Shame and desire. Intersubjectivity in Finnish visual culture
Laine, T.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
1

“You want to see? Well, take a look at this!”

*I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone. (...) But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean?*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*
Chapter 1

Intersubjectivity in the Cinematic Experience

The notion of intersubjectivity is concerned with the way in which subjectivity exists in the signification of others, the way in which subjectivity is clued up by one’s engagement with the Other. This mode of engagement is often conceived in visual terms: in his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, describes how the look of the Other reveals that the subject has his or her foundation outside him- or herself; how the subject’s identity is imposed on him or her from outside. This relationship with the Other is not only external, but also internal: one defines his or her subjectivity according to how he or she is being seen by the Other. The intersubjective dimension of the self binds the subject with the Other in such a way that it becomes part of the self. In contemporary visual culture, too, the status of the object and the subject of the look seems to be exchangeable; images look back at us and address us to re-think the ways in which our intersubjective relationships are constituted.

In this chapter I shall show how film can engage its spectator in a kind of relationship that dissolves the classic opposition of subject and object of the look through the concept of voyeuristic shame. I shall show that the subject depends on the Other for his or her being in the visual field, as the look of the Other can throw the subject into an objective apprehension of him- or herself. I shall show that the look of the Other has a constitutive function for the subject’s sense of self, and that this is the nature of cinematic experience as well. Admittedly, this dyadic account of self and Other seems rather abstract and ahistorical, and is in itself inadequate for the explanation of socio-historical dimensions of (inter)-subjectivity. Yet it serves here as a theoretical basis for proceeding to triadic and embodied modes of intersubjective constitution that allows one to think of the subject/spectator as a social being in a historical context.
The theme of otherness and intersubjectivity is one of Sartre’s main concerns in *Being and Nothingness*, in which he discusses the look of the Other through the emotion of shame in order to examine the existence of others for the self; for Sartre, there is an immediate intersubjective field to be found in shame. Sartre places his emphasis on shame before somebody in his famous description of a voyeur, who has been looking undisturbed at a captivating sight through a keyhole. First the voyeur is aware only of the keyhole and of what is to be seen through it. The voyeur’s consciousness is conscious of itself as consciousness of the keyhole only. Then the sudden sound of footsteps in the corridor makes the voyeur realize that he is being observed. With the look of the Other, the voyeur’s unreflective consciousness makes his self present as an object in the world, as an object for the Other: “The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the person directly or as its object; the person is presented to consciousness in so far as the person is an object for the Other.”

This realization allows the voyeur to look at what he is doing as it were through the observer’s eyes. The voyeur is no longer just observing a forbidden scene; the voyeur is abruptly made conscious of himself observing the forbidden scene, as an object for the Other. The voyeur realizes that he possesses a self which the Other knows and which he can never know. It is in the voyeur’s being as an object for the Other than he is able to experience the Other as subject, “for how could I be an object if not for a subject?”

This aspect of his new being is revealed to the voyeur through the look of the Other. Furthermore, the voyeur experiences that he has a foundation outside of him, in the Other. The voyeur is what he is for the Other and never for himself. This self-consciousness on the level of being-for-others involves for Sartre consciousness of the self as an object in the world, in the world of the Other: “I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other.”
But although the Other’s look fixes the voyeur’s transcendence and gives it a nature, an ‘outside’, “that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such.”

This realization degrades the voyeur in his own eyes and reduces him to shame: “... I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other (... ) Shame is shame of oneself before the Other; these two structures are inseparable.”

Experiencing, through the look of the Other, his revelation as an object in the Other’s world, the voyeur cannot apprehend the object he is for the Other. The self that is made present to the voyeur through his experience of the Other’s look is a self that escapes him and exists for the Other as an object of values that come to judge the voyeur without him being able to act on this judgment or even to know it.

Sartre understands shame metaphysically, as an indication of our basic relatedness to others. The intersubjective existence of two self-conscious subjects is discovered in the emotion of shame. Because of shame, because of my concern with how I appear to the Other, I become aware that others exist together with me in an intersubjective field. In this intersubjective field, the concept of the look plays an important role. It is the look of the Other that surprises the subject through revealing that his or her foundation lies outside him- or herself. In shame, the subject is no longer “the master of the situation,” but an object for the consciousness of the Other. The subject now has acquired an identity which he or she has not given him- or herself. For Sartre, then, one of the most essential points in shame is that by apprehending him- or herself through the look of the Other the subject recognizes the nature of his or her lost status as an ‘omnipotent’ subject.

In Seminar I, Jacques Lacan discusses Sartre’s treatise of the look (which in psychoanalytical language is very often referred to as the gaze) as follows:

The gaze in question must on no account be confused with the fact, for example, of seeing his
[the Other's] eyes, I [the voyeur] can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not even see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there.¹⁰

This means that for Lacan, as for Sartre, the intersubjective existence of self and Other can be discovered in the experience of shame. In shame the subject sees him- or herself being seen, and because of the subject's concern for how he or she appears to the Other (exposed to the look of the Other in a disadvantageous relation), the subject becomes aware that others exist together with him or her in an intersubjective field. Yet the way in which the concept of the look/gaze has been applied in psychoanalytic film theory (the so-called apparatus theory in particular) does not deal adequately with this idea of intersubjectivity. As a result, psychoanalytic film theory assumes an isolated spectator—and so social questions of spectatorship are masked.

It is therefore necessary to return to Sartre's original discussion of intersubjectivity that can be discovered in voyeuristic shame to see that the visual field of cinema is a much more complex field of intersubjective relations than what psychoanalytic film theory has argued it to be. While in psychoanalytic film theory the concept of spectatorship is often structured by the diametrically opposed but complementary positions of subject and object, active and passive, seer and seen, these classic oppositions can also be dissolved in the cinematic experience as it is an intrinsically intersubjective phenomenon. Cinematic images can look back at us, surprise us (much like the Sartrean voyeur is being surprised), and throw us into an objective apprehension of ourselves through the emotion of shame. Furthermore, even though for Sartre the structure of shame epitomizes the structures by which we are related to others ontologically, this model can operate as a basis for understanding the social dimensions of intersubjectivity,
as it is based on the subject being seen in a certain socio-historical context. Sartre’s model of intersubjectivity can therefore serve as a model for understanding national cinema, but also the ways in which we can be engaged with images in contemporary visual culture much more generally.

The Returned Look

I am by no means claiming that all cinema spectatorship is inherently voyeuristic, as Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, and others have argued. I nonetheless agree that voyeurism can occur when the spectators’ emotional reaction to the scene is predicated upon their act of seeing the events portrayed in the film, and when identification with the camera as one’s own look is privileged over character identification. As Richard Allen has shown in his *Projecting Illusion*, a film that privileges a disembodied, acentral point of view upon the characters and events often gives rise to voyeurism; a superior, sadistic, objectifying, and distant viewing position in relation to the subject of representation. The voyeuristic look is sadistic, according to Sartre, because it is structurally empowering: the voyeur ‘creates’ the object of his look with his eyes as it were. It is precisely this kind of look that can embarrass, humiliate, and shame the Other. A voyeuristic look is an attempt by the subject to create a world of his or her own without boundaries—characterized by psychoanalysis as desire—through reducing the Other to an object in it. At the same time the voyeuristic look is a fascinated look, a pure mode of losing oneself in the world in the act of looking. On the one hand, my voyeurism organizes the situation (there is a spectacle to be seen behind the door only because I am looking through the keyhole), but on the other hand the spectacle exists as the object of my ‘unreflective consciousness’ (my consciousness is the
object and there is no way I can define myself as being in the situation. A voyeuristic look is a fascinated but superior (objectifying) look that demands both proximity with and distance from its object.

But as in Sartre’s example, in the cinematic experience the (voyeuristic) spectators can be surprised in the act of looking by confronting them with their own look and thereby disrupting their illusion of imaginary unity and sense of ‘control’ over the image. This is a situation that the spectators anticipate, as it suggests that their position is always and already inscribed within the film; that their presence is being paid attention to and their desire to look is being observed by the Other. This can happen, for instance, when a film character looks directly to the camera: Harriet Andersson’s look at the camera that lasts for several minutes at the end of Ingmar Bergman’s Summer with Monica (1953) is an awkward moment for the spectators, because it is threatening to the spectators’ personal space. Furthermore, the look disrupts the spectators’ imaginary illusion of omnipotence, and suggests that the spectators are constituted for the film and not vice versa, thereby reducing them to shame. The spectators are now forced to think of themselves in an unsatisfying and unpleasant relation to the Other by being exposed to the look of the Other.

Cinema, then, can function as the look of the Other, revealing to the spectators that they depend on the Other for their being in the visual field, and that the foundation of their look lies elsewhere, in their engagement with the Other. Cinematic images can look back at us and throw us into objectivity in our own field of vision. Furthermore, cinema can be a source of displeasure as well as pleasure, being able to take advantage of the spectators’ desire to look. This is the tactics used in the Finnish documentary Sin — A Documentary on Daily Offences (Susanna Helke and Virpi Suutari, 1996). By epitomizing the structures of look and shame, the documentary Sin re-determines the nature of
cinematic experience in the scopic field, and re-defines the politics of looking involved in it. In his book *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols has convincingly shown how the unacknowledged presence of the documentary filmmaker (especially in the observational mode of documentary) often clears the way for the dynamics of voyeuristic pleasure. In my analysis, I shall extend his argument and show how documentary—without necessarily being self-reflexive—can take advantage of this voyeuristic structure and turn the spectators into objects of the look themselves.

In the documentary *Sin*, ordinary Finnish people found via newspaper ads confess their misdemeanours through the camera to the others watching them. The confessions are based on the seven deadly sins: gluttony, envy, sloth, boredom, pride, lust and wrath. The persons are filmed in their everyday environment—mostly at home or at work—but consistently standing full length and facing the camera, as in a police line-up. The spectators are invited to witness intimate personal stories in authentic settings, but these settings nevertheless give an impression of being highly staged, even though the documentary does not explicitly acknowledge the presence of the filmmakers or call the process of filmmaking itself into question. Furthermore, the way in which the persons tell the most intimate things about their lives is downright masochistic, demanding recognition from the spectators even if it were contemptuous. This is a kind of masochism that Sartre defined as the consequence of the self that causes itself to be absorbed by other, an attempt to lose oneself in the subjectivity of the Other in order to get rid of one's own. A masochist relies on the Other to make him- or herself exist; masochism is an "act by which the Other would found me in my being." 

Masochism, then, has a strong intersubjective dimension, since a masochist insists on being defined by the Other. But much like the way in which the persons in the documentary throw themselves at the mercy of the
spectator, masochism has functioned as a mode of social bonding in Finland, and this is the most interesting aspect of this documentary in the sense of national peculiarity. As argued above, Finnish national identity in the 19th century was shaped through a masochistic situation where the subject was expected to throw him- or herself at the mercy of the Other (the omnipotent group). In pietism, the subject was required to engage in objectivity, to rely wholly upon the Other, to see him- or herself as worthless compared to the group. According to Sartre, the subject experiences this being-as-object as shame, and will love his or her shame as the profound sign of his or her objectivity (and in pietism shame indeed was a positive sign which indicated that the subject lived in harmony with the values of the group). Finnish subjectivity, then, was constructed through a masochistic relation with the Other that manifests itself in shame. It can be argued that masochism as a mode of intersubjective engagement still lies at the heart of Finnish subjectivity, and it is this aspect of Finnish intersubjectivity that the documentary Sin seems to epitomize and re-articulate.

But masochism as foundation of subjectivity is a failure. According to Sartre, masochism is not an attempt to fascinate the Other, but an attempt to cause oneself to be fascinated by one's own objectivity. In order to do this one needs to be able to realize the intuitive apprehension of oneself as object for the Other. It is for the Other that the masochist "will be obscene or simply passive, for the Other that he will undergo these postures (...) The more he tries to taste his objectivity, the more he will be submerged by the consciousness of his subjectivity." Thus the masochist ultimately posits him- or herself in transcendence in relation to the Other, treating the Other as an object and transcending the Other toward his or her own objectivity: "Thus in every way the masochist's objectivity escapes him (...) in seeking to apprehend his own objectivity he finds the Other's objectivity, which in spite of himself frees his own subjectivity."
It is this paradox of masochistic attitude that underlies the experience of the documentary *Sin*. At first, the strong masochistic aspect in the documentary discourages the spectators' identification with its persons, giving rise to a voyeuristic viewing position in relation to the subject of representation. Since identification with the persons' beliefs and emotions in the documentary *Sin* is discouraged, the spectators are tempted to adopt an objectifying, superior and contemptuous viewing position, encouraged by the fact that the persons in the documentary make the confessions addressing the camera, as if the presence of the camera (and thereby the spectators) was a justification for their confessions. Yet an objectifying viewing position is being discouraged as well, if we assume Sartre's theory on masochism to be correct. Through their confessions and the aspect of masochism in them, the persons have already moved beyond the spectators' objectifying definitions, because the masochist inescapably always abuses the Other, demanding of the Other (in this case, the spectator) that he or she be taken at the value he or she would want to be taken at. As a result, the spectators cannot adopt the field of the camera as their own and thereby 'control the image'. Instead, the field of the camera becomes the field through which the spectators experience that they are being seen by the Other. By returning the spectators' look, the persons of the documentary occupy the position of observer towards the spectators. Reflecting the spectators' look back onto themselves, the documentary makes an object of spectacle out of the (voyeuristic) spectators, which they experience as shame. The documentary *Sin* catches out the spectators by their own looking, inviting the spectators to see themselves seeing, saying "You want to peek at other people's lives? Well, here's intimacy for you!"

This, according to both Lacan and Sartre, is the function of (visual) art. Art must lead to reflection, catch the spectators looking, invite the spectators' eyes to see
they themselves seeing, and thereby invite society seeing itself as seen. As Lacan puts it:

The function of the picture—in relation to the person to whom the painter, literally, offers his picture to be seen—has a relation with the gaze. This relation is not, as it might at first seem, that of being a trap for the gaze. (...) The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, might be summed up thus—You want to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons.18

According to Lacan, art combines the lure of the eye and the ‘taming’ of it. Art tames because “it encourages renunciation;”19 the spectators are simultaneously given the confirmation of their desire through a visual fantasy and denied it, by making the spectators aware of their lack: there is a simultaneous awareness of desire and lack. In the documentary Sin, the spectators are given the confirmation for their ‘visual fantasy’ by leading them to believe that the confessions in the documentary are being made to satisfy their desire to look. At the same time, however, the spectators are denied all the pleasure of looking: through the returned look the spectators sense that their reactions toward the person’s confessions are being observed by that very person. The spectators feel that the confessions are being made so that their reactions to them could be observed. The tales told in the documentary feel all too intimate, and the spectators experience embarrassment, even shame, and think that they are invading the privacy of the persons in the documentary. The spectators become objects for the Other, and experience shame through the return of their look in the documentary; and this is the basic structure of shame that in Sartre’s thinking epitomizes the way in
which we are related to others, and the way in which we all seek to make objects of each other. The function of the Other is threat, because the look of the Other has the power of reducing me to an object in the world of another and degrading me to shame. My only strategy is to look back and re-establish my subjectivity by reducing the Other to objectivity.

Thus, the emotion of shame signifies that in addition to confronting the spectators in the act of looking, the documentary also confronts the spectators with the Other—who refuses to be an object for the spectators’ look. The documentary Sin on the one hand fascinates the spectators through intimacy, but on the other hand painfully emphasizes its own representational nature. In Shame and its Sisters, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank in their discussion of shame and the taboo on looking (specifically looking directly into the eyes of another person) claim that the shame resulting from the act of looking/being looked at is deeply ambivalent. The source of the taboo on reciprocal looking is intimacy, because it at the same time expresses a desire to look and to be looked at simultaneously “with interest or enjoyment in a relationship of mutuality.”

This means that in shame one may wish not to look or to be looked at, but also to continue to do so (think of children who cover their face in shame but also peek through their fingers so that they may look). This is why the spectators are fascinated by the documentary Sin, and why they wish to continue watching it despite the awkward feeling it produces in them. Another reason for this ambiguity of fascination/awkwardness could be that the spectators are caught between the shame of looking and the shame of being ashamed to do so: as a defence against looking too intimately at the Other the spectator continues watching; not to continue would be too obvious an escape.

The documentary Sin catches the spectators in between intimacy and shame by fascinating them with intimacy but simultaneously not giving the spectators
the opportunity to ‘control’ the image. The spectators cannot assume an omniscient position in relation to the film, or to get satisfaction for their desire to look, because the spectators feel that their presence is being taken into consideration in advance. For instance, the persons in the documentary take long pauses while they are speaking. They pose in an unnaturally immobilized manner and talk with an expressionless, monotonous voice as if they were repeating something they had learned by heart. The immobility both inside and outside of the image is essential in the documentary. It is clear that the confessions are being made for the sake of filming.

As the spectators are not given the opportunity to ‘control’ the image, they feel threatened by the subjectivity of the Other. The intimacy that in the beginning fascinates the spectators becomes painful and disturbing, because the spectators are confronted with it as it were against their will. Standing next to his identically dressed twin brother, a little boy confesses that he cannot remember his brother when they have been apart for more than two hours. An elderly lady talks about her loneliness in the hallway of her house, surrounded by other elderly ladies (her fellow sufferers?) (figure 1). Sitting at a conference table, in an environment that traditionally does not tolerate revealing one’s personal weaknesses, a civil servant confesses his sense of insecurity and fear. A young man reveals his total lack of interest towards the world (and the spectators) before the camera. Fascinated by his own indifference, he is portrayed staring directly at the camera, in a close-up, while the deep focus of the frame reveals the small room which he lives, apparently without much need to reach out to the world (figure 2). Even tough the young man is addressing the spectator, paradoxically at the same time he is ignoring the spectator, and when he finally lowers his eyes it does not seem that he is concerned about the spectator’s judgment, but that he is not even interested whether he is being judged or not.
Figure 1. Painful intimacy: *Sin—Documentary on Daily Offences* (1996). (Frame enlargement)

Figure 2. Confronting the look of the Other. (Frame enlargement)

The influence of painful intimacy both inside and outside of the frame makes it intolerable for the spectators to confront the look of the confessors that suddenly seems to have extended to the whole frame.
"You want to see? Well, take a look at this!"

The whole frame looks back at the spectator, embodying the encounter with the raw subjectivity of the Other, reducing the spectators to shame. Why? Because a look cannot be looked at. As Sartre writes:

I direct my look upon the Other who is looking at me. But a look cannot be looked at. As soon as I look in the direction of the look it disappears, and I no longer see anything but eyes. At this instant the Other becomes a being which I possess.\(^2\)

It is clear that identification, empathy and empathic shame with the Other are not at stake here. What makes the spectators feel ashamed is not so much what the Other does, but rather the fact that the Other is not ashamed of what he or she does, of publicly confessing the most intimate details of his or her life. The spectator cannot possess the Other, because the Other does not cease looking back at the spectator. This confrontation with the Other’s intimacy is, according to Slavoj Zizek, where we encounter the function of shame at its purest: “it opens up with the prospect of the total ‘transparency’ of the human being.”\(^2\)

According to Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank, another source for the taboo of mutual looking is the constraint on the direct expression of certain affects, since intimacy necessarily involves the sharing of affect: “Since the face is the site of the affect, mutual looking becomes tabooed insofar as it might violate whatever cultural constraints there may be on the expression and communication of affect.”\(^2\) Furthermore, the free expression of emotion on the face, which the Other can see, also enables the Other to achieve control over and contempt for the subject who wears his or her emotions on his or her face. In the documentary Sin, the persons do not express emotions on their faces; they keep their poker faces despite the intimacy of the life stories they tell. This places the spectators in a position of combined intimacy and distance, which blocks the emotion of contempt on
their part, resulting in awkwardness and a feeling of shame instead. For instance, the 'sloth' part of the documentary shows a civil servant standing motionlessly, staring straight into the camera (figure 3). He is being shown in the dusty hall of an office building and he tells us with irony in his voice about his work as a draftsman of future scenarios:

My work is to draft future scenarios. Earlier we formulated visions and strategies, now it's scenarios. In the reports we write things like sustainable development, decentralization of government, integration. I can write a report on a global theme any time. I can also write proposals that I know will never be accepted.

The self-irony emphasizes the persons' awareness of the spectators, especially when combined with the 'staged' setting. In this scene the static camera is situated in the hallway so that to the right we can see a meeting room in which people are sitting motionlessly by a table on which we can see apparently important papers. Further back in the hallway stands a man, equally motionless. The general atmosphere in the image is grey, joyless, cold and immobile.

In the next scene we are being taken into a recreation room for nurses in a hospital (figure 4). The nurses in the background are situated in stiff positions, at a distance from each other, so that a sense of depth is created in the image. To the left opens a long hallway that is lit from its other end. The cold, bluish lighting, combined with the depth of image, emphasizes the contrast between the light and the shadow, and creates a kind of Kafkaesque atmosphere of bureaucracy. This atmosphere is further emphasized throughout the documentary by the poignant, non-tonal music, which is played by a string orchestra. The person who is speaking in the scene is situated in the middle of the image. She is also staring straight at the camera and says in an unnatu-
rally serious voice: “A patient could ask to be taken to the bathroom and be told: “You did a poo-poo only yesterday, you’ll have to wait till tomorrow.”

The topic of the documentary, the seven deadly sins, is not very obvious to a casual observer, since they
are dealt with in isolation from their context. The moral codes, the seven deadly sins, stay floating in the air. It is clear that they exist, but they cannot easily be defined. The spectators cannot assume a superior, omniscient position in relation to the persons in the documentary, because they have to try hard to understand what the documentary is all about, and how the topics dealt with in it are related to each other. The documentary does not strive to tell a truth; instead it is openly subjective, absurd, and even contradictory in its content. It plays with the paradoxes of intimacy and distance, with the artificiality of the form and the genuineness of the content and of irony and seriousness. As an intertitle in the documentary declares: “I started to study at the age of forty. My husband started harassing me in all sorts of ways. He hid my alarm clock. Often he unscrewed the bathroom light bulb so that everybody had to go there in the dark.” The documentary does not give straightforward answers to how the seven deadly sins are related to, and exist in, our everyday lives. Who is the victim of the sin, who is a sinner, or are we all sinners?

By positioning the spectator in between shame and intimacy with the Other, film can take advantage of the seemingly sadistic and structurally empowering voyeuristic look of the spectators (that ‘creates’ the Other with the eyes) and turn it back onto the spectators themselves. A film like the documentary Sin can thereby question the dichotomy of subject vs. object of the look in psychoanalytical film theory, as theorized by Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey. In his book The Imaginary Signifier, one of the cornerstones of the apparatus theory, Metz states that the process of film viewing is based on scopophilia, the desire to see more, and this notion leads him to analyze the film experience more closely as voyeurism (as well as fetishism and exhibitionism), where he finds the unconscious roots of the ‘scopic regime’ of cinema. For Metz too, voyeurism is a form of mastery, which is derived from the subject’s attempt to
gain control over the Other on the level of perceptions; the subject imagines that his or her look determines the Other.24

According to Metz, there exist two types of voyeurism: private (unauthorized) and public (authorized), of which the first type is dominant in film experience. Public voyeurism is discursive interaction based on a mutual agreement as, for example, in the peep show. This is also the nature of the film institution in itself. Films are made to be watched, and the spectator knows this when buying the ticket. The cinematic experience, however, is closer to private voyeurism. The darkness of the film theatre, the apparent privacy of the situation and the shape of the cinema screen together create ‘a keyhole effect’ that is complemented by the film characters’ unawareness of the spectators. The film characters allow themselves to be seen, but they act as if they were unaware of this, and unauthorized voyeurism is one of the means by which the (classical) cinema disguises its discursive nature. For Metz (and for Mulvey) spectatorship thus functions on two levels: on the one hand as ego-constitutive identification, and on the other hand as sadistic (erotic) voyeurism, where the spectators subjugate the film character as the object of their look.25 The spectators as subjects of lack feel that the field of camera really is their ‘transcendental’ field of vision, and are thereby able to subjugate film characters as (i.e. erotic) objects of their look. The basic condition of voyeuristic look is a distance between the spectator and the object of the look. According to Metz, “[P]erceiving drive concretely represents the absence of its object in the distance at which it maintains it and which is part of its very definition: distance of the look, distance of listening.”26

By contrast, for Sartre a voyeuristic look creates intimacy between the seer and the seen: the voyeur forgets himself and ‘fuses’ with the object of his look:
No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a *given* on which a judgment can be brought to bear. My consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts; and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed. My attitude, for example, has no ‘outside’; it is a pure process of relating the instrument (the keyhole) to the end to be attained (the spectacle to be seen), a pure mode of losing myself in the world.\(^27\)

It is only after the voyeur experiences the look of the Other that distance is created between the voyeur and the object of his look. Through the look of the Other, the unreflective consciousness makes the self present as an object for the Other: “First of all, I now exist as myself for my unreflective consciousness (...) I see myself because somebody sees me.”\(^28\) In this process, the voyeur’s subjectivity becomes threatened, the voyeur becomes conscious of himself as an object for the Other: “All of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself (...) in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other.”\(^29\) This means that the object presented to consciousness is out of the voyeur’s reach: “it is separated from me by nothingness which I can not fill since I apprehend it as not being for me and since on principle it exists for the Other.”\(^30\) The voyeur’s subjectivity flees from him, and will never belong to him, but he nevertheless *is* that object for the Other.

The new consciousness is embellished by the feeling of shame. Shame, then, is “the recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a *given* object.”\(^31\) Yet this self, which the voyeur is in the world of the Other, is made alien to him, for the Other’s look fixes his transcendence: all the instrumental-things in the midst of which he is (including the keyhole and the spectacle that
is to be seen through it) now turn toward the Other and escape the voyeur: the voyeur is the object in the midst of a world (the voyeur is one with the world as a passive object among other objects) which flows toward the Other. It is in the voyeur’s being as an object for the Other than he is able to experience the Other as subject.

Voyeurism, and the shame that follows, is for Sartre an indication for the whole human condition. A voyeuristic look is an attempt by the subject to create a world of his or her own without boundaries through reducing the Other to an object in it. Yet in this process the subject is being caught in action: the subject realizes that others exist with it in the same intersubjective field, seeking to render the subject into an object. This leads to shame:

My original fall is the existence of the Other. Shame (...) is the apprehension of myself as a nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such. Strictly speaking, it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a thing, but my nature is—over there, outside my lived freedom—as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other.32

The content of shame is then that the subject is in fact an object and constituted as such by the Other. The subject, who so far has conceived his or her own origin by projecting to be his or her own foundation (the ‘creator’ of his or her own being) now, as an object, realizes that he or she is dependent upon a consciousness other than his or her own. The result of this is the loss of freedom—the subject’s foundation now lies in the freedom of another—and it is the loss of freedom that degrades the subject to shame. The sense of loss of freedom is an essential feature in shame: in shame my self is not only seen as an object in the world of another and experienced as objectified, it is also sensed as taken by forces beyond my subjective control, since the Other can take a point of
view on me that I cannot. Even though there is an objective dimension of my being, that dimension of myself essentially escapes me. Shame, for Sartre, is thus more than a moral sentiment (even though morality is a part of it, at least if the ‘sale voyeur’ has internalized the cultural conventions of privacy that he is violating). Since shame reproduces the conditions of basic human-ness, shame is a metaphysical rather than a moral feeling.

Through the emotion of shame, the documentary *Sin* turns the subject/object dichotomy of apparatus theory upside down. It is through shame that the spectators of the documentary are revealed to themselves as existing for others, the persons of the documentary. First the spectator is fascinated by the intimacy in the documentary: we are invited to share other people’s intimate moments that we are not intended to see in social situations of another kind. But the practice of filmmaking justifies our voyeuristic fascination, the spectacle is there to be seen for us, we are invited to forget ourselves in the act of looking. The confessions in the documentary are made to satisfy our desire to look. But with the look of the Other in the documentary, the eyes directed to the camera that haunt the spectators in the act of looking, the spectators are presented in this visual field as objects for the Other’s look. All of the sudden the spectators are conscious of themselves not only in the act of looking, but as objects for the Other, in the world of another. The object of my look has suddenly taken a point of view upon me that I cannot apprehend. As a result, the spectator is able to experience the Other as subject, as the Other refuses to be an object for the spectator’s look.

In this way, the documentary *Sin* first lures the eye and then catches the spectators in the act of looking, making the spectators objects for the Other’s look, the Other that now appears as another subject. But whereas for Sartre this was a threatening situation—for him, all the relations with others are characterized by the
subject’s attempt to make objects of others and *vice versa*—I shall argue that it echoes a possibility of ‘filling in the void’ between the self and the Other. Sartre shows clearly that the look of the Other has a constitutive function for the subject, but that function is not necessarily limited to being a threat. This means that the Other can be a threat to the subject (the Other can objectify and shame the subject) but the Other also can be beneficial to the subject (the Other can support and care for the subject). The relationship between the subject and the Other can be *productive* instead of threatening; we are not separately bound, but interdependent, profoundly connected beings.

**Reciprocal Intersubjectivity**

Towards the end of Sartre’s play *No Exit*, one of the three characters trapped in the room of hell voices what must be Sartre’s most famous phrase: *Hell is other people*. Hell is ‘other people’ in the respect that each of these characters are trapped *eternally* in a relation with each other, in which they either objectify each other, or perceive each other as threatening for their own subjectivity. In his discussion of *No Exit* Arthur C. Danto describes how in the play

> Each demands of the others that he or she be taken at the value he or she would want to be taken at, that others perceive him as they would want to perceive themselves, because there is a mutual refusal, indeed incapacity to do this, each is forced to see himself through the eyes of the others, and none can escape an identity imposed from without.33

Hell is thus a hopeless situation in which the subjectivity of each is both exposed to others and hostage to others,
and from which it is impossible to escape. Understanding this possibility of ‘being seen by the Other’ is experienced as shame. Consequently, shame reveals the human condition in which we are related to others, the condition from which there is no exit. Relations with others always involve conflict; yet Hazel Barnes in her book on Sartre notes that there is also hope for positive reciprocity in intersubjective relations. That positive reciprocity means respecting the Other as another subject, without attempting to use the Other to one’s own ends. This does not mean that the Other does not have an effect on the subject or vice versa, but that, despite that effect, the subject remains open to the Other. The subject accepts that he or she is “a factual limit to the Other’s freedom” and that the Other is a factual limit to the subject’s freedom, but tolerates this limitation and removes from the Other “those free possibilities of courageous resistance, of perseverance, of self-assertion which he would have had the opportunity to develop in the world of intolerance.”

According to Barnes, in order to acknowledge the positive reciprocity, one needs to recognize the positive potential of the look. The first possibility for reciprocal subjectivity is is two people looking at the world together, in a common project. The second is the experience of ‘look-as-exchange’. This kind of look is not “a union of subjects but a mutual affirmation of respect for the Other as subject” that resembles Sartre’s concept of ‘love’ outlined in Being and Nothingness but that lacks the “attempt to assimilate the Other’s freedom.” The look-as-exchange “involves the usual subject/object alternation, but with the added intention of positively understanding the Other’s world and using this understanding to enhance both self and Other.” Through the look-as-exchange I recognize the Other as a subject fundamentally like myself in his or her basic ‘human-ness’, but it is not marked by threat but by an ethical attitude of reciprocal respect, which Sartre in Critique of Dialectical Reason referred to as “a free exchange between
two men who recognize each other [in a positive or negative way] in their freedom."36

The phenomenon of reciprocity can occur in the cinematic experience as well, as it is not a closed system of subject and object, but a potentially dialogical space of two (or more) subjects. The documentary Sin, for instance, creates positive reciprocity by establishing a subject/object alteration. For instance, the ‘lust’ part of the documentary introduces us to a married couple with a number of children living in a bungalow. They tell us about their relationship in a series of oppressive images—the setting is filled with props from the daily life of the couple while there is little sense of space in the images. In the first alternating series of images the man and the woman are standing alone in front of the camera, but later they appear together in the setting. The first communal image is situated in the bedroom. The woman is talking, looking straight at the camera. Her husband is standing next to her, in a diagonal line in relation to the camera (figure 5). She says: “If my husband doesn’t show enough sexual interest in me, I punish him. Either I don’t cook for him or I eat his goodies or I take money from him.” In the following image the man is standing in the middle of the dining room. His wife is further left in the kitchen, holding their children, but within hearing distance (figure 6). The man says: “I’m afraid my wife will find a man who can talk and who isn’t as cruel towards the kids as I am.”

Again the couple in the documentary share the most intimate things of their lives with the camera, demanding recognition from the spectators, and discouraging the spectator’s identification. The spectators are again tempted to adopt an objectifying viewing position, as the practice of filmmaking creates a space where observing the intimate confessions is justified. But the fact that the couple are staring directly at the camera renders the intimate encounter with the raw subjectivity of the Other painful, and paves the way to the emotion of shame. The spectator is again made
object for the Other in his or her field of vision. Yet despite the fact that the couple are staring directly at the camera while directing their words to the spectators, seeking to make objects of spectators, they really seem to
address each other. This situation, this residue in the subject/object alteration enables a moment of added intention of positively understanding this unhappy Finnish couple. How? The emotion of shame distances the spectators from the couple so that they remain aware of their own subjectivity—there can be no identification or other kind of assimilation of the Other to the self. But at the same time the spectators are invited to grasp the viewpoint of another—because it is uttered right through them. The couple in the documentary *Sin* talk through the spectators in order to reach their partner, and this allows the spectators to attain an approximation of the Other's point of view, yet at the same time to remain aware of their own subjective viewpoints.

The experience of look-as-exchange that the spectators are invited to participate in is an attempt to create mutuality and reciprocity with the Other, a precondition for establishing an exchange of recognition. This exchange is not necessarily positive: I do not need to approve of the Other (“...I punish him...” “...who isn't as cruel towards the kids as I am...”) to be able to recognize the Other as another subject fundamentally like myself in his or her basic humanness. I can empathize with the Other without identifying with the Other. The simultaneous distance and proximity with the Other allows the spectators to encounter the Other beyond the dominance of subject/object dichotomy, filling the void in the dual position. By keeping his or her distance, the Other poses no threat, but is able to touch the subject. Also the spectator's shame signifies no longer a threat for the spectators' subjectivity as its meaning originates from the intersubjective field that they have come to embody while acting as intermediates for the unhappy Finnish couple. This intersubjective field is the precondition for a reciprocal activity that recognizes the Other's impact on the self for participation in the reality of two (or more) separate subjects, but also acknowledges the externality of the Other.
The look of the Other and the basic structure of shame in Sartre’s thinking thus characterizes the manner in which we are intersubjectively connected to each other, and the manner in which we attempt to make objects of each other. To live in the social world means that we are compelled to see ourselves through the eyes of the others, and that we cannot flee an identity that is being enforced on us from without ourselves. Comprehending this risk of being seen by the Other is experienced as shame. Consequently, shame reveals the human situation in which we are connected to others, the situation that we cannot escape. However, Sartre’s notion of the look of the Other that compels the subject into an objective apprehension of him- or herself is often criticized of being ontological-individual rather than socio-historical. The Sartrean subject has been declared as being solid, essentialist, and self-sufficient “prisoner of the cogito.” Sartre’s concept of consciousness has been seen as a Cartesian construct, “with all the attributes of absolute autonomy” but little need in acting to improve the social circumstances in which one lives. According to Nik Farrell Fox:

In this respect, Sartre’s social theory in Being and Nothingness remains abstract and incomplete since he does not go beyond a dyadic account of self and Other, which (...) is insufficient for the explanation of ‘macro-phenomena’, such as institutions, languages, and collective structures.

Yet underneath the ‘Cartesian surface’ of Being and Nothingness there were important undercurrents which indicated a more contingent notion of the subject that Sartre later outlined in his Critique of Dialectical Reason. In this account, Sartre attempts to understand subjectivity through a dialectical plane; for Sartre ‘dialectical
reason’ is a way of understanding the objective dimension of history at the same time with the subjective, individual experience. Where *Being and Nothingness* provides an abstract and insufficient matrix for the subject’s self-realization as a social subject, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* subjectivity is imposed not by some ontological structures, but by its socially and historically conditioned frameworks. This theoretical mode of intersubjective constitution can also serve in thinking about the film and its spectator as social beings in a historical context, as I shall show in the next chapter.

---


2 According to Kaja Silverman, the figure of the voyeur is “so hyperbolically masculine” that she consistently deploys the male pronoun when referring to this voyeur. I shall follow this practice. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 245, fn 1.

3 For many theorists, the emotion of shame is connected to being seen and exposed inappropriately by others. However, no actual observer is necessary in order to feel shame, nor is it necessary that one believe that one is being observed by the other. One may feel shame being alone and knowing this to be so. Instead, in shame the subject shifts his or her viewpoint from that of the actor to that of a critical, detached observer, but so that the subject fulfills both these functions. The subject both identifies with the observer and constitutes the observer. It is part of the complexity of shame that the exposure it implies refers to the Other, but that Other is in the first instance oneself. To speak about the observer is thus to speak metaphorically, and ‘being seen exposed’ is a sign of being at a disadvantage and suffering a loss of power; and that recognition of disadvantage and suffering is what is central to shame. For a discussion, see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Gabrielle Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-assessment*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Michael Lewis, *Shame: The Exposed Self*. (New

1 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 349.
3 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 349.
* Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 303.
8 Per Persson has made an interesting case of this kind of 'character voyeurism' as a threat to the spectator's personal space. Per Persson, "Understanding Cinema: Constructivism and Spectator Psychology." Paper presentation at Noria meeting *Grand, Medium and Small Film Theories, Nordic Film Theory at the Turn of the Century*. (Copenhagen, December, 10.12.1999.)
10 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 491. This kind of masochism is thus essentially different from the 'pre-Oedipal masochism' theorized by Gaylyn Studlar. For Studlar, the cinematic experience re-creates the experience of pre-Oedipal infancy by placing the spectators in a passive position at the mercy of some entity ('the mother') for what they desire, which, according to Studlar, is the ultimate fantasy of the masochist. Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema." In E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Feminism and Film*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 203-225.
“You want to see? Well, take a look at this!”


25 Like Metz, Laura Mulvey proposes views about the importance of *scopophilia* in film experience in her classic article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, but unlike Metz she takes gender difference as her starting point. According to Mulvey, the classic cinema defines the male subject by the capacity to see as the source of the look (voyeurism), whereas the female subject is defined by the capacity to attract the look (exhibitionism). This reflects the attempt in the patriarchal system to subjugate women. For Mulvey, the psychic mechanisms invoked by cinema are gender-bound rather than gender-neutral. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods. Volume II.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Later psychoanalytic theory, however, has questioned the separation of the female spectator from the basic structure of cinematic pleasure, by claiming that the psychosexual organizations of human beings cannot be reduced to simple oppositions between the active, sadistic, male psyche and a passive, masochistic female psyche. Sexual identification is more dynamic, and gender difference does not determine the way of looking. For a discussion, see, for instance, Linda Williams, “Women in Love.” In *Jump Cut* 27/1982, and David Rodowick, *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film theory.* (New York: Routledge, 1991).


27 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 348.

28 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 349.

29 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 349.

30 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 350.

31 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 350.

32 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 352.


35 *Sartre, Being and Nothingness,* p. 494.

36 Barnes, *Sartre,* p. 64.

37 Barnes, *Sartre,* p. 333-34, italics added.


