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The Psychoanalytic Construction of Visual Desire and Spectatorship in A Short Film About Love: A Lacanian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the psychoanalytic construction of visual desire and spectatorship in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Love* through Jacques Lacan's concepts of the gaze, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It investigates how cinematic framing, visual distance, surveillance, and the relationship between seeing and being seen contribute to the representation of desire. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design combining close textual analysis with Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation. The analysis focuses on the film's central relationship between a young observer and an older woman, emphasizing how visual access produces fascination without guaranteeing emotional knowledge or reciprocal intimacy. Drawing on the supplied scholarship concerning Lacanian gaze theory and Kieślowski's cinematic treatment of love, the paper develops a conceptual framework connecting visual observation, imagined intimacy, symbolic mediation, and the limits of representation. The findings suggest that spectatorship functions not merely as passive viewing but as a psychological and ethical position shaped by distance, fantasy, and the instability of interpretation. The paper argues that the film complicates the assumption that seeing another person provides direct access to their emotional reality. Its contribution lies in integrating cinematic form and psychoanalytic theory to explain how visual desire emerges, intensifies, and encounters its limitations.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis, cinematic gaze, visual desire, spectatorship, *A Short Film About Love*, Imaginary, Symbolic, cinematic representation, voyeurism, subjectivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema organizes relationships between observers, images, and the objects of their attention. Through framing, editing, camera positioning, and the distribution of visual information, a film determines not only what viewers can see but also how they interpret what they see. These formal decisions become particularly significant when a narrative concerns desire, because visual attention can create an impression of intimacy even when the people involved remain emotionally distant. Krzysztof Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Love* offers a productive context for examining this tension between visual access and

psychological understanding.

The film centers on Tomek, a young man who observes Magda, an older woman, from a distance. His surveillance develops into an emotionally consequential encounter that challenges his assumptions about love, intimacy, and possession. The narrative therefore establishes a distinction between watching another person and understanding that person. Although observation initially provides Tomek with a sense of proximity, it also encourages him to construct an imagined relationship from incomplete visual information. The resulting conflict raises

questions about the reliability of perception and the ethical implications of treating another person as an object of fascination (Kieślowski, 1999).

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a framework for interpreting these questions. Its distinction among the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real provides a way to analyze the relationship between images, social meanings, and experiences that resist complete representation. Gerson (n.d.) presents Lacan's psychoanalytic model through these three interconnected registers, making it relevant to an examination of cinematic desire. Within this framework, the image does not simply reproduce an independently existing reality; it participates in the formation of the subject's understanding of self and other.

The cinematic gaze also requires a distinction between the physical act of looking and the psychological organization of desire. Colucci (2021) examines the gaze as an object in Lacanian thought, while Lee (2003) addresses the separation between the eye and the gaze. These perspectives help explain why visual control does not necessarily produce interpretive control. A spectator may direct attention toward an image without mastering the meanings that emerge from that act of looking.

The central research problem is therefore how *A Short Film About Love* constructs visual desire through cinematic observation while exposing the limitations of spectatorship as a means of knowing another person. The paper has three objectives: to interpret the film through Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts; to examine how visual distance and surveillance shape the representation of intimacy; and to assess the implications of the film's treatment of desire for cinematic spectatorship and ethical interpretation.

The study is limited to a qualitative reading of the film through the supplied references. It does not claim to establish universal psychological responses among audiences, nor does it treat a fictional character as direct clinical evidence. Instead, it develops a theoretically informed interpretation of how cinematic form represents the instability of desire, the construction of fantasy, and the limits of visual knowledge.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Kieślowski's Cinematic Representation of Love

Scholarship on Kieślowski provides a foundation for examining the philosophical and affective dimensions of *A Short Film About Love*. Coates (1992) considers metaphysical love in two of the director's films, establishing a relevant critical context for interpreting love as more than an immediately observable emotional state. From this perspective, the film's central relationship can be understood as an inquiry into the difference between the idea of love and the practical realities of interpersonal experience.

Baugh (2003) situates *A Short Film About Love* within a broader discussion of Kieślowski's cinematic treatment of religious and ethical questions. Although Baugh's principal framework differs from Lacanian psychoanalysis, the study is relevant because it encourages attention to the film's moral and interpretive complexity. The observer's desire cannot be assessed solely in terms of emotional intensity; it must also be considered in relation to the other person's autonomy and the consequences of surveillance.

The materials associated with Kieślowski's film in the Jerusalem Cinematheque (n.d.), Kieślowski (1999), and MUBI (Kieślowski, n.d.) provide additional contextual points of reference. These sources identify the film and its cinematic context, but they do not, by themselves, establish the psychoanalytic claims developed in this paper. Their role is supplementary rather than evidentiary for the theoretical argument.

2.2 Lacanian Registers and the Formation of Desire

Lacan's psychoanalytic framework distinguishes the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real as interrelated dimensions of subjectivity. The Imaginary concerns images, identification, and the formation of coherent self-images; the Symbolic concerns language, social relations, and structures of meaning; and the Real designates what cannot be fully assimilated into those systems of representation. Gerson (n.d.) explains these registers as central components of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Hobbs (2023) also discusses their conceptual relationship and offers an accessible account of their distinctions.

Applied to the film, the Imaginary helps explain how Tomek constructs an idealized image of Magda from the limited information available to him. His observation does not provide an unmediated understanding of her inner life. Instead, it supplies material through which he develops

expectations about who she is and what their relationship might become. The distinction matters because the object of desire is partly shaped by the observer's fantasies rather than solely by the observed person's actual characteristics.

The Symbolic register directs attention toward the rules and meanings that organize interpersonal relationships. Age, social position, communication, privacy, and the conventions of romantic intimacy influence how the characters understand their encounters. Their relationship is not formed outside society; it develops within an existing network of expectations about love, sexuality, and appropriate conduct. The Real, in turn, becomes relevant when emotional experience exceeds the explanatory capacity of these expectations. The characters' encounters expose discrepancies between the meanings they assign to love and the experiences they actually undergo.

Lacan (1977) provides a foundational theoretical reference for examining the relationship between subjectivity, language, and desire. Mitchell and Rose (1982) offer a critical engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis and sexuality, while Loos (2002) provides a conceptual discussion of the three registers. Together, these works support an interpretive framework in which desire is understood as mediated by images and symbolic structures rather than as a simple response to an objectively defined romantic object.

2.3 The Gaze, Visual Desire, and Spectatorship

The distinction between the eye and the gaze is particularly important for understanding cinematic observation. Lee (2003) addresses this distinction in relation to Lacan's account of the gaze, while Colucci (2021) examines the gaze as an object within psychoanalytic theory. These perspectives challenge the assumption that looking is a neutral act through which the observer acquires complete knowledge of what is observed.

Ma (2015) contributes a focused discussion of the Lacanian gaze, providing a further basis for interpreting the relationship between visual perception and desire. The relevance of this scholarship to *A Short Film About Love* lies in its capacity to explain why surveillance may intensify fascination without resolving uncertainty. The observer can accumulate images and details yet remain unable to determine the meaning of the observed person's experience.

The film's surveillance structure also raises an ethical problem. The camera may align the audience with Tomek's position, making his visual access narratively compelling. However, this alignment does not require viewers to accept his assumptions as valid. The difference between sharing a character's viewpoint and endorsing that character's conduct becomes essential to a critical account of spectatorship.

2.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

The supplied literature addresses several related but distinguishable concerns: Kieślowski's treatment of love, the philosophical and ethical dimensions of his cinema, Lacanian psychoanalytic registers, and the conceptual significance of the gaze. The present paper brings these strands together through a focused examination of how visual desire is constructed and destabilized in *A Short Film About Love*.

The analytical gap addressed here is not a claim that the film has never been examined through psychoanalysis. Rather, it is the need for an integrated interpretive model that connects the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real with the formal organization of surveillance and the viewer's ethical position. The paper consequently treats the gaze as both a psychoanalytic concept and a problem of cinematic representation. This positioning allows the analysis to move beyond a general description of voyeurism toward a more precise account of how looking produces fantasy, how fantasy encounters interpersonal reality, and why visual access remains insufficient for complete knowledge.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design based on close textual analysis and theoretical application. It examines the film as a structured audiovisual text in which narrative events, visual organization, and character relationships contribute to the construction of meaning. The method is appropriate because the research questions concern representation, subjectivity, and spectatorship rather than measurable audience behavior or statistical relationships.

The primary object of analysis is *A Short Film About Love* (Kieślowski, 1999). The supplied theoretical and critical references provide the interpretive framework. Lacan

(1977), Lee (2003), Colucci (2021), and Ma (2015) inform the analysis of desire and the gaze, while Gerson (n.d.), Hobbs (2023), and Loos (2002) support the discussion of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Coates (1992) and Baugh (2003) situate the interpretation within existing discussions of Kieślowski's cinematic treatment of love and ethical complexity.

The method does not involve interviews, surveys, clinical assessments, or experimental manipulation. Accordingly, the findings represent theoretically grounded interpretations of the film rather than empirical measurements of psychological processes among actual spectators.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The study develops a four-part interpretive framework: visual observation, imaginary construction, symbolic mediation, and confrontation with representational limits. These dimensions are analytically distinct but function as interconnected processes.

Visual observation concerns the organization of looking within the narrative. The analysis asks who sees, who is seen, what information becomes available, and how visual distance shapes the relationship between the observer and the observed. Surveillance is considered both a narrative mechanism and a representation of unequal access to another person's private life.

Imaginary construction examines how the observer transforms partial visual information into an apparently coherent image of the other. The key question is whether desire attaches to the person as encountered or to an idealized figure produced through fantasy. This dimension draws on the Lacanian understanding of image-based identification and the instability of self-other relations (Gerson, n.d.; Hobbs, 2023).

Symbolic mediation investigates how language, social expectations, interpersonal boundaries, and conventions of intimacy shape the characters' interpretations. Visual fascination does not operate independently of social meaning. Rather, it becomes intelligible through the concepts and expectations by which the characters understand love and sexual relationships.

Confrontation with representational limits considers moments when established fantasies and symbolic

explanations fail to account for emotional experience. The Real is used here as a theoretical concept for interpreting these limits, not as a synonym for ordinary reality or an independently observable psychological condition.

3.3 Procedure and Interpretive Criteria

The analysis proceeds through three stages. First, it identifies the narrative relationship between surveillance, desire, and interpersonal encounter. Second, it interprets this relationship through the four analytical dimensions. Third, it compares the resulting interpretation with the conceptual concerns represented in the supplied scholarship.

Three criteria guide the reading. The first is formal relevance: an interpretation must relate to the film's narrative or audiovisual organization rather than rely entirely on abstract theory. The second is conceptual consistency: the use of Lacanian terms must preserve the distinctions among image-based identification, symbolic mediation, and the limits of representation. The third is ethical reflexivity: the analysis must distinguish the audience's access to a character's perspective from the moral legitimacy of that character's behavior.

For example, a scene organized around observation from a distance can be read simultaneously as a formal arrangement of restricted visibility, a condition enabling the observer's fantasy, and a demonstration of the observed person's limited control over how she is represented. These interpretations are related, but they are not interchangeable. Their combination clarifies how cinematic form can construct desire while exposing its distortions.

3.4 Scope, Reliability, and Limitations

Interpretive reliability is pursued through consistency of concepts and comparison with multiple supplied sources rather than numerical replication. The analysis avoids claiming that one theoretical model exhausts the film's meanings. Baugh's (2003) ethical and religious orientation and Coates's (1992) discussion of metaphysical love provide perspectives that may illuminate dimensions not fully explained by Lacanian psychoanalysis.

A further limitation concerns the status of the theoretical framework itself. Lacanian concepts are interpretive tools, not directly measurable variables in this study. The paper therefore does not present its categories as experimentally

verified causal mechanisms. In addition, because the analysis is restricted to the supplied references, it does not attempt a comprehensive review of all scholarship on the film, psychoanalytic film theory, or the history of Lacanian reception. These restrictions define the study's scope without negating its value as a focused conceptual investigation.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Visual Observation as the Initial Structure of Desire

The analysis identifies visual observation as the narrative condition through which desire becomes organized in *A Short Film About Love*. Tomek's surveillance of Magda establishes a relationship in which one character possesses substantial visual access to another without equivalent interpersonal participation. This imbalance is significant because it allows observation to substitute for communication. Tomek can watch Magda's activities, but the information obtained through watching does not necessarily reveal her intentions, emotional needs, or understanding of intimacy.

The principal finding is that visual proximity and psychological intimacy operate as separate dimensions. Surveillance reduces physical and informational distance from the observed person, yet it does not eliminate uncertainty about that person's inner life. Instead, repeated observation may increase the observer's investment in an imagined relationship. The observed individual becomes central to the observer's emotional world even when the relationship remains largely unilateral.

This pattern corresponds to the Lacanian distinction between the eye and the gaze. Lee (2003) emphasizes the conceptual separation between the act of seeing and the gaze, while Colucci (2021) situates the gaze within a broader psychoanalytic account of subjectivity. The film's arrangement of observation can therefore be interpreted as more than a technique for providing narrative information. It exposes the limitations of the observer's apparent control over the image.

The camera's potential alignment with Tomek's perspective makes the audience a participant in this structure. Viewers may initially receive information through the same restricted visual position that organizes his fascination. Nevertheless, their access to the narrative does not establish the accuracy of his interpretations. The

film consequently creates a distinction between seeing what a character sees and knowing what that character believes he sees. This distinction is central to its representation of spectatorship.

4.2 The Imaginary Construction of the Desired Other

A second finding concerns the role of the Imaginary in the construction of Magda as an object of desire. The Imaginary is useful for examining how a person's image becomes associated with expectations of completeness, coherence, and emotional fulfillment. In Tomek's case, limited observation provides the material from which an imagined relationship can develop. Because his access to Magda is incomplete, his perception is vulnerable to the influence of fantasy.

The analytical implication is that desire does not emerge solely from the observable characteristics of its object. It is also shaped by the meanings attributed to those characteristics. A gesture, a routine, or a moment of apparent vulnerability may acquire significance beyond what the available evidence warrants. The observer interprets these details through an existing structure of expectation and subsequently treats the interpretation as if it were knowledge.

The three-register model discussed by Gerson (n.d.) helps clarify why the imagined image cannot be equated with the other person's complete identity. The Imaginary organizes identification and idealization, but the subject's relation to another person is also mediated by social meanings and experiences that resist complete integration. Tomek's desire thus becomes analytically important not because it reveals Magda's authentic identity, but because it reveals the processes through which he constructs an emotionally compelling image of her.

The film also complicates the distinction between fantasy and deception. Fantasy need not involve a deliberate intention to misrepresent another person. An observer may sincerely believe in the image constructed through repeated attention. However, sincerity does not make that image accurate. The resulting gap between imagined intimacy and reciprocal understanding explains why the intensification of desire can coexist with limited knowledge.

This finding contributes to the film's broader representation of romantic idealization. Desire may be

sustained by the distance between the person encountered and the imagined person who promises emotional fulfillment. If that distance disappears, the fantasy must confront the complexity and autonomy of the actual other. The film's treatment of observation therefore makes idealization both psychologically productive and potentially destabilizing.

4.3 Symbolic Mediation and the Limits of Possession

The third finding concerns the Symbolic organization of desire. Relationships are shaped by language, social expectations, conventions of sexuality, and distinctions between public visibility and private life. These structures determine how acts of observation and intimacy are understood. In the film, the meaning of watching Magda cannot be separated from the social and ethical boundary between curiosity and intrusion.

The Symbolic register explains why visual access does not automatically confer relational legitimacy. Knowing details about another person's routine does not establish mutual recognition, consent, or emotional reciprocity. These are different dimensions of a relationship, mediated by social practices and interpersonal communication rather than by visual information alone.

Hobbs (2023) and Loos (2002) provide conceptual accounts of the Lacanian registers that help distinguish the social organization of meaning from image-based identification. Through this distinction, the film's surveillance structure can be read as a conflict between the observer's private system of meaning and the conditions necessary for a relationship to exist between autonomous individuals.

The finding also clarifies the ethical significance of spectatorship. Viewers are given access to a narrative that makes surveillance psychologically intelligible, but intelligibility should not be confused with justification. A character's loneliness or emotional investment may explain the development of an action without making the action ethically acceptable. The film's representation of desire consequently supports a critical distinction between understanding motivation and endorsing conduct.

4.4 The Real and the Failure of Imagined Certainty

A fourth finding concerns the limits of the observer's explanatory framework. The Real, in Lacanian theory, is

not simply the everyday world outside the image. It refers to what cannot be fully assimilated into the subject's symbolic and imaginary systems. In this study, the concept is applied cautiously to moments when the characters' experiences exceed their established expectations about love, sexuality, and emotional fulfillment.

The film's narrative movement exposes the inadequacy of treating desire as a predictable response to visual information. Encountering another person does not necessarily resolve uncertainty or validate the observer's fantasy. On the contrary, an actual encounter may reveal the distance between an imagined relationship and the complex experience of interpersonal intimacy.

This finding is consistent with a Lacanian understanding of desire as structurally resistant to complete satisfaction. The desired object cannot simply be possessed as a final answer to the subject's emotional uncertainty. The observer's expectations may change, but the fundamental problem of knowing another person remains. Gerson (n.d.) is relevant here because the relationship among the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real helps explain why neither an image nor a socially available explanation fully contains subjective experience.

The implication for spectatorship is that the audience also encounters limits. The film offers visual and narrative information, but those forms do not necessarily provide a transparent account of either character's interiority. Viewers must interpret actions without assuming that interpretation eliminates ambiguity.

4.5 Integrated Findings

Taken together, the findings establish four interconnected propositions. First, surveillance supplies visual information without guaranteeing psychological knowledge. Second, the Imaginary transforms partial information into an idealized image that sustains desire. Third, Symbolic structures reveal the distinction between private fascination and ethically meaningful reciprocity. Fourth, the limits represented by the Real expose the instability of any claim to complete understanding.

These propositions form an interpretive sequence rather than a universal causal law. Visual observation can encourage fantasy, but the relationship between looking and desire depends on the narrative and social context. Similarly, the failure of an imagined relationship does not

mean that all romantic desire is inherently illusory. The more limited conclusion is that desire becomes problematic when an image is mistaken for comprehensive knowledge of another person.

The analysis also identifies a tension between narrative participation and ethical judgment. By providing access to Tomek's position, the film invites viewers to understand his fascination. Yet the same structure makes visible the asymmetry through which Magda becomes an object of observation. Spectatorship consequently becomes both the means through which desire is represented and the critical position from which its limitations can be recognized.

Overall, the findings suggest that *A Short Film About Love* presents visual desire as a process of construction rather than a transparent response to another person's presence. Its cinematic organization demonstrates that the act of looking may intensify attachment while leaving the observer unable to comprehend the person who attracts that attention. The film's psychoanalytic significance lies in this unresolved relationship between visibility, fantasy, and the limits of interpersonal knowledge.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Reconsidering the Relationship Between Looking and Knowing

The findings challenge the assumption that increased visual access necessarily produces greater understanding. In ordinary accounts of observation, information is often treated as a means of reducing uncertainty. The film complicates this assumption by showing how observation can become integrated into a structure of desire that shapes the meaning of the information collected. The observer does not simply receive images; he interprets them according to expectations that may remain unexamined.

This distinction is consistent with the theoretical significance of the gaze in Lacanian thought. Lee (2003) distinguishes the eye from the gaze, while Colucci (2021) examines the gaze as a psychoanalytic object. Together, these perspectives support a reading in which visual perception cannot be reduced to the observer's conscious intention. The act of looking participates in a broader relation between the subject, the image, and the desire that gives the image significance.

The film makes this relation particularly visible through its

asymmetrical structure of surveillance. Tomek's access to Magda provides him with a position from which he can construct interpretations without necessarily being exposed to the reciprocal demands of a relationship. The result is a form of apparent control that remains psychologically unstable. He may observe the visible aspects of Magda's life, but he cannot establish mastery over her subjective experience.

This argument should not be extended into the claim that observation is always misleading or that visual representation has no evidentiary value. The more precise point is that images require interpretation, and the interpretation may be influenced by the observer's desires. The same visible event can acquire different meanings depending on the expectations brought to it. The film's contribution is to make this interpretive process central to the representation of romantic fascination.

5.2 The Imaginary and the Production of Romantic Idealization

The analysis also suggests that the Imaginary provides a productive framework for explaining the relationship between romantic idealization and incomplete knowledge. The desired other may function as a figure through which the subject organizes personal hopes, expectations, and perceived deficiencies. In this sense, the object of desire is not simply discovered; it is partly constructed through identification and fantasy.

Gerson (n.d.) provides a conceptual basis for understanding the Imaginary as one dimension of Lacanian subjectivity. Applied to Tomek, this framework suggests that the emotional significance of Magda exceeds the information available through observation. His investment in her becomes inseparable from the imagined meanings he attaches to what he sees.

However, a critical reading must avoid reducing Magda to a passive symbol of Tomek's psychological condition. Such a reduction would reproduce the very problem the film makes available for examination: the transformation of another person into an object defined by someone else's desires. Magda's subjectivity remains analytically significant even when the narrative foregrounds Tomek's perspective. Her experiences cannot be fully inferred from his observations, and the limits of his knowledge should not be mistaken for the limits of her identity.

This point introduces an important ethical qualification to Lacanian interpretation. Psychoanalytic concepts can explain how an observer constructs an image of another person, but they should not be used to claim unrestricted access to that person's interiority. The theoretical framework is strongest when it reveals the limits of representation rather than replacing one form of interpretive certainty with another.

The argument also connects with Coates's (1992) discussion of metaphysical love in Kieślowski's cinema. The film's treatment of love can be approached as a problem that exceeds immediate attraction and the desire for possession. If love involves recognition of another person as distinct from oneself, then the inability to distinguish an imagined figure from the actual other becomes a central obstacle. The film does not provide a simple formula for overcoming that obstacle; rather, it exposes the instability of romantic expectations when they depend on an idealized image.

5.3 Symbolic Structures and the Ethics of Surveillance

The Symbolic dimension extends the analysis beyond individual psychology. Surveillance takes place within a network of social meanings that distinguish public behavior from private experience, curiosity from intrusion, and attraction from a mutually acknowledged relationship. These distinctions matter because desire is never interpreted in a social vacuum.

The observer may assign emotional significance to an act of looking, but that private meaning does not establish a corresponding meaning for the person being observed. A relationship requires forms of recognition that cannot be replaced by unilateral attention. The ethical problem is therefore not simply that the observer may misunderstand the other; it is also that the observer's conduct may limit the other person's control over their own visibility.

This interpretation complements Baugh's (2003) attention to the ethical and religious dimensions of Kieślowski's cinema. While the present study does not adopt Baugh's framework as its primary theory, the emphasis on ethical complexity supports an analysis that distinguishes psychological motivation from moral justification. Tomek's fascination may be narratively intelligible without being ethically neutral.

The same distinction applies to the audience. Cinematic

spectatorship frequently provides access to information that characters do not possess equally. This unequal distribution of knowledge can create suspense and emotional engagement, but it can also encourage viewers to accept a character's perspective as the natural organizing center of the narrative. A critical spectator must therefore consider how the film directs attention, whose experiences remain inaccessible, and whether the camera's alignment with an observer encourages the mistaken belief that observation equals understanding.

The practical implication is relevant to the interpretation of surveillance in contemporary visual culture, although the film alone cannot establish conclusions about all modern monitoring practices. Its narrative provides a conceptual illustration of a broader problem: access to information does not automatically confer the right to collect it, interpret it without qualification, or treat it as a substitute for reciprocal communication. This is an analytical implication of the film, not an empirical finding about contemporary audiences or surveillance technologies.

5.4 The Real and the Limits of Psychoanalytic Interpretation

The Real helps explain why neither fantasy nor symbolic explanation can completely stabilize the characters' experience. The subject may develop an image of the other and situate that image within familiar social meanings, yet actual encounters can expose the inadequacy of both. Desire does not become fully intelligible merely because its object is visible or its social context is recognizable.

The concept must nevertheless be applied with care. Treating every surprising event, emotional difficulty, or contradiction as an instance of the Real would make the category too broad to be analytically useful. In this paper, the Real refers more specifically to the limits of representation: those aspects of experience that cannot be completely contained within the characters' existing fantasies and explanatory systems.

This qualification is important because the film should not be presented as a demonstration that psychoanalysis has conclusively explained human desire. Rather, the Lacanian framework makes certain patterns interpretable while leaving other questions open. The film's ambiguity may be productive precisely because its meaning cannot be exhausted by a single theoretical account.

Mitchell and Rose (1982) provide a relevant critical context for considering Lacanian psychoanalysis and sexuality, while Lacan (1977) supplies the foundational theoretical reference. Their inclusion reinforces the importance of treating psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework that requires critical interpretation rather than a checklist of labels to be applied mechanically to characters.

The limits of interpretation also concern Magda's position. A reading centered on Tomek's desire risks giving his fantasy greater analytical weight than her experience. A more balanced account recognizes that the narrative's asymmetry is itself a critical issue. The absence of complete access to Magda's inner life should encourage restraint, not speculative certainty. This principle strengthens the paper's central claim that visual representation can produce compelling interpretations without guaranteeing comprehensive knowledge.

5.5 Relationship to Existing Scholarship

The present analysis connects three strands in the supplied literature. Coates (1992) provides a context for understanding love as a philosophical problem in Kieślowski's cinema. Baugh (2003) supports attention to ethical and interpretive complexity. Colucci (2021), Lee (2003), and Ma (2015) provide theoretical points of reference for understanding the gaze as more than an uncomplicated act of seeing.

The paper's contribution lies in bringing these concerns into a single interpretive structure. Rather than treating the gaze, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real as separate theoretical topics, it examines how they interact within the film's organization of surveillance and intimacy. Visual observation supplies the conditions for fantasy; fantasy shapes the meaning of observation; symbolic conventions regulate the interpretation of relationships; and the limits of representation expose the incompleteness of the resulting knowledge.

This synthesis is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not establish that every viewer experiences the film in the same way, nor does it demonstrate that the proposed framework is superior to all alternative approaches. Its value lies in providing a coherent account of how visual form and psychoanalytic concepts can illuminate the tension between desire and knowledge.

5.6 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The theoretical implication is that cinematic spectatorship can be understood as a position structured by both access and limitation. Viewers may receive extensive visual information while remaining unable to determine the complete meaning of a character's experience. This challenges models of spectatorship that treat looking as a transparent route to knowledge and supports a more reflexive approach to cinematic interpretation.

The practical implication for film criticism is methodological. Analysts should distinguish between what a film visibly presents, what a character believes, and what the critic infers. These levels often overlap, but they are not identical. Keeping them separate reduces the risk of treating a character's fantasy as narrative fact or interpreting a formal choice as proof of a universal psychological law.

The study also suggests that ethical analysis should accompany psychoanalytic interpretation when a film represents surveillance or asymmetrical relationships. Explaining how desire develops is not sufficient; criticism should also examine how the desired person's autonomy is represented and whether the narrative encourages or challenges the observer's assumptions.

Several limitations remain. The research relies on a single film, uses an interpretive rather than experimental method, and restricts its theoretical discussion to the supplied references. It does not analyze audience reception, compare multiple adaptations, or systematically measure cinematic techniques. Future research could compare this film with other works by Kieślowski, examine alternative theories of spectatorship, or investigate how different audiences interpret the relationship between visual access and emotional intimacy. Such work would extend the present conceptual argument without assuming that one interpretation exhausts the film's possibilities.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the psychoanalytic construction of visual desire and spectatorship in Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Love* through a Lacanian perspective. The analysis demonstrates that visual observation functions not merely as a means of acquiring information but as a process through which desire, fantasy, and interpretations of intimacy are constructed. Tomek's surveillance of Magda illustrates the difference between seeing another person and understanding that person's subjective

experience.

The study identifies four interconnected dimensions of this process. First, visual observation creates an asymmetrical relationship in which access to another person's visible activities does not guarantee emotional knowledge. Second, the Imaginary explains how partial observations can become the basis of an idealized image that sustains desire. Third, the Symbolic reveals how social conventions, interpersonal boundaries, and the meanings attached to intimacy regulate the interpretation of desire. Fourth, the Real helps explain why actual experience cannot be completely contained within the observer's fantasies or established systems of meaning.

These findings contribute to the interpretation of Kieślowski's cinema by connecting the film's representation of love with the theoretical distinction between the eye and the gaze. They also extend the discussion of spectatorship beyond visual participation to include ethical reflection. The audience may share the observer's perspective without being required to accept his assumptions. Consequently, cinematic alignment becomes an opportunity to examine how fascination can influence judgment and how visual access can conceal rather than resolve uncertainty.

The paper's principal contribution is an integrated conceptual framework connecting visual observation, imaginary construction, symbolic mediation, and the limits of representation. This framework offers a structured method for analyzing how cinematic form produces desire while simultaneously exposing its instability. It also emphasizes that psychoanalytic criticism should not reproduce the reduction of another person to an object of interpretation. The inability to establish complete knowledge of a character's inner life is a limitation that critical analysis must acknowledge rather than conceal.

The study has limitations arising from its single-film focus, qualitative design, and restricted reference base. Its findings should therefore be understood as interpretive conclusions rather than experimentally verified psychological outcomes. Future research could apply the framework comparatively to other films by Kieślowski, examine alternative approaches to cinematic spectatorship, or investigate how different audiences interpret surveillance, romantic idealization, and visual intimacy.

Ultimately, *A Short Film About Love* demonstrates the

critical distinction between visibility and understanding. Desire may intensify through observation, but observation alone cannot establish reciprocity, eliminate uncertainty, or provide complete access to another person's experience. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis, the film can be understood as an exploration of the unstable relationship between the image of the desired other and the subject's capacity to recognize that other as independent. Its significance lies in revealing that the act of looking is never simply a matter of seeing; it is also a process of interpretation shaped by fantasy, social meaning, and the limits of knowledge.

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