

# DIVISION

A QUARTERLY PSYCHOANALYTIC FORUM

# REVIEW

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## WHAT'S IN PLAY? David LICHTENSTEIN, Editor

The party game Truth or Dare reflects a principle that is at work in all forms of play. It is the paradoxical act of freely choosing a condition of constraint. If one person asks, "truth or dare?" and the other replies by affirming either of those two conditions, then what follows is a discursive structure in which what is liberating is the same thing as what is constraining. The Mobius strip of constraint and freedom is the essential character of play and it permeates all cultural discourse.

In Truth or Dare, ordinary speech rules are subordinated to a fundamental rule, and the ordinary right to refuse either an indelicate question or command is freely suspended for as long as one is playing. The paradoxical structure of play is that freely choosing a binding rule generates a new form of freedom, with characteristics determined by the particular rule.

The principle of subordinating subsequent speech acts to a fundamental rule is

shared by psychoanalysis. Indeed, although psychoanalytic treatment is not in fact an instance of play, since it is intended for a purpose other than the enjoyment of the act itself, it does draw significantly from the structure of play. The logic of play and game theory is deeply woven into the fabric of the psychoanalytic act, as has been noted by many analysts.

A defining feature of the psychoanalytic rule is the constraint to speak without constraints. One is bound by the rule to speak

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## FILM

## Closer to You Bettina MATHES

Words must be followed. Images come to us. But there are films that return me to words—my own words and that of others. Films that go slowly. Films that are opaque. Films that don't impress me with feelings that aren't mine. Films that don't "say" anything. Films that frustrate. Films that are often made in France.

*La Captive*, inspired by Proust's *La Prisonnière*, is such a film. A film about obsession and jealousy, about the destructive (and sometimes necessary) urge to manipulate and possess the person we love, about the obstacles we create in order to desire, and how they hold us captive. About Simon (Stanislav Merhar), a wealthy young man, and his (lesbian) lover Ariane (Sylvie Testud), who stays with him in his palatial Paris apartment, indulging his obsession. A film that contains neither judgment nor explanation. A quiet film. The little dialogue there is is mostly whispered. A film in which language is (mostly) a dead end. Simon: "What were you thinking?" Ariane: "Nothing." Simon: "Nothing? Tell me, Ariane, what you're thinking?" Ariane: "If I had thoughts, I'd tell you, but I don't."

This film about obsessive love can itself become an obsession. Since its release in 2001 I must have watched *La Captive* close to 100 times, perhaps more. The slow rhythm, the irresistible beauty of the framing, the near-static images, the lack of emotions in the acting and the photography (no drama, no psychology), the quiet drive toward death.

My words are clinging to the surface. This is not an interpretation.

Names—white letters on a dark screen. It is night. I hear before I see. The sound of breaking waves on a shore; slowly they come into focus. One after the other. Chasing, catching up, and crashing. A revolt against the stillness of the letters. Or is it the other way round? The written word an escape from the unthinkable fluidity of the sea? Who owns whom? / *La Captive* / As the credits continue, I concentrate on the ocean. The waves are stronger now, roaring. White crests dancing on a sea of darkness—approaching me, drawing me in. The list of names and titles feels like a distraction—why should I care? / *Un film de Chantal Akerman* / Ninety seconds into the movie and I know it's going to end where it started: à la mer, la mère, the mother, the sea. I wonder what this journey will be like for me. *Un film de Chantal Akerman*.

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"Works of art exercise a powerful effect on me," Freud writes in *The Moses of Michelangelo*. "This has occasioned me...to spend a long time before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to explain to myself what their effect is due to." For Freud, an explanation is always a thing from the past. And the past is always before us. And so he proceeds, through a tender description of what is there before his eyes in the church of San Pietro in Vincolo, to invent a past for the Moses of Michelangelo. How did he become who he is? What happened before the sculptor froze him in time? Psychologically speaking, this invention is a finding (the German "Erfindung" captures both meanings). It contains aspects of Freud's own life filtered through the fictional character of Moses. "No piece of statuary has ever made a stronger impression on me than this. How often have I mounted the steep steps from the unlovely Corso Cavour to the lonely piazza where the deserted church stands, and have essayed to support the angry scorn of the hero's glance! Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned." How close can he get?

Freud knew he was taking a risk when he prepared *The Moses of Michelangelo* for publication. He insisted that the essay appear anonymously as "by\*\*\*\*" (Freud's identity wasn't revealed until 1924, ten years after its first publication). I'm curious about that risk. I want to follow Freud's impulse (and some of his words) and

take *La Captive* personally, and by doing so say something more general about the film, something that can be shared. Simon is not Moses. Will they get on?<sup>1</sup>

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The sound of waves crashing on the shore fades into the whir of a Super 8 film projector. An amateur movie. Shaky. Grainy. Silent. A small group of young women on a beach: swimming, splashing, hugging, playing volleyball. Joyful and carefree. A film within a film. Simon plays the same short sequence over and over again. Close-ups of the women's faces as they rest, huddled together for warmth and company. Relaxed faces, soft and inviting; curious faces, confident and elusive. Who are they to each other? If he could read their minds, he would know what love feels like. His words come slowly: "Je, ... je, je vous . . ." Stop, rewind, and go. He concentrates on Ariane and Andrée. They are close, very close. But what does that mean, being close to someone? The camera zooms in on Ariane's face, losing focus, her eyes wide open. Will she take him in? He moves toward the screen, blocking the light of the projector, his body a black silhouette. He enters the image. "Je vous aime bien." At last! Love is found, captured, contained in a picture. How long until he will lose it again?

Cut. End of home movie. But that doesn't mean we're not watching a film. From now on we will be in the cinema of Simon's mind. If you ever wanted to know what obsession looks like from within, this is your movie.

*Freud: I realize that this cannot be merely a matter of intellectual comprehension, what the artist aims at is to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create.*<sup>2</sup>

Paris, Place Vendôme, deserted on a perfect summer day. A tracking shot of Ariane walking to her car, slender and elegant in a silvery, close-fitting dress and high heels. Her pace certain, determined, unswerving. Something tells me she knows she is being observed. The sound of her stilettos sharp and crisp on the pavement. Too sharp, too crisp. In whose head am I? Simon is in his car, watching. As she drives off in her Peugeot convertible, he secretly follows in his Bentley. Montmartre, Musée Rodin, Bois de Boulogne—wherever they go, they are always alone. Paris never seemed so unreal. One can't be a tourist in someone else's fantasy. The long drive gives me time to study his face through the windshield. Who is this guy?

When I look at him I see sadness: the swollen eyes, the inward gaze, the mouth both soft and insolent, the face inanimate from suppressed aggression. The sadness of meals served on stainless steel plates, of paintings no one ever looked at, of songs never sung, of a loss too painful to grieve. This is not the face he shows to the world; this is his private face, the face he sees when he looks into the mirror—which isn't very often.



## FILM

On the bottom of this sadness there is a longing and a fear. The fear of disappointment that makes him wary of other people: he will watch but he won't take part. The longing to be contained: he is always inside, even when he leaves the house. Akerman knows how to reveal the comfort and the rigor of interior spaces. Flights of rooms, doorways, mirrors, windows, windshields, the backseat of a car, narrow alleys, and tree-lined country roads present frames within the frame of the screen, protected spaces that satisfy his need for safety and certainty. *No alarms and no surprises, please.* Into this self-made prison only one person is admitted: Ariane. She knows the game, likes it, and plays by the rules.

He will be the stalker, but she gets to choose the location. The Musée Rodin, for instance. Hide and seek. Footsteps on creaking hardwood floors, sculptures mute to the touch, immortal bodies, frozen flesh. He glides more than he walks, stiff and erect like a robot, as if on drugs or in a trance. His eyes are fixed on her. No one else exists. She leads, he follows. No words, no glances, nothing is exchanged. The marble bust of a woman whose hair is arranged in a spiraling knot (*yes, we've seen this before*) catches her attention. Is this what he sees in her: a French version of Madeleine/Judy in *Vertigo*? Is this how he thinks of their relationship: a re-enactment of Hitchcock's masterpiece? Simon as Scottie?



Not quite. Akerman evokes *Vertigo*, and moves on. The reverence to Hitchcock prepares us for a detour from the way this story of male jealousy normally unfolds. In *Vertigo*, Scottie transforms Judy into the dead Madeleine. Simon has no intention of remaking or remodeling Ariane. Change is frightening; the future is boring. We can always trust Hitchcock to have his psychology right in place, but Akerman doesn't plant obvious clues to help us with the interpretation. We are free to let the images resonate with our thoughts and feelings.

*Freud: I can recollect my own disillusionment when, during my first visits to San Pietro in Vincoli, I used to sit down in front of the statue in the expectation that I should now see how it would start up on its raised foot, dash the Tables of the Law to the ground and let fly its wrath. Nothing of the kind happened. Instead the stone image became more and more transfixed, an almost oppressively solemn calm emanated from it and I was obliged to realize that something was represented here that could stay without change; that this Moses would remain sitting like this in his wrath forever.*

Here they are: Simon and Ariane in the bathroom, each one in their own tub, side by side, like twins, but in different rooms. A long, slow sequence, just one take with minimal camera movement. In the place of a wall there is an opaque window between the two bathtubs that reminds me of a mirror or a screen in a movie theater. We remain on Simon's side. Stretched out in the tub, calm and tranquil, he speaks about his desire for Ariane: her body, her sex, her odors so strong they make him dizzy, draw him in; how he makes

love with her while she is asleep. Does she mind? "No, not at all," she says. When no one is watching, when the object of his desire is there and not there, that's when he feels safe. "My odors don't bother you?" Ariane asks from behind the screen. That's when his mind gets stuck in a phrase: "au contraire—on the contrary," he replies. "On the contrary?" "Yes, on the contrary. On the contrary. On the contrary." Repeated four times, the phrase becomes a reassuring mantra, a secret code that confirms the availability of opposition and obstacle, of law and order. Of lovers meeting on either side of the fence, speaking through a hole in the wall. They get up. Face to face they stand, fingers touch, lips merge, his chest on her breast. Ariane a phantom behind the glass, elusive. He wants to kiss her through the looking glass, and he wants to leave the mirror intact. Narcissus in the bathtub. Who is going to dry his hair?



*Freud: [It has been said that] the great secret of the effect produced by the Moses lies in the artistic contrast between the inward fire and the outward calm of his bearing....I feel the lack of something in [this explanation]. Perhaps it is the need to discover a closer parallel between the state of mind of the hero as expressed in his attitude and the contrast between his outward calm and his inward emotion.*

I know what he wants. He wants transparency and fusion, total knowledge. He wants a mirror. He wants to enter her head, live inside her mind, feel what she feels, think what she thinks. He wants more. What he has is never enough. Because what he really wants is shelter, like a baby in the mother's belly. How to get there? He wants to be found, but he can't get lost. He wants to be taken in, but he can't take the risk to ask for it. There's shame in dependency. He must not be seen like this. He possesses where he once wanted to be possessed. He sees where he once wanted to be seen.

The tender monotony of his days and nights. *He is not living, he is killing time.* If Akerman didn't tell us how much time has passed—the next day, the day after tomorrow—we wouldn't know. Wanting. Waiting. Always waiting: for Ariane to leave the house and to come home; for Andrée to report; for the slip of the tongue, the white lies, the moment of confession. And that endless list of the same old questions.

Simon: *So tell me.*

Ariane: *What?...We went to the pool.*

Simon: *You went to the pool? And so?*

Ariane: *And so?*

Simon: *And tomorrow?*

Ariane: *Tomorrow?*

Simon: *Yes.*

Ariane: *Tomorrow I have my singing lessons.*

Simon: *I thought it was on Thursdays?*

Ariane: *Yes, sometimes it's on Thursdays.*

## FILM

And then he stumbles right into Ariane's other life. On his way out, in the courtyard of his apartment building, he is captured by two female voices singing the famous and famously sensual duet "Ed intanto che diletto" from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. (We've heard Ariane practicing this song in her room.) The lyrics describe a flirtation between a man and a woman, but the song's sensuality springs entirely from the erotic power of the women's voices mingling, touching, caressing each other. As if to say, it doesn't matter what we say, as long as we keep speaking. He looks up, puzzled by the emotion in the air. Ariane on her balcony, relaxed, attentive; an opera singer by the open window, seductive in her red dress. The women can't see each other. They've never met. They play it by ear. As their voices flow back and forth like birds, as the temperature rises, as they accommodate one another, it is impossible for him to tell who leads and who follows. He knows he is missing something, and it frightens him. Here it is: the erotic climax of the film, the sexual act he and Ariane will never perform. The two women are enough for themselves; they have everything they need, including the freedom to shut the window and go to bed, alone.

Confusion. But his jealousy will get him through. More of the same! What goes on between two women that doesn't go on between a man and a woman? He must know. He jumps to conclusions: gender is the obstacle between him and Ariane. He goes to question a lesbian couple. It's not the same, they say. "There are no explanations. It's just not the same." But a difference that can't be defined in opposition to an other doesn't make sense to him. He keeps asking: "Is it about bodies?" "No. It's not so simple. It's not the same thing. There are no words." I'm mesmerized by the women's refusal to step into his world of definitions and principles. This is not about gender, they insist. It's about intimacy that cannot be known as one knows a fact (clear-cut and hard), about desire that cannot be explained and owned, about understanding that a woman's desire for another woman is not always a desire for sameness and fusion. He is not ready to give up, not quite yet: "Do you think of someone else when you make love?" (How bold. The question comes as a surprise even to himself.) "Sometimes. Once you close your eyes, you're free." This is his problem: he sleeps with his eyes wide open.

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When I look at him I see a boy, or a girl: the smooth features without the slightest trace of stubble; the velvety hair; the soft voice, more a whisper than a shout; the lavender clothes; the wanting, raw and shy. Where is the mother? That is the unasked yet continuously felt question at the heart of Akerman's film, and Simon's world.



He lives with his grandmother. They love each other dearly. Every time Grandmère, slightly bemused, wanders into the frame, the mother's absence is evoked. Like a ghost that dare not speak its name. No one ever mentions her. A loss too big to feel. He has no words. None. He lost his mother before he had her. A stillborn baby,

waiting to be reborn. The most moving and revealing moment of the film occurs when Grandmère cannot fill the lack, when she holds him—his head resting in her lap—and has to let him go unconsolated. Tears streaming down a face as empty as a blank sheet of paper. He's not crying, he's shedding tears. Tears for fears. But what about the pain? The hurting? All his life he has been waiting for a feeling that never comes.

*Freud: What we see before us is not the inception of a violent action but the remains of a movement that has already taken place. In his first transport of fury Moses desired to act, to spring up and take vengeance and forget the Tables; but he has overcome the temptation and he will now remain seated and still, in his frozen wrath and in his pain mingled with contempt.*

It is Ariane who breaks the spell, releases him. "To dare love a girl—it takes courage," he says. "Everything takes courage," she replies. In a final gesture of love, before she disappears from his life, escapes from his unbearable need to control, she leads him to the sea—though he is the one driving the red Peugeot. A luxury hotel right by the ocean. Night is falling. The wind is picking up. They order a meal although they are not hungry. They order champagne although there is nothing to celebrate. Last supper. Before the food arrives Ariane goes for a swim. We know what an excellent swimmer she is; nothing to worry about. Simon watches the waves from the terrace, dark shadows creeping up the balustrade keep him company. The entrance to the underworld. Suddenly a thought stirs him into action: Ariane, she's in danger! Ripping off his clothes, he races down to the water. We haven't seen him like this: he's frantic. Here is where we lose him. We can only guess what's going on out there. Two bodies fighting? One body struggling to rescue the other? Perhaps. At dawn we find Simon on the sea in a small boat steered by a fisherman. The boat is coming closer. Simon's figure fills the screen — lonely, vulnerable, motherless. Wrapped in a blanket, disheveled, exhausted, shivering like a newborn baby being washed up the shore. This time someone will find him.

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The best films return us to our singular experiences of the world. Today, where the vast majority of movies are little more than marketing tools designed to keep us as far away as possible from our needs and frustrations, going to the movies for most people is a form of window shopping: presented with an inexhaustible stream of objects waiting to be bought, we leave the cinema reassured that everybody wants the same things, that all we need is to shop.

How soft a whisper can get. ■

*To Nicola Burg.*

The images on pp.38-40 are from the film *La Captive* by Chantal Akerman.

### NOTES

1. Freud's 1912 paper "On a Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men" is the obvious match for Akerman's film. As with most obvious choices, this match would have told us nothing new or interesting, neither about psychoanalysis nor about the film.
2. Quotes are from Freud's essay "The Moses of Michelangelo".

### REFERENCES

- Freud, S. (1910). On a Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I), *Standard Edition* 11.  
 Freud, S. (1914). The Moses of Michelangelo, *Standard Edition*, 13

### CREDITS

*La Captive* (Chantal Akerman, France 2000, 118 min)