyeuristic than the act of reading) was that the very voyeuristic nature of the film would make up for the lack of the voyeur within the scene itself.

It turned out I was disappointed. However, that very disappointment is at stake here.

Let us look closely to the general set-up of the scene. The whole voyeuristic order is undeniably there: Brummell is "alone" in his room as he looks at his body in the mirror, adjusts it and, in the act of adjustment, produces it; the eye of the camera is also there, stalking this important moment of intimacy.¹⁴ My eye, the viewer's eye, is there too, and it gazes at Brummell in the mirror, simultaneously enabled and barred by the

theatres as places where "a version of Bakhtin's carnival was enacted"; Pollock (1995: 44) sees them as "those fantastic domains of infantile looking, oscillating between exhibitionism and voyeurism"; Metz (1982: 63) envisages them as places of "cinematic voyeurism, unauthorized scopophilia", where "the obscurity surround[s] the onlooker, the aperture of the screen with its inevitable keyhole effect"; while Mulvey (2009: 704) asserts that "the extreme contrast between the darkness of the auditorium [...] and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation".

¹⁴ This scene would in real life correspond to the phantasmal birth of Brummelliana (to borrow the term promoted by William Hazlitt (1934: 152-154)), a corpus of tales and legends surrounding Brummell's figure: it is the moment when Brummell turns into a myth. In the film, it is the moment in the narrative that defines and causes all the subsequent events, leading Brummell too close to the sun and subsequently to ruin. It is the moment when Brummell decides to cast away his past self and literally recreate himself in front of the mirror, supplying the scene with all the anger, bitterness and vengefulness needed "against the society which robbed him of his love". And it is given to the spectator not in images exclusively, but also through the intermission of an expository intertitle.

camera *and* the screen, just as Jesse did in the biography. The camera and the screen act as the conveyers of the narrative, but also as the barriers that distance myself (the voyeur viewer) and construct a configuration of voyeuristic pleasures. I am simultaneously *within* the represented picture and *outside* of it, revelling voyeuristically in the distance and asymmetry of the visual setting.

Still, hardly anything is truly revealed, the power of the voyeur's act *seems* imperceptible.

The scene starts with the camera hiding behind Brummell's back; I, the viewer, am here given a certain distance, which allows me to peep at Brummell secretly and without notice. However, the camera soon moves forward as Brummell steps backward, pushing me into Brummell's own gaze. By this act I consume him, I consume what should have stayed out of my reach and lure my desire: mine, the camera's and Brummell's vision are collapsed into the same point of view, killing the distance and obliterating the barrier between me and the object of my gaze. However, I am also outside the scene, sitting in a dark theatre and watching Brummell's mirror game through the peephole of the screen. I am, as Metz (1982: 48) observed, "all-perceiving". Brummell's body is my body and Brummell's gaze is my gaze: I am allowed to gaze at the visual spectacle and revel in voyeuristic pleasures, but only by forgetting my outside-the-screen physicality. Identifying with Brummell, while still voyeuristically enjoying his spectacle (a paradoxical, self-voyeuristic loop), I realize that the price for the voyeuristic act is self-erasure without outcome, consequence or a substitute.

Contrary to the book, the voyeurism of this scene is insufficient and discouraged. I, the voyeuristic subject, am amputated.

What is the issue? What kills voyeurism in this film (or any), while it accentuates it in the text? Is it due to the visual barriers that amplify the desire for the object of the gaze in the text (the mirror, the door left ajar, the surface of the page), while they somehow disenable it in the direct visual representation? How does the reader/viewer constitute him-/herself in this situation?

The Temporal Reader and the Absent Viewer

I would like to propose that what we are dealing with here is the spectating subject's position regarding the text and the film as media. What is at stake here is *my* position, as I (voyeuristically) read the (voyeuristic) biographical text and as I (voyeuristically) watch the (voyeuristic) silent film. I am facing two languages – the graphic and the visual – and they

are not equal, they do not address me evenly; they do not speak to me comparatively, since I do not approach them from the same position. As I read *The Life of George Brummell* and am drawn into the described vertigo of voyeurism, it is true that my desire is lured by the gradual disclosure and denuding (overcoming, first, one obstacle – the mirror, then another – the door), but it is equally lured by the very nature of the written medium and by the nature of reading that carries out that disclosure in *time*, through sequential words separated by empty, open spaces. In reading, I cannot penetrate the object of the gaze at once or by force. Desire is not lured by open, boundless access or by directness and exposure of language; it is lured by asymmetry, distance, by the possibility of transgression (against the Law), and by the limits and interruptions of language (“the edges” and “the seam[s], the cut[s], the deflation[s]”, Roland Barthes (1975: 6-7) would say). In the text, my desire emerges from these interruptions, it emerges from between the words, from the gradual intimation that the temporality of the text, by itself, eroticizes. I have time to inhabit it, that text, I have time to succumb to the desire for what is not given to me directly; I am inhibited but desirous, because in that inhibition I discern my own fall and *jouissance*. And as much as I fall between the words, I, the reader, have time to constitute myself in the text as a *temporal subject*, to inhabit it and find pleasure in the prohibition imposed on me by the spiral of voyeurism (from the biography, through text, to Brummell). I have time to recreate myself through the voyeuristic act of self-erasure.

In the film, on the other hand, where am I as a viewer? What is the position of the spectating/voyeuristic subject in the film? While text allows me to inhabit it through the temporality of reading, film imposes a position and a point of view on me – an already established subjectivity. Gazing at the image that gives me the narration in a simultaneous and condensed manner, I gaze from the position that the screen (the keyhole) defines for me. The screen, with its finite, physical limits, frame structure, image composition and sublimated narration, that screen that is a keyhole, is only a remnant, fossilized trace of a once present, but now vacant, spectating subject – trace of the director, the cameraman, the “mechanic eye” itself. The screen is both the signifier and the trace of the “absent viewer”, “absent voyeur” whose corporal totality is erased and whose abandoned representation – trace – I, the viewer, now inhabit. The voyeuristic gaze I direct (as I watch the film), the voyeuristic desire I experience and the pleasure I take are not mine; I just occupy them, like one occupies an empty house; I lend them my eyes and my unconscious, I give them my body – I *embody* them. My desire is not inhibited like in text (where that inhibition – that “seam”

or “cut” – makes it stronger); it is amputated, taken away from me by the crude surface of the screen.

If we agree that the essence of the voyeur’s project is the asymmetry (namely, the concealment of the voyeur and the exposure of the object), the power of the voyeur’s act in the analysed scene is missing, quite paradoxically, precisely due to the nature of the media historically considered innately voyeuristic. I cannot experience the voyeurism because I am not aware of it; I do not have time to constitute myself as a subject because I am consumed by the point of the “absent voyeur” – the camera, the filmmaker, the society – that I cannot see. There is a voyeur in the act of watching, but that is not me, it is not my subjectivity that constitutes the act – I just embody it.

A book allows me to assume the role of the hidden voyeur, and to use the process of self-forgetfulness so as to (re)create myself. On the other hand, although film demands self-forgetfulness from me, it amputates my voyeuristic desire by imposing someone else’s subjectivity on me.

The (unanswered) question remains: if I, the reader, due to the temporality and intermittence of the written narration, am subjected to my own desire, who is the “absent voyeur” whose desire is imposed on me, the viewer, by the screen and condensation of language? Whose desire do I experience as my gaze penetrates the moving image of Brummell’s body? The desire of Harry Beaumont who directed it? Of John Barrymore who featured it? Of the society? Maybe the camera? Or of George Brummell himself as he looks at himself in the mirror, while being watched by me looking at the tertiary reading of the Jesse’s biography: at the fictive, cinematographic critique of the biographical.

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Analysed films

Beau Brummel. Directed by Harry Beaumont, 1924, produced by Warner Bros, United States, 135 min.

Marko Teodorski

VOAJERIZAM, TEMPORALNI ČITALAC I ODSUTNI GLEDALAC

Rezime

U eseju se razmatra voajerizam u konstrukciji subjektivnosti prilikom činova čitanja i gledanja. Problematizuje se povezanost subjekta sa voajerskim konzumiranjem knjige i filma. Iako oba čina pretpostavljaju vizuelno konzumiranje, postoji razlika u načinu na koji se žudnja oko njih strukturira i kreće i, posledično, u načinu na koji je užitak proizveden. Naznačena problematika razmotrena je putem fokusiranja na odlomak knjige Vilijama Džesija, *Život Džordža Bramela* (1844) (devetnaestovekovnog biografskog dela o legendarnom dendiju džordžijanske Engleske) i na scenu iz nemog filma Harija Bomonta, *Bo Bramel* (1924), koji, na izvestan način, dramatiizuje Džesijevo delo. Kroz ove primere, esej problematizuje pitanje voajerskog subjekta (naime, pitanja žudnje, pogleda i užitka) u činovima čitanja i gledanja, ali i ukazuje na sunovratan lavirint voajerizma unutar analiziranih narativa. Zaključak je da, nasuprot uvreženom mišljenju po kome je gledalac neosporno veći voajer od čitaoca, čitanje omogućava temporalno zasnivanje voajerskog subjekta u tekstu, dok ga „odsutni gledalac“ (trag kamere, režisera ili kamermana) u filmu amputira i briše.