There is nothing more intoxicating than self-love. On those rare occasions when we imaginarily coincide with the ideal imago which we usually worship languishingly from afar, we experience an absolutely thrilling euphoria—what Lacan, in his essay on the mirror stage, does not hesitate to call "jubilation." Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the pleasures afforded by even the most intense object-love pale by comparison with those provided by this narcissistic transport.

However, at such rapturous moments, the subject is "filled up" in a dangerous way. Not only is the moi bloated with importance, but it functions in this distended form to conceal from the subject what founds him or her: lack, or manque-à-être. Although imaginary, this surfeit is inimical to the operations of desire, and, therefore, to human existence in all its manifold dimensions. As long as it continues, there is in effect no other, and no world. And if capable of infinite prolongation, it would spell certain death.

Moreover, the ideal image is impossible to approach except in moments of mania or delusion. For the most part, the subject who yearns to approximate it experiences not repletion, but insufficiency, not wholeness, but discordance and disarray. He or she vaguely apprehends the irreducible heterogeneity of the bodily ego, the distance of his or her proprioceptive coordinates from the specular ideal, but only via the extremely dystopic fantasy of the body in bits and pieces. This fantasy elicits feelings of extreme aggression toward any other who is imag-
ined to be intact or complete, a rivalry to the death over the right to occupy the frame of the idealizing image. And it is only such an other who really figures psychically for the subject who is my present concern.

Finally, the subject who aspires to incarnate or embody the ideal most typically derives his or her definition of that ideal from normative representation. He or she thereby surrenders all negotiating distance with respect to ideality, and all agency within the larger field of vision. He or she is not only compliant with the dominant values of the screen, but also deprived of any capacity to put its images to new uses, or to work transformatively upon them. This subject can only passionately but passively reaffirm the specular status quo.

Some further clarification of the last paragraph would seem necessary. By “idealization,” I mean the increase in an object’s value which occurs when it is elevated to the level of das Ding, or the impossible nonobject of desire.\(^2\) Idealization is a strictly human activity. Representational practice generally works to establish which objects are worthy of being idealized. It does so, as I will explain in greater detail later, by embedding them in a symbolic matrix which extends and deepens their semantic range, and so solicits libidinal investment. Certain objects are so widely represented as being worthy of idealization that they assume the status of normative ideals. Nevertheless, no matter how often it is reiterated, an ideal remains a bloodless abstraction until it is has been psychically affirmed. We alone are thus finally responsible for the production of ideals.

When the subject idealizes what is most culturally valorized, the idealized object becomes almost automatically fetishized, in the Marxian rather than the Freudian sense of the word.\(^3\) Affirmed both representationally and psychically, it begins to seem intrinsically more valuable than other objects, substantially superior. Although the subject has constituted that object as an ideal, he or she often falls prostrate before it, in thrall to its fascinating luster.

It might seem to follow logically from this discussion that the human subject should somehow learn to live without ideality. However, such is not the conclusion toward which the present chapter will move. Idealization has a crucial role to play in the psychic existence of even that individual who most fully and relentlessly confronts the void upon which all subjectivity pivots. This is only in part the case because human existence would be intolerable without ideality. By putting objects in the place of the unattainable nonobject of desire, one also maintains one’s distance from that nonobject, thereby becoming, in the strongest sense of the word, the subject of lack. Even more crucially, idealization is something we cannot do without because under the right circumstances it facilitates not so much rivalrous as loving identifications—because it alone makes possible a genuine relation to the other. Finally, and equally importantly, it can open up identifications which would otherwise be foreclosed by the imperatives of normative representation and the ego. However, ideality can only serve these vital functions when it is bestowed at the greatest possible distance from the self, and when that bestowal is active rather than passive.

As the preceding paragraphs make clear, this chapter is devoted to the subject of idealization. Most of it will be given over to a theoretical elaboration and textual dramatization of the perils involved in self-idealization. However, in the final two sections, I will address the psychic and social functions served by idealization when it is directed not toward the self, but toward the other. I will then attempt to specify the conditions under which idealization might work to position the subject actively within the field of vision, and to effect a radical redistribution of value at the site of the screen.

Although the writings of Lacan are central to this chapter, the argument here and in the next chapter may seem very alien to the reader of his late seminars. What I am attempting to imagine or construct is an alternative to Lacan’s itinerary—a route along which he takes a first few hesitant steps in Seminar I, and again in Seminars VII and XI. Following up on the implications of several remarks in the earlier text on the topic of the “active gift of love,” I will move not toward the conclusion that there can be no real relation between man and woman,\(^4\) but toward an elaboration of the terms under which precisely such a relation might be possible. The Lacan who figures here thus speaks with a very different voice from the one made famous through Seminar XX.

The Ideal-Ego

In Seminar I, Lacan first effects a deconstruction of the human/animal opposition, then reintroduces the difference between those two terms at an unexpected juncture. He attempts to dispel the illusion that animals inhabit a purely natural domain by suggesting that the imaginary register is as central to their existence as it is to that of the human subject. However, he then contrasts the animal realm to that of the human on the basis of the divergent relationship each sustains with the image.

Visual representation is as necessary to the maturation of an animal as it is to that of a human being, he suggests; both conventionally effect an erotic approach to the other only via the image. However, whereas the representation which “lures” an animal into sexuality facilitates its relation to other members of the same species, in the case of the human subject, it is more generative “of fragmentation, of rupture, of breaking up, of lack of adaptation, of inadequation.”\(^5\) The image precipitates not only desire for another human body, but also something which is prior to and often at odds with both the sexual conjunction of one individual with another, and their peaceful cohabitation: the moi.

Lacan suggests that in the case of the animal, the image functions to define it as a member of a species rather than as an individual. Its productivity is exhaust-
ed in encouraging the animal to effect only those sexual conjunctions through which it will reproduce the biological paradigm of which it is a representative. Lacan maintains that the animal is “so much a captive of the type” that it is “already dead in relation to the eternal life” of that species. Somehow both the animal’s typicality and the smooth operation of its sexuality are intimately connected to the fact that the image functions for it more as a window than a mirror—it opens onto the other, rather than the self.

Things are very different with the human subject. Classically, his or her central preoccupation throughout life is to overcome that inadequacy to him- or herself which is the result first of the prematurity of birth, and later of a whole series of divisions and losses, most particularly those induced through the entry into language. The image consequently functions less as a window than a reflecting surface. When confronted with an idealizing representation, he or she generally searches first for the self rather than for the other. However, since “it is [always] in the other that [the subject] will...rediscover his [or her] ideal ego” (I, 282), not even the most jubilant captation can be prolonged forever; sooner or later, the subject apprehends his or her distance from the actual or metaphorical mirror.

At the moment that he or she perceives the “otherness” of the idealizing image, the subject classically responds to it as an enemy and a rival, one whose separate existence is inimical to his or her own. He or she strives desperately to close the gap between it and the sensational body, so as to assert the unity of the self. The result is the negation of either that entity, or the other. To the degree that the subject succeeds in affirming him- or herself as image, the world is in effect annihilated. To the degree that he or she fails to do so, he or she experiences that corporeal disintegration which Lacan associates with the fantasy of the fragmented body. This is the “either you or me” logic which informs the subject’s relation to the other:

[the object] appears in the guise of an object from which man is irremediably separated. (I) ... shows him the very figure of his dehiscence within the world.... Inversely, when he grasps his unity, on the contrary it is the world which for him becomes decomposed, loses its meaning, and takes on an alienated and discordant aspect. (II, 166)

Seminar I thus stresses both the murderous and suicidal logic of this narcissistic relation to the image. It makes clear that what I have called the “principle of the self-same body” entails more than the repudiation of bodily otherness, or its assimilation to the subject’s own corporeal coordinates. It also involves an aspiration to be “one” with the ideal image, and a relationship of fatal rivalry with anyone who seemingly occupies the position of that image.

At the same time, Seminar I makes clear that it is only through the mirror that each of us is able to love an other. “What we call libidinal investment is what makes an object become desirable, that is to say how it becomes confused with this more or less structured image which, in diverse ways, we carry with us,” observes Lacan. “It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s own ego made real on the imaginary level” (141–42). It is consequently not through its radical alterity that we effect a libidinal approach to an object, but rather through its evocation of an image which we would like to call our own.

However, “love” does not necessarily imply entering into a generous relation to another. Love can represent the demand that this other prostrate him- or herself before our image, and submit in every way to our demands. As Lacan observes, such a love “is expressed in a sort of bodily agglutinating of freedom. We want to become for the other an object that has the same limiting value for him as does, in relation to his freedom, his own body.... We require that a freedom accept its own renunciation so as to be, from that moment on, limited to everything capricious, imperfect, in truth inferior, the paths along which it is swept by its captation by that object which we ourselves are” (I, 217). A generously loving relation to the other implies something very different, something which can best be described as my recognition of that other as an other.

Since, as Lacan insists, such a relation is still narcissistic in nature, it implies at the same time the specification of that person as what I would like to be. The necessary simultaneity of these two actions means that if I am to relate to the loved other outside the vicious logic of the “you or me,” I must accept that the image within which I would like to see myself reflected does not show me myself, but someone else. To state the matter slightly differently, I must confer ideality upon the face and lineaments of another.

This formulation may seem to grant an exorbitant privilege to the body within the economy of love. However, Lacan not only stresses over and over again in his writings and seminars that the body is the frame within which the subject apprehends both self and other, but he even insists in Seminar VII on the absolute centrality of that term to the operation of idealization, an operation without which there is no love, and no pleasurable identification. “Even in Kant’s time,” he observes, “it is the form of the human body that is presented to us as the limit of the possibilities of the beautiful, as ideal Erscheinun. It once was, though it no longer is, a divine form. It is the cloak of all possible fantasms of human desire. The flowers of desire are contained in this vase whose contours we attempt to define.” Paul Schilder also stresses the centrality of the human body to our notion of beauty, which might be said to represent one of the most important end results of idealization. “We regard beauty as being primarily connected with the beauty of the human body,” he writes; “The problem of beauty is therefore closely linked with the problem of the body-image.” But why is idealization
so intimately connected with the human body?

*Seminar VII* suggests that if the body is "the cloak of all possible fantasms of human desire," that is for fundamentally narcissistic reasons. As the key to a psychoanalytic understanding of idealization, it proposes the subject's relation to its corporeal imago in the mirror stage. *Seminar VII* thereby intimates that idealization is an activity which the subject performs first and foremost in relation to the corporeal image within which he or she most aspires to see him or herself. All other images which are subsequently idealized are somehow related to it. Indeed, to idealize an image is to posit it as a desired mirror. The mirror image derives its preeminent value from its capacity to substitute for what has been lost to the subject through his or her entry into language. Through identification with it, the subject imputes a fictive reality to him- or herself, and thereby elevates the moi to the status of das Ding.

In a passage immediately following the one quoted above, Lacan invokes both the mirror stage and the subject's *mange-à-être*, and insists upon the necessity of conceptualizing them in relation to each other. In so doing, he gives the lie to the notion that the mirror stage could be said in any simple way to "precede" the inauguration of lack. He suggests that the mirror stage plays more of a compensatory role than a preparatory one with respect to lack:

...the body, and especially its image, as I have previously articulated it in the function of narcissism, [is] that which from a certain point of view represents the relationship of man to his second death, the signifier of his desire, his visible desire. (298)

But *Seminar VII* represents the mirror image as more than a conventional pivot for desire. It is also a "mirage" preventing the subject from apprehending his or her fundamental nothingness or "being-for-death," a lure encouraging him or her to pursue endlessly that imaginary plenitude whose unavoidable sequel is the fantasy of bodily fragmentation. The subject's attempt to approximate the ideal image can be read as proof positive of lack. However, it is also through this imago that he or she protects him- or herself against knowledge of that lack. Lacan suggests that the idealizing reflection provided by the real or metaphoric mirror

...both indicates the site of desire insofar as it is desire of nothing, the relationship of man to his lack of being, and prevents that site from being seen. (298)

It is often assumed that a strictly symbolic differentiation provides the only path leading out of the dead-end described in this passage from Lacan, and that such a differentiation is antipathetic both to the image and to ideality. However, *Seminar VII* makes clear that far from discouraging idealization, the symbolic order relies upon it. The symbolic order does not so much impede ideality as exploit and colonize it. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Lacan also makes abundantly evident both in *Seminar VII* and elsewhere that there is no subjectivity without the image, and that idealization represents a vital psychic function. The crucial project is not to move from the imaginary to the symbolic, since there is no "getting out" of the one to the other. The all-important undertaking with respect to the domain of images is to idealize at a distance from the self. To state the matter in terms closer to the present discussion, the goal is to confer ideality upon an image which cannot be even delusorily mapped onto one's sensational body.

For Lacan, this project implies replacing the ideal-ego with the ego-ideal. However, the ego-ideal generally demands the subject's psychic subordination, and his or her allegiance to dominant cultural values, both of which are at odds with the active idealization toward which I gestured in the previous chapter. I will consequently advance a rather different formulation than the one to which Lacan is primarily committed. First, I will attempt to specify in more insistently political terms what it means to idealize. I will also attempt to determine how we might do so not only outside the parameters of the self, but also outside those of normative representation. Finally, I will attempt to elaborate an identificatory model which does not replicate the negative power dynamic instanciated by the relation of the ego to the ego-ideal.

But before exploring how idealization might work to facilitate rather than to render impossible a genuine relation to the other, I would like to offer an extended reading of a film which addresses with great urgency many of the issues raised so far in this book: Ulrike Ottinger's *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (Ticket of No Return). This text dramatizes the difficulties the white female subject is likely to encounter when she takes seriously the cultural imperative imposed upon her to embody an exemplary femininity, and, so, to become the image. It consequently provides a visual and narrative specification of the dangers of self-idealization. It also showcases both the fantasy of bodily decomposition which haunts such a project, and the deadly rivalry which it encourages in the subject vis-à-vis the ideal image, whether human or representational. Through an analysis of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, I hope to make evident how important it is that ideality be dispensed at the greatest possible distance from the self.

**The Ideal-Ego and the Fantasy of the Body in Bits and Pieces:**

At first glance, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (1979) seems to provide an extended illustration of two of the most accepted tenets of feminist film theory. Like the theories of Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, it seems to suggest that there is a certain collapse between woman and the image, and to propose as an
alternative to this specular implosion the masquerade of femininity. Its female protagonist is pathologically obsessed with her own mirror reflection; that reflection engrosses all of her desire, and completely defines her relations to all of the other characters in the film. A long fantasy sequence in the second half of Bildnis, however, shows her assuming in succession a whole range of professional roles, and in the process manipulating the contours of her bodily imago. Here, she seems to have achieved some distance from the mirror, to be detached from the identities which it figures forth. Because of the parodic aspect of the fantasy sequence, this detachment might well be taken for irony, and the images it inflects as a politically enabling masquerade of femininity.

I want to advance a very different reading of Bildnis einer Trinkerin, to show that, from the very beginning, “Madame” (Tabea Blumschein) stands at an irreducible distance from the mirror, and that her pathological relation to her own reflection is the logical extension not of too complete a specular “capta
cion,” but of her inability to accept her exteriority to the idealizing image. I also want to use Ottinger’s film to challenge the larger assumption—which sometimes informs the equation of woman and spectacle—that the female subject stands outside lack, along with the particular reading of psychoanalysis from which that assumption proceeds. Bildnis provides a wide-ranging commentary on what Lacan calls the “imaginary,” on the psychic register that is specific to identification and narcissism, and which the author of Seminar II places in the closest possible relation with the specular. Bildnis tells the story of a woman who abandons her past, and with it her name, in order to dedicate herself uninteruptedly to the adoration and exhibition of herself-as-image. More precisely, it recounts the narrative of a woman who decides to take seriously the impossible mandate which is culturally imposed upon the white female subject: that she conform to the visual specifications of an ideal femininity. Bildnis brilliantly dramatizes the fantasy of bodily disintegration which haunts this project, and the consequent self-hatred into which self-love constantly threatens to devolve. However, it refuses to characterize the imaginary as a “feminine” domain, as a presymbolic space from which woman never fully emerges, or to which she easily regresses from the symbolic order.

Rather, like Lacan’s early seminars, which will figure prominently in the following pages, Bildnis shows the imaginary to be fundamentally reparative, and, hence, unthinkable prior to the subject’s symbolic structuration. It suggests, that is, that the images of an ideal unity within which the subject attempts to locate herself are not only always inflected by meaning, but are also conjurations against the void which is introduced by language. And if the imaginary cannot be thought apart from the symbolic, neither can the symbolic be “entered” without imaginary mediation; it is only through the coordinates of that necessary fiction, the self, as Bildnis shows, that the subject is able to apprehend the other.

The theoretical gendering of the imaginary as “feminine” consequently represents a misrecognition of the part that register plays within all subjectivity. Finally, Ottinger’s fourth feature film takes very seriously both the dangers and impasses to which the logic of the imaginary can lead, and its undeniable seductions, pleasures, and powers—seductions, pleasures, and powers which are at the heart of its own spectatorial appeal.

In “Film and the Masquerade,” Mary Ann Doane claims that for the female spectator, who is here representative of the normative female subject, “there is a certain overpresence of the image—she is the image.” She argues that because of the “closeness” of this relationship, “the female spectator’s desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism—the female look demands a becoming. It thus appears to negate the very distance or gap specified by Metz and Burch as the essential precondition for voyeurism” (22). Although Doane is careful to specify this “overpresence of the image” as a theoretical construction, her own insistence upon the importance of masquerade as a mechanism for opening up an interval between the female spectator and the spectacle confers upon that construction a certain psychic reality, at least within the present symbolic order.

The white protagonist of Bildnis is not introduced in terms of her biographical specificity—we are in fact never given a single concrete detail about her past—but rather in terms of what might be called her “mission.” A disembodied female voice-over characterizes her as someone destined to embody the feminine ideal. It invokes this ideal by enumerating a number of the names with which it has been associated throughout the history of Western representation:

She, a belle of antique grace and raphaëllic harmony, a woman, created like no other to be Medea, Madonna, Beatrice, Iphigenia, Aspasia, decided one sunny winter day to leave La Rotonda. She bought a one-way ticket to Berlin-Tegel.

However, this proliferation of names attests to the impossibility of locating the feminine ideal within any individual woman, even within the realm of literature or art; it can only be conjured forth through a range of mythical figures. The images which accompany the voice-over commentary attest further to the abstract nature of this ideal. Ottinger’s “belle of antique grace and raphaëllic harmony” is not depicted through the specificity of feature or limb, but through the spectacle of swirling red fabric, and the sound of high-heeled shoes tapping with exaggerated precision on a green marble floor.

When we are finally given a close-up of Madame’s face, it is shot through a glass door, as if to stress its distance from actuality. But even this guarded attempt to corporealize the ideal is doomed to failure. Almost immediately, the exquisitely composed image of Madame’s face and raised hand is “liquified” or desta-
bilized by the cleaning woman, who squeezes water out of cloth onto the other side of the door’s transparent surface [figure 1].

This series of shots demands to be read in relation to the project outlined in the opening monologue. There, we are told that Madame is leaving La Rotunda for Berlin because Berlin seems to her a place where she will be able to devote herself uninterruptedly to a very singular goal:

She wanted to forget her past, rather leave it like a ragged house. With heart and soul she wanted to concentrate on one affair. Her affair. To finally follow her destiny was her sole wish. Berlin, foreign to her, appeared to be the right place to live her passion undisturbed. Her passion was to drink, live to drink—a drunken life, life of a drunkard. Upon landing at Berlin-Tegel, her decision had become irrevocable. Inspired by a Berlin folder that was presented to her by a friendly stewardess, she decided to set up a drinking schedule. . . . She decided to do a sort of boozier’s sightseeing, briefly, to use sightseeing for her very private needs. . . . Her plans for a narcissistic worship of loneliness have deepened and intensified to the point where they have entered a stage worthy to be lived, not to risk being lost in realms of phantasy. Now had come the time to let everything come true.

As this commentary makes clear, the object of the passion to which Madame commits herself for the duration of Bildnis is only ostensibly alcohol. The consumption of wine and brandy is really a metaphor for another kind of incorporation, one much more difficult to effect. It is a metaphor, that is, for Madame’s attempt to assimilate or become the specular ideal in relation to which she, like all female subjects, is (negatively) defined. However, whereas for Doane the dilemma of femininity is the excessive proximity of the mirror, for Madame the problem is rather its irreducible distance.

Alcoholism functions as an appropriate metaphor for the project described by the voice-over for two reasons. First of all, the consumption of alcohol leaves behind no permanent “deposit” or residue. It results only in a very transitory and delusory euphoria, which then gives way to a sense of emptiness and loss, and must consequently be endlessly repeated if its effects are to be sustained. Alcohol also lends itself to Ottinger’s purposes because it is a fluid substance. Implicit in the Narcissus myth, as in Ottinger’s retelling of it, is an insistence on the impossibility of the lover’s incorporative desire for the idealized self, and liquidity assumes a privileged role in the articulation of this impossibility. Because the image which engrosses him is reflected in a pool, he cannot embrace it without shattering it.

Lacan provides an important definition of the fragmented body in Seminar I. He suggests that it is “an image essentially dismemerable from its body” (148), that it provides the fantasy through which the subject acknowledges his or her distance from the idealizing representation within which he or she would like to find his or her “self.” It could thus be said that any attempt to enter the impossible frame of that representation leads inexorably, as in the Narcissus legend, to the subject’s “fall” into an image which is the very opposite of the one which is desired: his or her headlong “plunge,” that is, into an image of bodily decomposition.

As we will see, the shot in which water streaks down the window separating Madame’s face from the camera is only the first of many occasions on which her attempt to approximate the status of an exemplary spectacle ultimately leads to an experience of a radical corporeal disintegration. Over and over again, the protagonist of Bildnis ventures into the streets of Berlin in the guise of the image which she wishes to become, only to have that image quickly lose its shape and coherence as she commences her evening of drinking. However, the film never permits the spectator to imagine that he or she stands safely outside the insane project to which Madame devotes herself. It prolongs the moment of méconnaissance long enough to remind us of the jubilation it affords—long enough, that is, to evoke in us once again our own inextinguishable desire to approximate the ideal.

The airport scene provides a witty dramatization of the no-exit logic of the narcissism to which Madame commits herself upon her arrival in Berlin. She is thwarted in her first attempt to leave Tegel by the window washer who stands on the other side of the door. Her second attempt initially meets with no greater success; the electric door in front of which she stands fails to open, and Madame searches in vain for a knob to turn. The claustrophobic binarism which leads relentlessly from the desire for unity to the fantasy of the fragmented body is of course a trademark of the imaginary register. However, Bildnis emphasizes more than once during this scene that although the imaginary promotes closure, it is not itself isolated from the symbolic. Not only does the female voice-over evoke the ideal femininity which Madame seeks to embody with names that are redolent with cultural significance, but she arrives in Berlin at the same time as three
"professional" women in extravagantly styled houndstooth suits.

As their names suggest—Common Sense (Monika von Cube), Social Question (Magdalena Montezuma), and Exact Statistics (Orpha Terminus)—these figures provide parodic representatives of the symbolic order. Although one of their primary functions in the film is to demonstrate the inadequacy of a whole range of social discourses to account for the peculiar pleasures and dangers to which Madame surrenders herself, their presence in virtually every important public scene also speaks to all of the ways in which the symbolic intrudes into the imaginary register. The obsessive conversational return of each of the houndstooth women to the comforting certitudes of her professional discourse also suggests the extension of the imaginary into the symbolic.

The scene following Madame's arrival at Tegel begins with a spectacular shot of her leaving her hotel, which once again stresses the close imbrication of imaginary and symbolic. Dressed in an exquisite black dress and matching hat, with a golden spiral hanging from each ear, she is emphatically situated within the mise-en-scène of her desire, on the side of a hyperbolically idealized image [figure 2]. That image is also classically articulated, organized according to the strictest perspectival principles. At the moment when Madame first comes into sharp focus, she is framed by an ornate interior doorway, and she stays within this frame until she is lost from sight. Even her movement through this doorway fails to disrupt the fictity of the composition, since it is in turn framed by a second doorway. And the interior entrance seems to lead to yet another doorway, which represents a kind of vanishing point. This shot functions as a powerful reminder that, even at its most imaginarily alluring, the field of vision is never free of symbolic definition.

The casino where Madame begins her "sightseeing" tour of Berlin provides the site for one of the film's most explicit repudiations of the heterosexual imperative at the heart of classic cinema. In the elevator leading to the gambling room, a uniformed man attempts without success to interest her, first by exhibiting his card tricks, then by showing her the photos of naked women on the reverse side of the cards. Although here, as in many other scenes in the film, the protagonist of Bildnis functions emphatically as an erotic spectacle, it is not for the benefit of the male look. Her indifference to the uniformed man strips that look of its usual phallic pretensions, not the least of which is its claim to confer meaning on the female body.

A later shot in the same scene again situates Madame beyond the reach of the male scopic drive, and outside the libidinal economy which it conventionally implies. This shot begins with a close-up of her black-gloved hand placing an elegant glass of white wine on the casino table. The contents of this glass, which now occupies the center of the frame, are brilliantly illuminated, gold against a black background. Significantly, however, this light does not radiate outward, but is entirely contained by the contours of the glass, as if—like the protagonist of Bildnis—it shines only for itself. A man's fingers reach from right frame toward Madame's hand, which lies beside her drink. She immediately frees herself from his hold, and slowly lifts the glass to her lips [figure 3]. The glass casts a luminescent reflection on her face and neck, a reflection which is framed and echoed by her long spiral earrings. Lacan suggests in Seminar II that the shadow of the ego always falls upon the object (166). Here, that relation is reversed, attesting to both the initial exteriority of the images through which the ego constitutes itself, and the infinite reversibility of its relation to the object.

The camera shares Madame's indifference to the man's appropriative hand; like her, it never even turns to glance at the man. However, although the feminist spectator might be tempted to offer a lesbian reading of this indifference—a reading which many other scenes in the film support—the shot under discussion points unequivocally in a different direction. Here, Madame is clearly locked in a narcissistic self-embrace. Alcohol is ostensibly an external substance, pointing at least tentatively to the possibility of a libidinal investment in the exterior world. However, the shimmering reflection of the glass on Madame's face and neck makes clear that her relation to its contents is less under the sign of "having" than "being."
When she appears in the ornate double doorway of her hotel prior to leaving for the casino, Madame seems at least momentarily to approximate the image around which her desire revolves. The ensuing cab ride, however, already attests to a certain unravelling of this coherence. Initially, she is located firmly in the back seat of the car, but eventually she projects herself imaginarily into the driver's seat, in the guise of a young white man with a moustache and black leather jacket [figure 4]. Significantly, this masculine masquerade fails to alter the terms of her self-address. What this scene dramatizes is less the production of an ironic distance from the mirror than the conjuration of yet another ideal image of self, this time male rather than female. As is so frequently the case in *Bildnis*, either the image cannot be assumed, or it quickly loses its seductive luster. The fantasmic cab driven by Madame in her capacity as male driver knocks over the cart of Lutze, a homeless white woman, and spills its contents all over the street. This accident provides another demonstration of the inability of the self to contain the images out of which it is ostensibly composed. But here, at least, the specter of disintegration is successfully exteriorized.

![Figure 4](image)

As she leaves the casino, Madame once again encounters Lutze, who helps her into a cab and washes one of its windows with spit and a rag. Like that important series of shots organized around window washing in the airport scene, Lutze's actions serve to liquify or destabilize the image on the other side of the glass. Her face also functions as a kind of alternative mirror. As Lutze wipes the window with her rag, Madame stares intently at her features, even turning to look back when the cab pulls away. This scene clearly positions the wealthy woman in a narcissistic relation to her homeless counterpart. However, this relation differs markedly from that described by Lacan in "The Mirror Stage." Lutze does not provide Madame with an idealized self-image, but with the opposite; she literalizes the fantasy of the body in bits and pieces, which constantly threatens to undermine that image.

Back in her hotel room at the end of her first day in Berlin, Madame resorts once more to alcohol as a device for closing the gap between herself and ideality. Her room has been transformed into a narcissistic shrine: two identical photographs of its occupant in masculine clothing hang on the wall above the bed, each lit by three lights in the shape of votive candles. Madame again positions herself in relation not only to feminine perfection, but also to what might be called "the man she would like to have been." Madame reserves herself the right to approximate each in turn.

The wine Madame consumes facilitates a series of extraordinary fantasies. Because these fantasies are "actualized" at the level of the image, but not the narrative, they dramatize the resistance that the spectacle of woman can offer to the forward movement of the story. Each takes the spectator into what Mulvey calls "a no man's land outside its own time and space," and gives "the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen" (20). Of course, given its larger preoccupation with female specularity, and, most particularly, with those idealized images of femininity which can be neither temporally nor spatially localized, this quality inheres as well in many of the film's other images; this fantasy sequence merely represents its apotheosis.

In the first shot of the sequence, a dwarf (Paul Glauer) stands to the right of an elaborate granite fountain, bowing and gesturing to Madame to approach. She enters from the other side, sits down on the ledge of the fountain, and drinks from its contents [figure 5]. The hyperreal acuity of the sounds made by her approaching footsteps and the placement of her glass on the ledge evoke the clink of ice cubes in a glass. This acoustic version of the alcohol metaphor surfaces again in the next fantasy, where it is given a visual analogue. Here, Madame and the dwarf slowly climb a glass-enclosed stairway [figure 6]. This structure has the shape and the opaque consistency of the glasses conventionally used for iced tea or mint juleps. The third fantasy shows the dwarf, in extreme long-shot, carrying a drink on a tray toward a pagoda, in which Madame sits. She raises the glass to her lips.

![Figure 5](image)

![Figure 6](image)
In the final, and most aesthetically compelling fantasy, Madame and the dwarf ceremonially cross a brook on the round steps provided for that purpose, again producing a sound evocative of ice against glass. Here, as in the other fantasies, her clothing, the music, and the general mise-en-scène connote "the Orient." The dwarf plucks an orange flower from the water and hands it to Madame. She raises it to her lips, her head thrown back voluptuously [figure 7]. Three more shots repeat this gesture, emphasizing the contrast between the intense orange of the flower, the rich black and blue of Madame’s dress, and the exaggerated pallor of her complexion [figures 8, 9, 10].

isolates the activity of drinking from all else. I say "the distance between Madame and the camera," but what is really at issue here is the distance between the protagonist of Bildnis and her ideal imagos. In the first three fantasies, that imagos remains unapproachable, but in the final four shots, Madame moves closer and closer to the desired mirror, until she almost achieves in relation to it that proximity which Doane characterizes as the feminine norm.

Significantly, in the shot immediately preceding the fantasy sequence, Madame is shown lying with her back to the images that hang on the wall above the bed. Consequently, she is not overtly positioned as an external spectator in relation to the ideal she seeks to approximate, which presumably facilitates the imaginary approach to it dramatized by the flower-drinking shots. However, not only are all of the fantasy images marked by a high degree of "unrealism," located in a "no man's time and space"—a place, that is, where no one can actually "be"—but each is emphatically displayed for an implied viewer, who can only be Madame. The final shot of her lifting the flower to her mouth gives way to two scenes in which the axis of vision is much more fully foregrounded, in ways which work to place her once again at an irreducible distance from ideality. Here, Madame is subordinated to the gaze, in her capacity both as spectacle and as look.

The Ideal-Ego and the Fantasy of the Body in Bits and Pieces: 2
The first of the two scenes to foreground the axis of vision does so by deploying the gaze to problematize Madame’s quest to approximate the feminine ideal. In it, she sits at a table in a coffee shop drinking brandy after brandy, her empty glasses ranged in front of her. Here, the ingestion of alcohol offers none of the narcissistic gratification it provides in the fantasy sequence; instead, it is manifestly desperate and obsessional. Madame faces a window, toward which she repeatedly grimaces and gesticulates [figure 11]. At first, she appears to be addressing someone on the other side of the window, but as the scene progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that the window is important less for its transparent properties than its
reflective ones. Madame's gestures and grimaces are not directed to the world outside the restaurant, but to the body in bits and pieces, or—to state the case somewhat differently—to the principle of decomposition which now threatens to gain the upper hand. Significantly, that principle is once again represented by Lutze, who is now placed in an even more intimate psychic relation to Madame than in the cab scene. In the only shot which purports to show what Madame sees when she looks at the window, Lutze pushes her cart toward the restaurant from the rear of the frame, until she stands directly behind the reflection cast on the glass by Madame [figure 12]. This shot not only indicates that the window functions as a mirror in the coffee house scene, but it also incontrovertibly establishes Lutze as the image which that mirror shows.

Significantly, Lutze passes through the window which maintains her exteriority in the cab scene, and into the space where the other woman sits. Madame summons her inside the restaurant, in an explicit acknowledgement of the psychic affinities which link her to the "bag lady." The two women drink several double brandies, but the alcohol again fails to provide Madame with the desired méconnaissance. Finally, in a reversal of the Narcissus legend, she attempts to shatter rather than embrace the mirror. She tosses the contents of a glass of brandy onto the window, much as one might throw something into a pool of water to disrupt the image formed there. As she does so, two other patrons of the coffee shop quickly pull out their cameras. They point them not at Madame or Lutze, who replicates the action of her friend, but at the streaming surface of the window [figure 13]. They thus photograph Madame not as "herself," but in the guise of the image she attempts to efface.

The photographers' action serves as another potent reminder that self-recognition is never a purely imaginary transaction. That transaction involves not only subject and image, represented in the restaurant scene by Madame and the window/Lutze, but also the gaze, which is metaphorized—as it is in Lacan's eleventh seminar—by the camera. The gaze, which can perhaps best be defined as the inscription of Otherness within the field of vision, radically exceeds the human looks through which it often manifests itself. It impresses itself upon us phenomenologically through that sense which we all have at moments of acute self-apprehension of being seen from a position outside ourselves, a position which Bildnis inscribes through the flash of the camera. That experience of specularization constitutes a necessary feature of identification; we can only effect a satisfactory capitulation when we not only see ourselves, but feel ourselves being seen in the shape of a particular image.

I say "particular image" because the gaze does not photograph us directly, but through the cultural representations which intervene between it and us—representations which Lacan calls the "screen."22 Although we often treat these representations as simple mirrors, they do not so much reflect us as cast their reflection upon us. They are carriers of—among other things—sexual, racial, and class difference. For these reasons, the subject does not always occupy the field of vision happily. No image can be comfortably assumed by the subject unless it is affirmed by the gaze, but the gaze does not necessarily photograph the subject in ways that are conducive to pleasure. As is so clearly the case in this scene, the gaze often imposes upon the subject an unwanted identity.

Even before the actual cameras are pointed at the window within which Madame sees herself as a body in bits and pieces, the screen is firmly in place. It manifests itself through a conversation taking place elsewhere in the restaurant. At a certain point in this scene, Common Sense, Social Question, and Exact Statistics enter, and order "Houndstooth" desserts. As they eat their sweets, they engage in a conversation about alcohol abuse. At the precise moment that Madame and Lutze are ejected from the coffee house, one of them provides a verbal gloss on the screen through which those figures have been "photographed": "Disgusting! Women getting drunk in public!"

This commentary serves an extremely important function. It suggests that the image of the fragmented body is no more "authentic" than those within which Madame more jubilantly apprehends herself. In other words, it disposes of any temptation on the part of the spectator to see the restaurant window as the mirror in which Madame discovers her "true" self. Like the spectacle of ideal femininity, that of corporeal disintegration is culturally produced, and projected onto certain bodies by the social gaze. Not surprisingly, then, when Madame apprehends the distance which separates her from that femininity, she visualizes herself in the guise of Lutze. As I stressed in Chapter 1, in our culture, homeless bodies signify the very unravelling of the bodily ego.

The next morning, an unseen hand pushes under Madame's hotel room door a copy of a newspaper with the headline "Wealthy Foreign Lady Raised the Roof at Coffee-House Mohring." When Madame picks up the paper, she discovers that it also features one of the unflattering pictures taken of her the day before. She carries the picture to the mirror, ostensibly to compare it with her reflected
image. But the dissatisfied expression on her face shows that she is unable to separate the two representations. After several more unsuccessful attempts to isolate the mirror image from the newspaper photograph, she throws the contents of a glass of wine against her recalcitrant reflection, in a repetition of the previous day’s action and looks at it once more [figure 14]. Again, Bildnis stresses that there can be no direct access to the “self,” and that even the subject’s relation to the literal mirror involves all kinds of cultural coercions.

The film cuts immediately from this shot to a scene which, although clearly fantastic, is nevertheless curiously embedded in the larger narrative, and which again draws attention to the gaze. This scene begins with the oblique image of a sexually ambiguous figure whistling and gesturing, as if signalling the opening of a circus performance. This is followed by an overhead shot which shows a large auditorium, with a conspicuously empty orchestra space. Five women, all dressed in black, file ceremoniously down the aisle and sit in the front row. A second whistle is heard. Madame enters and is escorted to her seat by the androgynous figure. The camera cuts to a medium shot of the black-clothed women, who turn around en masse to stare at Madame [figure 15]. Their faces have been dramatically made up, as if for a dumb show. The character presiding over this strange “event,” who can now be seen to be an elderly woman, brings Madame a glass and a bottle of champagne. Madame takes a sip of the champagne, and gestures her enthusiasm to her server. Again, the camera cuts away to the five women in the front row, who continue to stare fixedly at the drinking woman. There is a final shot of Madame; she takes another sip from the glass, puts on her dark glasses, and adopts a theatrically spectatorial position [figure 16].

This scene, which might be said to make a spectacle out of spectatorship, demands to be read in relation to the one which follows it. This next scene begins with a close-up of the blue video monitor in Madame’s room. It shows the dwarf carrying a large cooked turkey on a platter into the same room. He stands motionless for several moments, as if displaying the turkey, and then carries it over to the bedside table and bows. The camera then pans away from the monitor to the right, revealing the “actual” night table and turkey. Madame enters the frame, picks up the carving knife that accompanies the bird, and stabs it violently around one of the two images of herself hanging on the wall [figure 17]. Again, that image is illuminated by a bracket of candle-shaped electric lights, as if it were a shrine. Madame is dressed in the same pink satin nightgown that she wears when tossing the wine against the mirror, suggesting that this scene is the continuation of that one.

Whereas in earlier scenes Madame lay with her back to the images on the
wall, she is now manifestly a viewer of them. This unwanted exteriority promotes aggressivity; located at a stubborn distance from the figure standing in front of it, the idealizing representation becomes a threatening rival which must be destroyed. This scene thus dramatizes the “despair” side of what Mulvey characterizes as the “long love affair/despair between image and self-image” (18).

In the auditorium fantasy, the desire for the elimination of the hated rival finds dramatic fulfillment. Again, Madame is positioned as spectator rather than spectacle, but now the stage remains conspicuously empty. This void permits her once again to make a narcissistic claim on ideology, this time from the position of spectatorship. She attempts, in other words, to retreat from peculiarity to vision—to position herself as gaze, and thereby to achieve the narcissistic gratification which is denied her in her capacity as image. But this is an impossible aspiration. The subject always looks from a position within the field of vision. Even when adopting a spectatoral position, in other words, he or she is subordinate to the gaze, which remains outside. The impossibility of Madame’s project is signified in this scene not only by the hyperbolic specularization of her look, but also by the fixed stare of the five black-clad women.

I have interpreted the auditorium scene as though it followed the scene in Madame’s room, but that is not the order decreed by Bildnis. When these two scenes are considered in their actual sequence, the second assumes the status of the spectacle which is called for by the first. The shot that begins with the video monitor and ends with Madame stabbing around her portrait comes as the “reverse” counterpart to the one of her sitting in the auditorium in an attitude of exaggerated scopic anticipation. In the transition from the one to the other, her look is even more emphatically disassociated from the gaze. She is transferred from the seemingly transcendental viewing position of a theater spectator to one in front of the ideal image, a position manifestly defined by exclusion and insufficiency.

The Ideal-Ego and the Fantasy of the Body in Bits and Pieces: 3
Yet another fantasy sequence occurs immediately after Madame and Lutze visit the lesbian bar. In this sequence, Madame aspires to occupy not only the position of the gaze, but also that of the spectacle “photographed” by the gaze. This sequence is initiated by an extreme long shot of Madame sitting in a sky-blue dress on a decorative park bench, symmetrically positioned in front of a bridge over the Spree, and framed by trees. Again, the compositional impulse is classical. The dwarf enters from the left, places a picture of himself on the ground beside the bench, and exits to the left. A close-up of Madame’s left eye follows, accompanied by the click of a camera [figure 18]. This image gives way to six more shots of her sitting in the same place. The camera moves progressively closer to its human subject [figure 19], cutting back between each shot to the close-up of her eye. The last of the eye images introduces a series of six “professional” fantasies. At the end of this series, the frame sequence is repeated in reverse, beginning with a close-up of Madame’s eye, and concluding with an extreme long shot of her sitting on the park bench while the dwarf removes his photograph. In the latter, the dwarf enters from the left, and carries away his portrait.

The close-ups of Madame’s eye that are interspersed between the images of her on the park bench are extremely brief, more like “flashes” than composed images. Like the sound which accompanies them, they suggest the opening and closing of a still camera shutter. Because of the metaphoric value afforded the camera in the restaurant scene, these shots make very evident Madame’s renewed aspiration to occupy the position of the gaze. However, whereas the auditorium scene dramatizes her attempt to abolish the spectacle she cannot inhabit, the situation here is more complicated. The eye/park bench series does not dramatize Madame’s ambition to become a transcendental gaze, outside spectacle, but rather her attempt to occupy the point from which she is “photographed.” She seeks to safeguard the ideality of herself as spectacle by functioning simultaneously as the gaze, thereby imposing a purely imaginary logic on the field of vision.

Once again, Bildnis attests in all kinds of ways not only to the alterity of the gaze, but also to the unavoidable imbrication of imaginary and symbolic. To begin with, in each of the professional fantasies, Madame “performs” not for herself, but for the houndstooth women, who, as I have already suggested, offer a parodic personification of the symbolic order. Moreover, although Madame never produces “embodied” speech in any of these fantasies, each depends in some central way upon a verbal text, whether it be the soliloquy from Hamlet, the outraged monologue a business owner directs toward his recalcitrant secretary, an advertising brochure for coffins, the words of a popular song, or the exclamations of onlookers during a tightrope performance. Sometimes these texts are spoken by a voice-over, and at other times they are spoken by a voice internal to the fiction, but we are never given images uninflected by language. The professional fantasies are also characterized by a certain degree of narrative elab-
oration, which, like the centrality of language and the spectatorial role played by the houndstooth ladies, testifies to the omnipresence of the symbolic.

The eye/bench sequence introduces yet another term that cannot be assimilated to a hermetic narcissism: the photograph which the dwarf places on the ground beside Madame. That photograph does not show the fantasizing subject, but an image seemingly extraneous to her specularization. Nevertheless, its introduction works somehow to precipitate the ensuing sounds and images, suggesting that for Madame—as for the subject described by Lacan—the self is an "other." The images that constitute the moi come from outside, and cannot be "owned."

The figure of the dwarf is an element in excess both of a hermetic narcissism, and a claustral imaginary. Miriam Hansen characterizes that figure as the representative of Madame’s "death wish," and the "master of ceremonies" within the domain of her fantasies. He performs some version of each of these functions in the eye/bench sequence. His appearance in the park both opens and closes that sequence, and the first fantasy begins when he pulls back the curtain from the stage on which Madame will subsequently "deliver" Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. That gesture suggests that the scenes that follow are being ordered or "managed" from another "scene," and that Madame's desires are the desires of the Other. The soliloquy from Hamlet, moreover, immediately introduces a topic which will resurface repeatedly in the professional fantasies, only to be subordinated each time to a concern with "appearances." The first words Madame "speaks" after appearing on the stage are "To be or not to be—that is the question." The subsumption of death to a narcissistic problematic indicates perhaps more strikingly than anything else that the fantasy sequence represents an imaginary displacement of a symbolic problematic.

In his second seminar, Lacan remarks that the fully constituted subject is a dead subject, he or she "engage[s] in the register of life" only from a place "outside life" (90). The Rome discourse also attributes an annihilatory force to the symbolic order; the signifier murders what it designates. And in Seminar XI, Lacan proposes that the subject accedes to language only at the cost of being. He allegorizes the entry into the symbolic as an old-fashioned highway robbery, in which the alternatives are not money or life, but meaning or life. The subject, of course, always chooses meaning, and hence speaks from the domain of death.

However, Lacan writes in the Écrits that "fear of death" is subordinate to "narcissistic fear of damage to one's own body" (28). He thereby underscores the reluctance of the subject to arrive at a conscious acceptance of his or her "being-for-death"—his or her unwillingness, that is, to confront the nothingness or manque-à-être out of which desire issues. The ego represents the primary vehicle of this denial, that through which the subject procures for him or herself an illusory plenitude.

As is so often the case within the psychic domain, we are not dealing here with a simple denial, but with a simultaneous avowal and disavowal. The only ego capable of filling the lack at the heart of subjectivity is the one which affords a "jubilant" self-recognition, and this exemplary unity—which always assumes in the first instance a corporeal form—is impossible to sustain. It inexorably gives way to its antithesis, corporeal decomposition. The body in bits and pieces might thus be said to provide the imaginary construct through which the subject indirectly apprehends both his or her distance from the mirror, and his or her manque-à-être.

The eye/bench fantasy sequence enacts precisely the displacement I have just described. The Hamlet soliloquy offers yet another version of the old-fashioned highway robbery, only here the options are more starkly stated; the alternatives are, quite simply, life and death. But even as this grim choice is articulated, it undergoes an imaginary transfiguration. While listening to the famous monologue, Social Question, Common Sense, and Exact Statistics comment not on the relative merits of the two possibilities it presents, but on Madame's unsuitability for the role she plays. "The lead is totally drunk!" one of them exclaims. Another complains that Hamlet is a "breeches" rather than a female part. Again, attention is deflected away from death to the specular domain, or, to state the case slightly differently, from manque-à-être to the moi.

The subsequent fantasies subordinate death even more fully to a "fear of narcissistic damage to the body." Madame literally falls out of her assigned role in two of these fantasies, dramatically opening up that gap between the subject and its ideal imago which Lacan associates with the fantasy of the fragmented body. In one scene, she loses her balance while attempting to walk a tightrope and plummets to the ground; in another, she rolls unconscious off the hood of a stunt car after it drives through a wall of flames. Bildhuis shows this last fall three times, with virtually identical shots, as if to emphasize the loss of corporeal control. In the remaining fantasies, Madame's fall out of the idealizing frame is more metaphorically rendered. In the scenes in which she represents an advertising consultant, a secretary, a singer, and a coffin salesman, she remains manifestly exterior to the roles she plays. This exteriority is perhaps most strikingly communicated through the sound track; the voices which speak "for" Madame are not synchronized or "married" to her body, but manifestly derive from elsewhere.

Parts of the fantasy sequence might seem to provide precisely that masquerade which Doane presents as an alternative to classic femininity. However, Madame's dislocation from the parts she plays in that sequence is only obscurely and intermittently parodic. For the most part, it does not represent an ironic deformation of the social vnisemblance, or the production of a psychically and politically enabling distance from the images which would otherwise engulf her, but a manifestation of the abyss separating the female subject from an exem-
plary specularity. In other words, it is a signifier of the impasse at the heart of traditional femininity: the impossibility of approximating the images in relation to which one is constantly and inflexibly judged. In this fantasy sequence, as in those which precede it, Bildnis suggests that if the specular domain figures more centrally in conventional female subjectivity than it does in its masculine counterpart, that is not because woman is the image, but because—more than man—she is supposed to be.

The scene which follows immediately after the eye/bench fantasy sequence provides a further caution against a too easy assimilation of that sequence to a masquerade paradigm. In it, an already drunk and slightly dishevelled Madame boards a fish-shaped boat, orders a bottle of wine, and initiates a glass-breaking competition with a group of other passengers. She is abruptly ejected from the boat, and stumbles with her wine bottle along the edge of the Spree to a cheap café, where she finds Lutze and her cart. The two women then wander from bar to bar in an alcoholic haze, a spectacle which constitutes the very opposite of mastery.

The Ideal-Ego and the Fantasy of the Body in Pieces: 4

The next two shot sequences, which represent the events of a single day, but which do not cohere "scenically," offer several more images of an idealized femininity. Significantly, however, Bildnis does not provide the female spectator with easy identificatory access to these images. The first sequence positions Madame in the same frame as Lutze, stressing once again the intimate relation between the ideal image and the fragmented body. Those two figures walk away from the camera, which occupies a fixed, low-angle position, toward the Column of Victory. At a certain moment, they simultaneously—and seemingly involuntarily—drop their purses. In keeping with the metaphoric value consistently attributed to its owner, Lutze's bag spills its contents on the ground. Madame's, on the other hand, remains closed, an apparently sealed unity. Lutze returns for her possessions, but Madame continues walking after dropping hers [figure 20].

A photographer picks up the abandoned purse and follows Madame for a time, as if to return it to her. Eventually, he abandons his pursuit, empties the contents of the bag on the curb, and photographs them one after another. These photographs, which are presented as six brief close-ups, reveal in succession a bottle of medicine, a tube of lipstick, a small pink heart, an address book, a watch, and a pocket knife. As the inclusion of the heart would suggest, these objects represent less another inscription of the fragmented body than a half-humorous catalogue of the elements of Madame's "interiority." If the contents of her psyche can be so easily exteriorized, it is clearly because they derive in the first instance from outside. Once again, then, Bildnis works to deconstruct the notion of the "self."

The six objects found in Madame's handbag testify as much to her symbolic structuration as they do to her imaginary captation. The address book connects her not only to the order of language, but to that of the name and—by implication—kinship. The watch signifies the social and economic regulation of time, and belies any easy relegation of Madame to a presymbolic space. The tube of lipstick offers an obvious synecdoche for woman-as-spectacle or, to be more precise, for all of the feminine props and appurtenances through which the female subject attempts to approximate the ideal image. The pocket knife surfaces again in a closely adjacent scene, where it evokes the aggressivity implicit within the subject's relation to that image. Together with the medicine bottle, the knife represents the culturally induced "malady" at the heart of classic femininity.

In this series of shots, as in the restaurant scene and the final fantasy sequence, the camera clearly represents the gaze. Significantly, it is once again situated at an emphatic remove from Madame's look; it "takes" her from behind, from a position which is inaccessible to her vision. However, although the gaze constitutes both a literal and a metaphoric third term in relation to Madame and Lutze, and so stands outside the insistently dyadic logic through which the imaginary articulates the interactions of self and other, ego and reflection, it is once again shown to play a determinative "backstage" role. And as in the coffee shop scene, it does not "photograph" its object directly, but through a series of intervening images.

Madame makes one final attempt to embody the image of her desire later in the same day. She leaves the bar where she has been drinking with Lutze and walks out into the dark, past a series of shop windows, and down to the pavement below. A spotlight illuminates her as she progresses, and her high heels produce the by-now familiar sound of ice against glass. At the end of this shot, Madame lifts her arms dramatically toward the sky. For a brief moment, she lays claim not only to a generalized ideality, but also to a very specific image from the history of Western representation—the image of Rita Hayworth in a black sheath dress and gloves, singing "Put the blame on Mame."
This citation from Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946) serves a complex function. Although the scene in question inscribes such an idealized feminine eroticism that Hayworth was to feel inadequate to the task of representing it in day-to-day life for ever after, it is constantly on the verge of giving way to the body in bits and pieces. Disintegration haunts *Gilda*'s performance from the very beginning of this scene, and ultimately it triumphs as she begins removing her clothing, and is dragged from the dance floor in a state of masochistic intoxication. The spotlit image of Madame raising her arms to the darkened sky is also placed in the closest possible intimacy with the fragmented body, although here that relation is conveyed formally rather than narratively. This shot is cross-cut with the scene in which Willi and Lutze stagger drunkenly amid the debris surrounding the railroad tracks, and finally embrace incoherently in a ruined glass railway station.

Lest the spectator fail to note the significance of this montage, *Bildnis* cuts from the final shot of Willi and Lutze in the railway station to a medium close-up of Madame's hand reaching into the left of the frame with a knife [figure 21]. The knife casts a theatrical shadow against the wall. Almost immediately, this shot yields to a series of rapid-fire images. First, a shadow of the hand and knife appears against the wall from the left frame, followed by a smaller version of this shadow in the lower right frame. Then, in a jump cut, Madame walks into the frame from the right, her outstretched hand still holding the knife, and crosses over to the corner of the room. She stab the wall around the edges of her shadow with the weapon. This shot gives way first to the shadow image of a hand-held knife striking the wall from the left frame, and then to one of an ambiguous body shadow.

In shot seven of this sequence, the shadow of a second person appears on the left, also with knife in hand. Shot eight reveals the person to be Lutze. Her right arm, which holds the sharpened implement, is dramatically extended, and she is framed by a large shadow. Madame stands next to her, facing away from the camera, one arm protectively lifted. She struggles with Lutze, who says, "It's me, Madame! I'm your only friend, Madame! Stop that rubbish, Madame!" She "combs" her own hair and that of her friend with the knife. Madame faces Lutze acquisitely, and the two embrace.

In this shot sequence, as in that which follows, Madame wears a dress composed primarily of silver foil. She has attempted to close the gap between herself and her ideal imago by literally "putting on" the mirror. However, the dress does not entirely close in the back, and in the final moments of the film this gap will become more and more pronounced. The exaggerated shadows cast on the white wall throughout this sequence also render visible that dislocation of body and image which is for Lacan the very definition of corporeal fragmentation. As before, the exteriority of the idealizing representation provokes violence; in asserting its independence from the desiring subject, the beloved imago becomes a hated rival and must be destroyed. Significantly, the sound of the knife striking the wall is connected acoustically to all the many variations of the sound of ice cubes clinking in a glass; indeed, the ice cubes clinking can be heard in the knife stabs, and vice versa.

The final sequence of *Bildnis* is organized around a text by Peter Rosei. This text, titled "Drinkers," circulates among a series of narratively inconsequential characters, each of whom reads a passage aloud. Ottinger herself initiates this textual relay, in the guise of a derelict alcoholic. Sitting on a bench with a bottle of alcohol, she reads,

> "Wondrous plan: to heighten a pleasure so much that it torments one to death. Lately I talked it over with Lipsky. He meant: 'Our manias are nothing but Erys in the theater of cruelty.' I said: 'So we hate ourselves.' 'Yes,' Lipsky said, 'it's not that bad.'"

This passage makes explicit the metaphoric connection between alcohol and narcissism. It also suggests once again that a libidinal economy organized entirely around the attempt to approximate an ideal imago could more hardly be characterized as "self-hated" than "self-love," since the demands it makes on the subject are impossible to sustain for more than a delusory moment. However, since the "intoxication" of that moment is so extreme that all other pleasures pale by comparison, there is nothing more addictive.

The final section read from the Rosei text also emphasizes the thrill that comes from being lifted even briefly into the rarefied atmosphere of ideality. It compares that experience to planetary travel: "drinkers are travellers," reads a businessman into whose open suitcase Madame has dropped the book, "they're...moved without moving. You pick them up, you give a lift. Can you see the galaxy?" The Rosei text stresses not just the pleasures, but also the life-threatening dangers of this sublation. To identify with ideality is to refuse lack, and with it desire; consequently, it is to turn away from life itself. For this
reason, the Rosell passage concludes, "self-sufficiency could only be ruin[ous]."

The penultimate shot of Bildnis shows Madame lying unconscious on a flight of stairs leading to a train station. Lutze finds her there and attempts to lift her to a standing position. As she does so, a crowd of people rush down the stairs, obscuring the two women from our view. Lutze screams in terror, indicating that Madame has been trampled to death by the crowd. This shot must be read in relation to the one with which the film concludes. In it, Madame walks down a hallway constructed entirely of mirrors in her silver-foil dress [Figure 22]. As she proceeds, she crushes her own reflection underfoot. This shot, which has no narrative locus, repeats the one which precedes it at a metacritical level. It thus makes clear that Madame’s death is less literal than symbolic—the event outside the train station is to be understood not as her physical demise, but as a signifier for her full and final surrender to the morbidity of that psychic trajectory which leads from self-idealization to self-disgust. Madame’s destruction of the many mirrors which reflect her image back to her in the final shot of the film is only the most dramatic instance of that aggressivity toward the ideal image which follows inexorably from the aspiration to ideality, here brilliantly indexed through the silver-foil dress.

Figure 22

Bildnis einer Trinkerin dramatizes vividly the closed logic of the psychic loop which leads from the aspiration to ideality to the fantasy of the body in pieces, and back again. However, it has nothing to say about how we might break out of this closed logic, and into a relational field which includes the other. It also affords us no alternative model for conceptualizing how idealization might work. We are left with the sense that its operations always annihilate the other and the self alternately, that having once exalted an object, the subject will first attempt to murder it so as to take its place, and then fall in turn into radical self-disarray.

The Ego-ideal

It would be a grave mistake to assume that the psychic condition dramatized by Bildnis represents an isolated malady, or even one specific to femininity. The imaginary register is as central to human subjectivity as is language. Lacan maintains that the world can be seen only on the other side of the mirror stage, and that long after that "event" the bodily ego continues to provide each of us with "the very framework of [our] categories, of [our] apprehension of the world" (I, 282).

I indicated earlier in this chapter that for Lacan love always necessitates an imaginary facilitation (I, 122), but it is now necessary to make an even more global claim on his behalf: there can be no relation to the other except through the frame of the ego. As Lacan remarks in Seminar I, "the object relation must always submit to the narcissistic framework and be inscribed in it" (174). Finally, the relation between the subject and language—the relation, that is, through which lack is installed—will always "pass via the intermediary of these imaginary substrates, the ego and the other, which constitute the imaginary foundation of the object" (II, 323).

As we have seen, this means that the subject often attempts to avoid confronting his or her manque-à-être by attempting to diminish the distance between the sensational body and ideal images. However, it also implies that even for the subject who knows him or herself to be both “nothing” and “nowhere,” there can be no sustainable existence without those idealizing (and hence narcissistically inflected) representations through which we attempt to give feature and substance to our ultimately unspecified desire. This is not only because life would be barren and the relational inconceivable without ideality, but because—as I will explain later in this chapter—the articulation of desire is precisely what maintains the subject at a distance from das Ding, and inscribes him or her as lacking.

But although Lacan suggests that without such representations the subject would not be a “man” but a “moon,” he characterizes as a “madman” someone “who adheres to the imaginary, purely and simply” (II, 243). For such a person, the other has only a fleeting existence, since it is no sooner apprehended than it is either repudiated or assimilated as “self.” The world of objects, in other words, has no temporal consistency, hence no real existence (II, 169). For Lacan, the subject gains access to objects which persist over time only through the mediation of the ego-ideal.

At times, Lacan associates the ego-ideal almost exclusively with language. In Seminar I, he defines it as both the “legal exchange which can only be embodied in the verbal exchange between human beings” (141), and as “the other as speaking, the other in so far as he has a symbolic relation to me” (142). He associates it, that is, both with that linguistic signifier which creates the “time” or temporal stability of the object, and with the recognition of the other as a subject. Although “recognition” here resonates in all kinds of ways with Kojève’s reading of Hegel, it ostensibly represents a step beyond that imaginary impasse
which Lacan associates with the master/slave dialectic: it supposedly implies the mutual affirmation of the other as an other on the part of two subjects—their joint acknowledgment of their equality before the Law (177).

However, Lacan also suggests in Seminar I that the ego-ideal needs to be conceptualized in relation to the ideal-ego, which it in certain respects resembles, and from which it in other respects differs (142). He goes on immediately in the same passage to talk about the domain of visual representation as that within which both this difference and this similarity are registered. The passage in question serves as a useful reminder that, like the ideal-ego, the ego-ideal is in the first instance an idealized image of the body. It consists among other things of a corporeal representation or set of representations constituting at the very least a subcultural, and more often a broadly cultural, standard.

Finally, Lacan maintains that the ego-ideal is a “guide” to an ethical relation to the other. This claim is not so easy to reconcile with the notion of the ego-ideal as an idealized image of the body, but obviously warrants the closest possible attention in the present discussion. In order to arrive at a clearer sense as to how the ego-ideal can for Lacan be simultaneously an idealized image of the body and an ethical guide to the other, we need a more precise definition of the connection between idealization and identification. We also need to ascertain in precisely what sense the subject identifies with the ideal image which constitutes the ego-ideal.

Identification can clearly occur without idealization. The first of those psychic operations often assumes not only imaginary, but also symbolic or structural forms; the subject can identify not only with an image, but also with a position or “place.” In addition, identification can come powerfully into play—as Chapter 6 will suggest—specifically around the distance separating two subjects from identity. However, idealization cannot be thought apart from identification. Indeed, drawing upon Freud’s “On Narcissism” and Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, I would like to suggest that they are two sides of the same operation. We cannot idealize an object without at the same time identifying with it.

Identification always follows close on the heels of idealization because idealization refers back to the subject’s bodily ego. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, all ideal images are linked to the first and most important of those images, the specular image. Through idealization, the subject also posits an object as capable of filling the void at the heart of his or her psyche, which puts him or her in a definitionally identificatory relation to it. Freud makes the same point in slightly different terms. In “On Narcissism,” he writes, “What man projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood” (94). And in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, he maintains that when we idealize an image or an object, “a considerable amount of narcissistic libido overflows on to it.... We love it on account of the perfections which

we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism” (112–13).

But identification can take two forms in relation to the idealized object: it can acknowledge that object’s separateness, or it can seek to abolish it. As we have seen, during the rare moments that it can be sustained, the second of these forms of identification results in jubilation. The subject establishes such an intimate imaginary relation with the ideal image or other as to believe him- or herself to be ideal. The first of these forms of identification is specific to the condition of love, in the most profound and generous sense of that word. It implies forming an imaginary alignment with bodily coordinates which cannot be assimilated to one’s own.

Freud also makes clear in Group Psychology that whereas the aspiration to become the ideal is idiopathic or incorporative in nature, love—which for him entails the externalization of the ego-ideal—is fundamentally heteropathic or exorciative. He describes the successful alignment of the subject’s sensational ego with an idealized image or object as involving an “introjection,” and as leading to a state of enrichment (113). In love, on the other hand, the subject “surrender[s] itself to the object,” resulting in the “impoverishment” of the ego.

I would like to suggest that the diminution of the ego, which for Freud is coincident with love, should not be understood as referring in the first instance to the subordination of the lover to the beloved. When read through Lacan, this passage can be seen to designate in some more fundamental sense the productive dissipation of the “mirage” concealing lack which the love relation facilitates. In other words, the “shrinking” of the ego can be grasped less as a necessary “surrender to the object” than as the clearing of the narcissistic mist which generally prevents the subject from accepting that he or she desires out of an irreducible void. The apprehension of this enabling void as an inadequacy vis-à-vis the other results only when the latter is conversely exalted as substantially ideal, when he or she is assumed to possess the wholeness and unity of which the subject is deprived. The “impoverishment of the ego” assumes a negative value, in other words, when the object is passively idealized. I will suggest later that the object can instead be actively idealized.

The subject’s relation to the ego-ideal also turns upon an exorcitative identification. Like the love object, the ego-ideal represents an unassimilable ideal. Indeed, the ego-ideal implies—and is even created through—the idealization of a bodily image which is to varying degrees different from what the subject sees when he or she looks in the mirror. At the same time, it is the mirror within which he or she would like to see him or herself. It might thus be said to provide identity-at-a-distance, much like the exteroceptive mae in the Wallonian mirror stage. It is for this reason, I would argue, that Lacan privileges the ego-ideal. In Lacan’s account, the ego-ideal provides an ethical guide to the other.
because it shows that that relation depends on the location of ideality outside the confines of the self.

The fact that I have spent so much time clarifying the argument through which Lacan represents the ego-ideal as an ethical guide to the other should not be taken as implying that I agree with it. Crucial as the category of the ego-ideal is to the theorization of an excorporative or heteropathic identification, it fails in other respects to model the terms of an exemplary relation to the other.

First of all, that psychic entity does not always work to promote the absolute disjunction of sensational body and visual image for which I argued in Chapter I. Although the establishment of the ego-ideal opens up a psychically salutary gap between the subject and the image, it does not necessarily imply either an acceptance of corporeal heterogeneity, or identification outside the narrow limits of what is culturally valorized. As Freud suggests in "On Narcissism," there is usually a close convergence between the ego-ideal and the values of the larger culture within which it is formed (101). Certain corporeal indices are consequently likely to be privileged at the level of the psyche, regardless of a given subject's gender, race, and class. It may consequently result in certain cases (such as that of a white man, whose ego-ideal is likely to be both white and masculine) in the idealization of corporeal parameters which are only slightly divergent from those of the bodily ego. In others (such as that of the black male subject described by Fanon, whose ego-ideal is white and masculine), it may lead to the idealization of corporeal parameters which, although sharply divergent from those of the bodily ego, are in keeping with normative representation.

The ego-ideal also represents a problematic model through which to conceptualize identity-at-a-distance because the subject's relationship to it represents only an inverted version of that affective tie which Lacan calls "imaginary love." Within the latter, as I have already indicated, the subject seeks to capitate the other, to be to him or her the image to which he or she is in thrall. In the relation between the subject and the ego-ideal, this situation is reversed. The subject remains at a distance both from the ego-ideal and those others who at times actualize it for him or her not only because the latter are marked by alterity, but because the subject also feels him- or herself so enamored of—though so inadequate to—the norm they represent.

Lacan comments on this unfortunate power dynamic in Seminar VII. "The [ego-ideal] makes room for itself alone," he observes, "within the subject it gives form to something which is preferred and to which it will henceforth submit...[i]t places the subject in a state of dependence relative to an idealized, forced image of itself" (98). He makes the same point about the love object in a passage from Seminar I in which he comments on the externalization of the ego-ideal in love: "The loved object, when invested in love, is, through its captivating effect on the subject, strictly equivalent to the ego-ideal," he remarks. "It is for this reason that, in suggestion, in hypnosis, we encounter the state of dependency, such an important economic function, in which there is a genuine perversion of reality through the fascination with the loved object and its overestimation" (126).

Lacan makes clear that the ideality which the subject confers upon the ego-ideal or its representative is not freely given—it is more the recognition which the slave accords the master than that through which one subject recognizes another as separate from him- or herself. Lacan also suggests that the subject imputes an absolute reality to that ideality, that he or she believes the construct in question to be essentially perfect. In both cases, then, the subject once again idealizes passively. Since what is thereby idealized is generally a normative set of bodily and other values, this naturalization is doubly problematic.

The Gift of Love

In Seminar I, Lacan alludes briefly to another model of heteropathic identification, one which lends itself much more fully to the ethical-political project of this book. In that text, he counterposes to imaginary love a very different relation to the other, which he designates "the active gift of love." In the passage in question, Lacan maintains that such a love is always directed "towards the being of the loved subject, towards his particularity" (276). He thereby suggests that it is predicated on the perception of the other as a subject, rather than an object, and as separate from, rather than an extension of, the self. But Lacan does not indicate what precisely the loving subject might be said to "give" to this other. He also neglects to clarify the role played within this libidinal economy by the image.

The active gift of love is never adequately theorized by Lacan. However, some of his later Seminars specify at least some of the parameters within which such a theorization should take place. I therefore propose to begin my elaboration of that affective relation by looking at the relevant passages from Seminar VII and Seminar XI. Later, I will indicate the points at which my own notion of the active gift of love altogether exceeds the Lacanian paradigm.

Although Seminar VII does not mention the active gift of love, it does refer to the gift of love (150). Significantly, it links the gift of love not only to idealization, but to sublimation as well. Indeed, Lacan suggests that where there is sublimation there is also idealization. He illustrates what he means by the gift of love with an extended discussion of courtly love (139–54); in that discussion, he associates courtly love with an "idealizing exaltation" (151). A page earlier, he also suggests that courtly love—and, by implication, the active gift of love—is an instance of sublimation (150).

Before engaging with Seminar VII in a more detailed way, it is crucial that we understand that Lacan presents sublimation there in very different terms from those made familiar by Freud. In his essay on narcissism, Freud argues that ide-
alization needs to be differentiated from sublimation, with which it is often confused. Idealization is something that happens to the object of a drive; sublimation is something that happens to the aim of a drive (94). Idealization, that is, involves the exaltation of an object, while sublimation involves the deflection of the drive away from a sexual to a more culturally esteemed aim.

However, whereas Freud rigorously distinguishes sublimation from idealization, Lacan suggests that sublimation produces one form of idealization. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that to sublimate is to confer ideality upon an object, in contradiction to the self—or, to state the case more precisely, in contradiction to that image or object which one attempts to assimilate to the self. Sublimation in Lacan also has nothing to do with desexualization; it can coexist with absolute carnality (161).  

In Seminar VII, Lacan suggests that sublimation inheres in the displacement away from das Ding to die Sache (112), in the shift away from the impossible nonobject of desire which is produced with the entry into language and the "fading" of the real to a nameable and specifiable object. Otherwise stated, he proposes that it involves the elevation of a thing to the status of the Thing. He thus equates it with that process whereby something is posited as the object capable of making good the subject's lack, with the activity whereby the desire for something which has neither face nor name is given imaginary lineaments. When one treats an object in this way, one of course idealizes it. To sublimate is thus to confer ideality on that someone or something through which the subject articulates his or her ineffable desire.

It is vital to my own theorization of the active gift of love that sublimation be understood not only as the conferral of ideality upon an object, but also as idealization, and so identification, at a distance from the self. When the subject sublimates, he or she agrees to posit the other rather than the self as the cause of desire—to see perfection in the features of another. A number of passages from Seminar VII and Seminar XI suggest as much, albeit indirectly.

In the passage in which Lacan encourages us to equate the gift of love with sublimation, he once again indicates that the former, like the latter, is somehow bound up with that "primary symbolization" through which the subject names his or her fundamentally unnameable desire (150), and thereby confers ideality upon it. However, this time he goes further. By putting an object in the place of das Ding, sublimation or the gift of love consolidates that operation which Lacan elsewhere characterizes as primal repression or the entry into language. Crucially, what is at issue here is more than the plugging of the hole through which the real might otherwise flood back into the psyche with representations of what has been lost through primal repression. Sublimation or the gift of love also delegates that representative function to signifiers capable of directing the subject away from his or her "self" to the other. It transfers ideality from the first to the second of those terms, a displacement which is crucial to the assumption of lack, and—by implication—of desire.

Seminar XII twice stresses that sublimation is an operation turning upon the object rather than the ego. At one point, Lacan quotes Freud approvingly as saying that sublimation concerns object rather than ego libido (95). Since, as even the casual reader of Freud knows, libido is neither inherently narcissistic nor altruistic, but capable of being invested either in the object or the ego, what this really means is that sublimation works to the "credit" or enrichment of the object rather than the ego. A few pages later, Lacan suggests that sublimation is also somehow a way out of the no-exit logic so richly dramatized by Bildnis einer Trinkerin (98). It is a mechanism for getting beyond what he calls the "mirage relation" to the object, in which the latter "introduces itself only insofar as it is perpetually interchangeable with the love that the subject has for its own image" (98), and into a more productive interaction with that object.

In the "Drives and Lures" section of Seminar VII, Lacan indicates again that to elevate an object to the status of the Thing is to constitute it as an objet a (99). In the same passage, he proposes that the psychic operation whereby the subject installs die Sache in the place of das Ding can be designated through the algorithm for fantasy, $\xi \omega \alpha$, an algorithm which he elsewhere decodes as the desire of the lacking subject ( $\xi$ ) of or for ( $\omega$ ) the object which stands in for das Ding or "being" ( $\alpha$ ).  

Although Seminar XI is not concerned with sublimation per se, it addresses at great length the relation of the subject to the objet a in the transaction implied by $\xi \omega \alpha$, and the terms in which it does so are absolutely crucial to an understanding of the gift of love. In that text, Lacan proposes a slightly different schematization for what Seminar VII calls "sublimation," one better calculated to show that the sublimating subject never really takes possession of the objet a, but respects its separateness. The schematization, which designates the itinerary of the drive, is a loop. Inside that loop is situated the objet a:
This diagram shows the progression of the drive from its source in the rimlike opening of an erotogenic zone toward and around the objet a, and back once again to that opening. It consists of an outward and a backward movement, designated in the $C$ $D$ algorithm by $C$ and $D$, respectively (209). Although it might seem that the drive here traces a hermetic trajectory, returning punctually to the point from which it begins, the subject attains through that trajectory what Lacan calls “heterogeneity” or the “dimension of the capital Other” (194). Through the loop diagrammed above, the subject travels away from himself or herself toward what resides outside.

It is also important to understand that the subject returns from this journey with “empty hands.” His or her hands are empty not only because the return journey is made without the objet a, but because the outward journey is synonymous with a certain bequest, which has been made at the expense of the self, with the conferral of ideality on the objet a. And since that object by definition represents what the subject lacks, the return journey might also be said to inscribe the subject as “barred” ($|$) or insufficient unto him- or herself. As Lacan puts it at one point, “the subject sees himself caused as a lack by a” (270), or, several pages earlier, “Through the function of the objet a, the subject separates himself off, ceases to be linked to the vacillation of being” (258).34

At this point, it would seem crucial to reiterate once again that although sublimation or the gift of love concerns the object rather than the ego, it does not involve merely the substitution of love for identification. The gift of love is loving in the most profound sense of the word, not because it abolishes identification, but because it involves idealization, and hence identification, at a distance from the self—because it strives to keep the cherished “image” outside.

Lacan associates the gift of love with heteropathic identification in Seminar VII. In a key passage from that text, he acknowledges that courtly love—his primary example of the gift of love—is “fundamentally narcissistic in character” (151). He thereby indicates that, due to the attractions which have been conferred upon the object, even here, the subject cannot help but place him- or herself in an identificatory relation to it. However, he maintains that this “mirror function” is anamorphic or off-center—it does not work according to the usual incorporative logic. Two paragraphs later, he goes on to clarify why: courtly love defined the lady as unapproachable; it radically isolated the idealizing lover from the object of his idealization.35

Even more explicitly and axiomatically, Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis associates the loop around the objet a with an identification “of a strangely different kind” from that which obtains within the conventional narcissistic relation (257). At one point in that text, Lacan specifies this identification in terms which contrast strikingly with those conventionally deployed not only in the essay on the mirror stage, but in Freud’s Totem and Taboo. Whereas identification normally operates cannibalistically to annihilate the otherness of the other, sublimation or the active gift of love works to inhibit any such incorporation by maintaining the object at an uncrossable distance. The objet a is “presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were” (270). The only possible identificatory relation is excorporative.

Making the Gift of Love Active

Now that we have established that the gift of love involves idealization and, therefore, identification at a distance from the self, let us attempt to determine precisely what it might mean for the latter to be “active.” I suggested above that passive idealization involves misrecognizing the ideality which one has conferred upon the other as the other’s essence. The gift of love must consequently be “active” in the first sense of that word when it somehow inhibits this substantialization, when it prevents the concealing of ideality into an intrinsic quality of the beloved. This gloss on “active” is also available in Lacan.

Seminar VII proposes that sublimation is in its most exemplary forms not only part of that process through which “emptiness” is produced in the subject, but is itself an organization which implies emptiness:

In every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative.... All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness.... Religion in all its forms consists of avoiding this emptiness.... Yet although the whole ceremonial phase of the body of religious practices... enters into this framework... the emptiness remains in the center, and that is precisely why sublimation is involved.

In an extremely unfortunate recourse to anatomy, Lacan proposes that in the case of courtly love the inscription of emptiness might be said to have resided at the site of the female genitals (168–69). However, elsewhere in Seminar VII, he suggests a much more interesting account of how a particular act of sublimation might work not only to produce, but also to point to emptiness. In that passage, Lacan maintains that the object which is elevated to the status of the Thing should both stand in for the Thing and indicate its own purely substitutive character—it should render the Thing “both present and absent [my emphasis]” (141). He hereby encourages us to think of the luster which the subject confers upon another through the active gift of love as something which does not seamlessly adhere to the other, but—unlike that which illuminates the ideal-ego or the ego-ideal—retains a borrowed and provisional quality.

Lacan dramatizes the gap between the loved other and the ideality which the subject imparts to him or her through his primary example of sublimation, courtly love. He indicates first of all that the cult of courtly love installed the
lady in a position which was startlingly divergent from that to which she was socially confined. He thereby inadvertently gestures toward the possibility of idealizing outside the normative parameters of the screen, a point to which I will return. Lacan also suggests that although it transformed relations between the sexes, courtly love made no attempt to effect a close match between the images through which it exalted the lady and the physical attributes of the real women who benefited from this exaltation:

[the lady] is presented with depersonalized characteristics. As a result, writers have noted that all the poets seem to be addressing the same person.

The fact that on occasion her body is described as granta déplend e gen—that means that plumpness was part of the sex appeal of the period, e gen signifying gracefulness—should not deceive you, since she is always described in that way. (149)

Once again, the ideality conferred upon the other through this most exemplary of all sublimations is described as fitting the other more like a draped toga than a luminous skin.36

Thus, whereas the subject classically prostrates him- or herself before the ego-ideal or its human substitute, and responds to the latter as something intrinsically exalted, to give someone the active gift of love implies assuming a productive relation to him or her. It means not only to "crystallize" the other, as Stendhal would say37—to encrust that other with the diamonds of ideality—but to do so knowingly, and without forgetting for a moment that he or she is also a subject marked by lack. The active gift of love consequently implies both idealizing beyond the parameters of the "self," and doing so with a full understanding of one's own creative participation with respect to the end result. It means to confer ideality, not to find it. Lacan further stresses that such a relationship involves generosity, but not subordination, when he remarks in Seminar I that although the actively loving subject can "accept to such a great extent" the "weaknesses," "detours," and "errors" of the other, "there is a point at which (his or her generosity) comes to a halt, a point which is only located in relation to being—when the loved being goes too far in his betrayal of himself and persists in self-deception, love can no longer follow" (276).

The adjectives "active" and "passive" can be construed in a completely other sense as well, one more germane to the field of vision elaborated in Chapter 1 than to Lacan's dispersed remarks upon the gift of love. The loving subject can subordinate him- or herself not only to that other to whom he or she gives the gift of love, but to the restrictive mandates of the cultural screen. This second dependency is perhaps even more problematic than the first. "Active," on the other hand, might be said to qualify most profoundly that process of idealization which, rather than blindly and involuntarily conforming to what the cultural screen mandates as "ideal," lights up with a glittering radiance bodies long accustomed to a forced alignment with debased images. This active process of idealization conjures into existence something genuinely "new," as did the courtly lover when he idealized his lady.

I want to pause here briefly to indicate that it is very difficult for the gift of love to be given actively in the first of the ways I have just specified when it is not also given actively in the second. Every culture attempts to map out in advance which objects can be raised to the status of the Thing, to "colonize the field of das Ding with imaginary schemes," as Lacan puts it in Seminar VII. It is consequently in "forms that are historically and socially specific" that the objet a usually presents itself to the subject (99). However, an ideal remains lifeless until it has also been libidoinally validated. The libidoinal process through which such a validation occurs is of course idealization.

It is because the psychic operation is necessary to ratify the cultural one that there can be sõch energetic contestation around the values at the heart of a given society. This is what permits those values to be questioned, even derealized, and others affirmed in their place. However, when an object is validated at the level of the psyche as well as the screen, it exercises an almost irresistible reality-effect; all too easily, it assumes the status of something intrinsically or essentially ideal, before which the idealizing subject must subordinate him- or herself. The result is very different when we libidoinally valorize an object which does not enjoy an equivalent cultural legitimation. Here, the resulting ideality is not prone to a similar naturalization, and is thus more easily sustained in the mode of a bequest.

As should be clear by now, the active gift of love represents more than an alternative model of romantic passion to that described by Freud, in which the loved other comes to take the place of the ego-ideal. It is first and foremost an account of how identification, that psychic operation without which there would be no subject, no world, and no possible relation to the other, might work outside the libidoinal economy which Lacan associates with the master/slave relationship. In other words, it is an account of how identification might function in a way that results in neither the triumph of self-sameness, nor craven submission to an exteriorized but essentialized ideal. As it has been elaborated here, the active gift of love also provides the basis for conceptualizing how we might idealize outside the narrow mandates of the screen; how we might put ourselves in a positive identificatory relation to bodies which we have been taught to abhor and repudiate.

But how, precisely, does one give the active gift of love? Here, Lacan is often less than helpful—in fact, I would go so far as to suggest that he can be positively misleading. At times, he speaks about that psychic transaction as though it could be voluntarily effected, as if idealization could be somehow consciously
and volitionally "steered." At other times, he seems to propose that this particular variety of sublimation, which involves the foregrounding of the image as a signifier, could be effected entirely unconsciously. Both of these assumptions seem to me incorrect.

First of all, idealization is not something which any of us can simply decree. It is an activity which extends deep into the unconscious, and cannot be consciously mandated. Second, the gift of love cannot be actively given at the level of the unconscious, since no unconscious act of idealization is capable of inscribing itself in the guise of an investiture, or Belehnung; the unconscious always substantializes, treating representations as things, and appendages as essences. The "active" moment in the gift of love can only occur at a conscious level, because it implies epistemological access to what would otherwise remain occluded in the mists of the imaginary—the coming of the subject to the knowledge that if something dazzles him or her, that is because he or she has rendered it dazzling. And as Freud observes in The Ego and the Id, "All our knowledge is invariably bound up with consciousness." 38

Within the domain of individual human subjectivity, the adjective "active" can consequently only be understood to qualify the gift of love according to the logic of a deferred action, or Nachträchtigkeit. We cannot confer that gift actively, but we can come to be in an active relation to it after the fact; at a conscious level, in other words, we can affirm our productivity with respect to what we unconsciously idealize, and thereby desubstantialize the latter in our waking, if not in our sleeping life. This is a finite notion of agency, but one whose reverberations could be made to resound within the entire field of a given subject's interpersonal relations.

While I in no way want to understate the importance of this ethical project, it should be clear that it satisfies the meaning of "active" in only one of the senses enumerated above. How can the gift of love come to be active in the second, and ultimately more radical sense? How, that is, can we learn to idealize not only consciously but unconsciously outside the narrow confines of what is culturally decreed to be "ideal"? How can we be brought at the most profound level of our psyches to confer an imaginary luster on bodies which are culturally profoundly devalued?

I stress the normative nature of unconscious idealization because it is unfortunately the case that the subject more often than not libidinally affirms what is culturally valorized. As I emphasized earlier, the objects which are repeatedly represented by a particular society as "the ideal" can exercise an almost irresistible attraction. Thus, the project I am calling for necessarily exceeds the limits of the purely ethical; it necessitates a political intervention into the domain where our culture "colonizes" das Ding. But what is that field?

Lacan suggests that it is through textual production, specifically in its visual or "imaginary forms," that the subject is encouraged to idealize certain corporeal parameters over others. As he puts it in Seminar VII, it is through the fantasies produced by "artists, artisans, designers of dresses and hats, and the creators of imaginary forms in general" that certain bodies come to seem worthier of our libidinal affirmation than others (99). Although in 1995 we would be likelier to name cinema, television, and photography as the primary contributors to our cultural screen, most of us would not dispute the overarching logic of this formulation. The conclusion which we are encouraged to draw is stunning in its simplicity: if it is through textual production, especially in its visual or imaginary forms, that the subject is encouraged to idealize certain bodily parameters, it can only be through the creation and circulation of alternative images and words that he or she can be given access to new identificatory coordinates.

Consequently, I would like to suggest that the gift of love can only be active in all of the ways I have specified as a result of a ceaseless textual intervention. The textual intervention I have in mind is one which would "light up" dark corners of the cultural screen, and thereby make it possible for us to identify both consciously and unconsciously with bodies which we would otherwise reject with horror and contempt. It would also inhibit our attempt to assimilate those coordinates to our own in order to "become" the ideal image. Finally, it would bring us to a conscious knowledge of both the purely provisional nature of the illuminated image, and our own capacity to turn the light on or off.
lable to my own argument. Mary Ann Doane also argues for the greater spectatorial mobility of the female spectator in "Film and the Masquerade," in Femmes Fatales, pp. 24–25.

(61) This would seem to be the moment to indicate that within the context of a particular subculture, the gaze might be capable of producing a different "photograph" than that which comes into play at the larger cultural level, and so of sometimes sustaining an identification which would be at other times impossible.


(63) Once again, a subcultural gaze might provide more support for this identification than that provided by the larger culture.

Chapter Two: From the Ideal-Ego to the Active Gift of Love


(2) As will become evident later, I am echoing here the formulation with which Lacan defines sublimation in Seminar VII: the elevation of a thing to the status of das Ding. I will be arguing that sublimation and idealization are even more intimately linked in Lacan than they are in Freud, and that the first of these operations does not necessarily involve a deinsexualization.


(7) Ibid., p. 223.

(8) In "The Freudian Thing," Lacan writes that the "identification precipitated from the ego to the other in the subject" classically "has the effect that this apportionment of functions never constitutes even a kinetic harmony, but is established on the permanent 'you or I' of a war" (Écrits, 138). For a discussion of this binary logic, see also The Seminar, Book II, p. 169; and Chapter 6 of my Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York: Routledge, 1992).

(9) In Seminar I, for instance, Lacan observes, "The subject originally locates and recognizes desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being. It's exactly at that moment that the human being's consciousness, in the form of consciousness of self, distinguishes itself. It is in so far as his desire has gone over to the other side that he assimilates himself to the body of the other and recognizes himself as body" (147).


(12) I do not mean to suggest that the formulations advanced by these two theorists are in all respects commensurate. Laura Mulvey's concern is with the positioning of woman as spectacle within classic cinema (see "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Visual and Other Pleasures [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989], pp. 14–26). Mary Ann Doane addresses rather what she sees as the psychic proximity of the female subject, particularly of the female spectator, to the image—her lack of symbolic differentiation from it (see The Desire To Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]; and "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis [New York: Routledge, 1991], pp. 33–43).

(13) This argument derives primarily from Doane's "Film and the Masquerade," pp. 24–26. But Mulvey also talks about female transvestitism in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'" inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun," in Visual and Other Pleasures, pp. 29–38. For an engagement with the second of these formulations, see Chapter 1.

(14) Again, within film studies, it is primarily Doane who has articulated the argument that woman stands outside lack. See, in addition to the texts cited above, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in Femmes Fatales, pp. 165–177.

(15) Lacan there observes that "Bilder [images] means imaginary" (137).

(16) I am arguing in some crucial respects against Doane's formulation. However, it would seem important to acknowledge that whatever the differences in our models with respect to how we account for the dilemmas of normative femininity, we are agreed in arguing that they can only be overcome if the female subject accepts her distance from the representations which define her. See Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," pp. 22–26.

(17) For a discussion of the cinematic conventions surrounding the male look, see Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

(18) Although Bildnis does not seem to me to be a film primarily about lesbian desire, it clearly contains many lesbian tropes and locations, and even a number of manifestly lesbian characters. Judith Mayne offers an excellent formulation of this apparent contradiction in The Woman at the Keyhole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Mayne suggests that although Madame is herself narcissistic rather than lesbian, she circulates primarily within a world of women, one which is often transacted by lesbian desire: "The woman drinker appears to live
entirely and exclusively within the narcissistic world of her own regressive fantasies, but female figures of social marginality function, however briefly and tangentially, as marks of otherness and signs of fascination. On the other end of the social spectrum, the film is equally taken up with how Blumschein's woman drinker tantalizes and even challenges the less obviously narcissistic but equally self-enclosed world of the three houndstooth ladies. Lutze fascinates the woman drinker in some of the same ways that the woman drinker fascinates the three houndstooth ladies, with the significant difference that the woman drinker, located on the brink between subject and object, is much more susceptible to crossing over those boundaries than the houndstooth trio" (141). Lutze, as Mayne suggests, is clearly a figure who is able to step over the threshold of the mirror stage and into a relational visual field. She thus remains a key player within the lesbian "thematic" of the film. Madame, on the other hand, remains for the most part on the far side of that threshold.

(19) For a discussion of the woman who takes as her ego-ideal the man she would like to have been, see Chapter 1 of this book.


(21) See Jacques Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 106. For a general discussion of the gaze, see not only this text, but Chapter 3 of my Male Subjectivity at the Margins, and Chapter 4 of the present volume. In the latter, I provide a fuller discussion of the metaphorization of the gaze as a camera.

(22) See Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, pp. 91–107; Male Subjectivity, Chapter 3; and Chapters 1, 4, and 6 of the present volume for an account of the screen.


(26) Synchronization implies above all else a unified subject. Its absence here attests yet again to the heterogeneity of Madame's bodily ego, as well as to her dependence upon the Other. For an analysis of the cinematic norm of synchronization, and its implications for sexual difference, see my The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), Chapter 2.


(29) I want to stress once again that I deviate here from the model of heteropathic identification proposed in Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 214–96. Although I still stand by that discussion as an accurate account of how such an identification can function within masochism or sado-masochism, I am concerned here to provide a much more general account of the role of heteropathic identification in love. I will ultimately be proposing the conditions under which it can effect from a position of activity rather than passivity.

(30) Subsequently, Freud expresses discomfort with this formulation and substitutes for it the following two sentences: "In the [first] case...the object has been lost or given up; it is then set up again inside the ego, and the ego makes a partial alteration in itself after the model of the lost object. In the other case the object is retained, and there is a hyperacrophysis of it by the ego and at the ego's expense" (114). Once again, he emphasizes that love involves a certain "shrinkung" or diminution of the ego.

(31) Lacan here closely follows Freud, for whom—as I indicated above—love always involves such an exteriorization.

(32) This is a point upon which I will lay great stress in Chapter 3, when discussing Isaac Julien’s film Looking for Langston.


(34) "Vaccination" would here seem to mean "hesitancy to accede to the loss of being," or "the inability to make a clean break with what has been lost through language."

(35) I want to make clear here that while I find Lacan's characterization of courtly love extremely suggestive, I do not at all points agree with that characterization. I also wish that I had access in this discussion to an example of the gift of love which is less problematic with respect to gender. However, as I will indicate below, courtly love is politically exemplary in at least in one respect: it confers ideology upon socially subordinate bodies.

(36) In quoting this passage from Seminar VII, I of course do not mean to propose stereotype as an exemplary strategy through which to open up a distance between the loved other and the images through which the subject idealizes him or her. On the contrary, such a strategy is for me completely inimical to the project of loving the other in his or her "particularity" urged by Seminar I.

(37) Lacan's account of the gift of love owes much to Stendhal's On Love, trans. Vyvyan Beresford Holland (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), particularly to the passage which compares the lover's idealization of the love-object to salt-crystallization: "In