

## The Triangulation of Desire: A Psychoanalytic Three-Part Structure of Desire and Power in Film

### *La triangulación del deseo: una estructura psicoanalítica de tres partes sobre el deseo y el poder en el cine*

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Artículo recibido: 22/10/2024 – Aceptado: 10/12/2024

#### **Abstract:**

This article explores the application of the 'triangulation of desire' methodology in film studies. The methodology integrates textual analysis with a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective to examine how desire is depicted through *mise-en-scène* between romantically involved characters in film. This paper highlights how this approach enables a nuanced analysis of power dynamics, addresses challenges encountered in its implementation, and considers the broader implications for its use in film studies. This methodology not only deepens our understanding of romantic dynamics but also provides a framework for analyzing other mediums where power and desire intersect. It suggests a new lens for evaluating whether media portray non-objectifying and complex representations of relationships. In doing so, it paves the way for more inclusive and critical approaches to cinematic narratives that challenge traditional representations and offer richer modes of seeing.

#### **Keywords:**

Triangulation of desire; power; psychoanalysis; textual analysis; film studies

#### **Resumen:**

*Este artículo explora la aplicación de la metodología de la 'triangulación del deseo' en los estudios cinematográficos. La metodología integra el análisis textual con una perspectiva psicoanalítica lacaniana para examinar cómo el deseo se representa a través de la *mise-en-scène* entre personajes involucrados románticamente en el cine. Este trabajo destaca cómo este enfoque permite un análisis matizado de las dinámicas de poder, aborda los desafíos encontrados en su implementación y considera las*

implicaciones más amplias de su uso en los estudios cinematográficos. Esta metodología no solo profundiza nuestra comprensión de las dinámicas románticas, sino que también proporciona un marco para analizar otros medios en los que el poder y el deseo se entrecruzan. Propone una nueva lente para evaluar si los medios representan relaciones de manera no objetivadora y compleja. Al hacerlo, abre el camino para enfoques más inclusivos y críticos de las narrativas cinematográficas que desafían las representaciones tradicionales y ofrecen modos más ricos de interpretación.

**Palabras clave:**

*Triangulación del deseo; poder; psicoanálisis; análisis textual; cine*

**1. Introduction**

[C]inematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.

– Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1989.

This quote from Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* serves as the foundation for the methodology proposed in this article: the triangulation of desire. Mulvey critiques how cinematic codes craft an “illusion cut to the measure of desire,” revealing the ways in which film creates and manipulates the gaze, desire, and power. Inspired by this analysis, the triangulation of desire framework aims to explore the visual and narrative dynamics that shape desire in film, particularly in romantic relationships.

This article introduces the triangulation of desire as a methodology informed by psychoanalysis and supported by textual analysis, with a specific emphasis on *mise-en-scène*. The goal is to provide a structured framework for investigating how power dynamics within romantic relationships are visually and narratively represented on screen. By isolating the three core components—lover, beloved, and barrier—this methodological proposal outlines the necessary steps for conducting a formal analysis. These steps include scene selection, *mise-en-scène* analysis, and identifying key elements based on existing scholarship in psychoanalysis and formal film studies. The objective is to provide a structured methodological approach for analyzing how desire is constructed through the visual and narrative elements of the selected film or audiovisual material.

This article, and the justification for the proposed methodology, can be situated within a social justification framework. According to Liv Hausken, a humanistic media scholar, socially justified research seeks to analyze power relations in society, addressing issues such as the dynamics between institutions, social groups, genders, geographical areas, centers, and peripheries (Hausken, 2009, p.156). In line with this perspective, the social justification of this proposal lies in its focus on investigating the power dynamics embedded within media objects as well as offering a practical framework for analyzing power relations within romantic relationships as portrayed in film.

The development of this methodology arose from the need for a structured approach to analyzing desire in film, particularly within romantic relationships. While psychoanalysis offers a compelling theoretical lens, as Toril Moi points out, it lacks a step-by-step method for conducting research:

Whether I do a postcolonial or a feminist or a psychoanalytic reading, methodologically I do the same sort of thing: I read. And to read is to pay attention to the particular text, to look and think in response to particular questions. Is reading a 'method'? (Moi, 2017, p. 178)

Moi highlights that psychoanalysis is more of a theoretical framework than a rigid methodology, which is why there is a need to develop a structured approach for film analysis that builds on psychoanalytic theory but provides practical steps for analyzing romantic relationships in films. To fill this gap, the triangulation of desire framework combines psychoanalysis with textual analysis.

Christian Metz, a pioneer of psychoanalytic film theory, emphasizes that a psychoanalytic approach to film must be "attentive to the signifier, to the script, and to their mutual articulation" (Metz, 1982, p. 33). This suggests that conducting a psychoanalytic investigation requires more than simply applying psychoanalytic concepts and theories; it also necessitates close attention to both the film's narrative and the visual elements through which meaning is constructed. These include *mise-en-scène*, editing, and cinematic structure. In this sense, psychoanalysis and formal analysis go hand in hand, complementing each other to offer a deeper understanding of film form and meaning.

By following Metz's guidance, the triangulation of desire methodology integrates psychoanalytic theory with formal analysis to create a comprehensive framework. Following Gibbs' (2002) argument that the significance of *mise-en-scène* lies in the interaction of elements such as lighting, costume, color, props, *décor*, performance, spatial relationships, and framing, this proposal seeks to account for these intricacies. Bordwell, Thompson and Smith further support this perspective, asserting that "[f]orm is the overall patterning of a film, the ways its parts work together to create specific effects" (Bordwell et al., 2019, p. 3). This statement underscores the systemic nature of cinema, where every component works in tandem to produce meaning.

A psychoanalytic approach, with a strong emphasis on formal analysis, enables a nuanced investigation of how films depict the intricate interplay of desire, power, and gaze. By adopting this structured methodology, this article offers an analytical tool for examining the representation of romantic relationships and the dynamics of desire in cinema. The specific elements to focus on at each stage of the analysis are detailed in the methodological proposal section of this article.

A comparative methodological analysis is necessary before advancing the framework proposed here. Why choose this methodology over other qualitative approaches? Psychoanalysis, with its long history of analyzing desire, offers a robust theoretical foundation for exploring power dynamics. However, other qualitative methods also could provide valuable tools. For example, Michel Foucault's discourse analysis emphasizes the role of language in constructing and maintaining power relations, as he argues that discourse is a way for analyzing the embedded power relations in language and social practices (Foucault, 1972). Similarly, Judith Butler's work in gender theory highlights the performative nature of gender and its intersections with power and identity, stressing the need to interrogate the societal norms that regulate desire (Butler, 1990).

The aim of this proposal is not to discredit any existing schools of thought or methodologies. Rather, the choice to apply the triangulation of desire methodology lies in its systematic structure, consisting of three clearly defined steps, and its focus on analyzing *mise-en-scène* through a psychoanalytic lens. Above all, it offers a framework for understanding power structures and their portrayal within romantic relationships in film. By focusing on three key elements—the lover, the beloved, and the barrier—it provides a clear and systematic way to examine how desire and power dynamics are visually and narratively constructed. This precision allows for an in-depth analysis of how *mise-en-scène* elements contribute to the representation and dynamics of romantic relationships on screen.

The proposed methodology could add another dimension to the study of desire and power by offering a focused lens through which researchers can examine the intersection of psychoanalytic theory and formal cinematic elements. Although I will not expand on the works of Foucault, or Butler throughout the text, their inclusion here serves to situate the triangulation of desire within the broader landscape of qualitative methodologies, demonstrating its specific strengths and contributions.

## 2. State of the art

To contextualize and underpin the proposed methodology, I will explore key theories and concepts that form its foundation. My primary focus is to clarify the theoretical choices, particularly the reliance on psychoanalysis. This serves two purposes: first, to locate the methodology within broader academic discourse, and second, to explain why these particular theories are essential to the structure and objectives of the triangulation of desire framework.

### 2.1. *Objet petit a*

In this section, I introduce the term *objet petit a*, as coined by Jacques Lacan, a prominent figure in psychoanalytical studies. This term is crucial for understanding desire (as lack) in psychoanalysis, a concept central to my investigation. Since this study seeks to explore desire, it is fitting to start by examining what is meant by desire, whom I am relying on for this understanding, and why I interpret it as 'lack.'

Lacan's *objet petit a* represents the unattainable object of desire—the elusive "something" that can never be fully attained. As Lacan argues, desire emerges from the realization of an inherent lack within the human condition, a realization that begins in early development and continues throughout life. As psychoanalysis scholar Lewis Kirshner explains, this lack propels individuals to seek fulfillment beyond basic needs, driving them toward objects, fantasies, or goals that temporarily seem to satisfy them but never completely do so (Kirshner, 2005). Sean Homer, a professor in film and literature, elaborates on Lacan's concept:

The *objet a* is not an object we have lost, because then we would be able to find it and satisfy our desire. It is rather the constant sense we have, as subjects, that something is lacking or missing from our lives. We are always searching for fulfillment, for knowledge, for passion, for love, and whenever we achieve these

goals, there is always something more we desire; we cannot quite pinpoint it but we know that it is there. (Homer, 2005, p. 87)

*Objet petit a*, then, symbolizes the unattainable, perpetually out-of-reach object of desire that keeps driving the individual forward. This desire is never truly satisfied, even when temporary objects of desire are achieved. Whether these objects are material, emotional, or symbolic—such as love, career success, or personal fulfillment—they ultimately fail to resolve the underlying sense of lack, pushing the individual to continue seeking in an endless cycle.

The *objet petit a* is central to Lacanian theory because it illustrates the fundamental impossibility of fully satisfying desire. This concept is integral to the triangulation of desire methodology, as it helps explain the dynamic of unfulfilled desire that operates between the lover, the beloved, and the barrier. Throughout this article, I use the concept of desire as lack to analyze how characters in film are depicted as "reaching for an impossible object" and how this endless pursuit is visually conveyed through *mise-en-scène*.

Given that psychoanalysis has long been employed by film scholars to study film structure and narrative, it offers an ideal theoretical foundation for this investigation into the dynamics of desire and the visual representation of romantic relationships.

## 2.2. Triangulation of Desire

With the concept of desire as lack established, I now introduce the central term of this methodology proposal, which forms the foundation of the framework: the *triangulation of desire*. This term, discussed by Anne Carson, a classics scholar, is crucial to my analysis. Carson, like Lacan, presupposes desire as lack, making this concept a natural extension of the previous discussion.

To understand the term, we must revisit the ancient concept of *eros*, which Carson explores in her book *Eros the Bittersweet*. In ancient Greek mythology and society, *eros* denotes romantic desire, which is defined by the absence of what is desired—namely, the beloved. As Carson explains, "[d]esire can only be for what is lacking, not at hand, not present, not in one's possession nor in one's being" (Carson, 1986, p.27). *Eros* embodies the continuous longing for the unattainable, a desire for an insatiable absence—a parallel to Lacan's *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire.

This conception of *eros* mirrors Lacan's idea of desire as lack, specifically applied to romantic desire, where one seeks to fill the lack through the pursuit of a beloved. Carson's triangulation highlights the ever-present absence in desire by introducing a three-part structure: the lover, the beloved, and the barrier. *Eros*, defined by lack, requires a space or distance between the lover and the beloved—without this separation, there would be no desire. Carson illustrates this concept using Fragment 31 from the ancient Greek poet Sappho, one of the first known women to write about desiring another woman. The fragment reads:

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
whoever he is who opposite you  
sits and listens close

to your sweet speaking  
and lovely laughing—oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
is left in me (Sappho, trans. Carson, 2002, p. 63).

In this fragment, Sappho observes a man listening to a woman she desires, thus creating three key figures: the poet (Sappho), the woman she desires, and the man. Carson explains that the fragment is not merely about these three individuals but about the geometrical figure created by their perceptions of each other—the distances between them, and the forces that coordinate their interactions. Carson writes:

Thin lines of force coordinate the three of them. Along one line travels the girl's voice and laughter to a man who listens closely. A second tangent connects the girl to the poet. Between the eye of the poet and the listening man crackles a third current. The figure is a triangle. (Carson, 1986, p.32)

This triangulation of desire positions each person at one vertex, with lines of force connecting and separating them. Carson argues that this dynamic exists in all romantic interactions because desire thrives on the absence of fulfillment. Without the barrier, which both connects and separates the lover from the beloved, there would be no desire—eros depends on this absence to exist. Carson's definition of triangulation is as follows:

For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. (Carson, 1986, p.36)

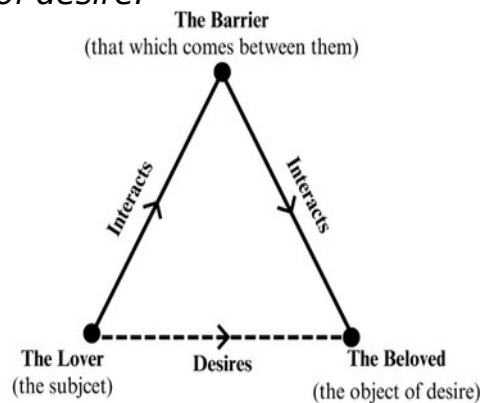
In this framework, the third component—referred to as the barrier—does not necessarily have to be a person. It can take the form of an object, event, or circumstance that keeps the lover and beloved apart. This third element acts as the conduit through which desire circulates, ensuring that the desire is never fully satisfied. By maintaining the distance between the lover and beloved, the barrier paradoxically creates a unique form of connection, allowing them to "touch without touching."

Although it may be easier to conceptualize the third component—the barrier—as a person, thereby resembling what is commonly understood as a love triangle, the barrier does not inherently require the presence of a third subject. Grounded in the theory of desire as lack, the triangulation does not depend on the direct presence of a romantic rival; rather, it exists universally in all romantic relationships. In some cases, the third component may represent a blend of the lover and the beloved, manifesting in a more abstract form. For example, elements such as jealousy, differing social or ethnicity statuses, or other points of distinction can function as barriers that estrange the lover and the beloved. This underscores the importance of analyzing each triangulation on a case-by-case basis to uncover the unique dynamics at play.

To illustrate this concept, I have created a diagram (Figure 1) that demonstrates the dynamics of the triangulation of desire and its three structural components. As Carson explains, and the diagram shows, the trajectory of eros moves from the lover toward the beloved. However, this desire cannot be fulfilled directly because once the lover reaches the beloved, the desire would dissipate. The diagram represents this dynamic with a dotted line, symbolizing that directly fulfilling the desire would erase the very lack that drives it. Instead, the lover interacts with the barrier—a separate entity that engages with the beloved without eliminating the tension of desire. It is through this barrier that the lover can desire the beloved without direct contact.

**Figure 1**

*The triangulation of desire.*



Notes: Diagram of the triangulation of desire. Own work.

This triangular structure is crucial to understanding the proposed methodology. By closely examining each vertex of the triangle, the methodology could clarify the power dynamics operating within a film narrative. The flexibility of what constitutes a barrier allows the triangulation of desire to be applied to various romantic scenarios, each with its own unique dynamics. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the roles that each structural component plays in shaping the filmic narrative.

### 3. Methodological Proposal: The Triangulation of Desire in Film Analysis

The following methodological proposal presents a framework for analyzing romantic relationships and the power dynamics that emerge between two characters in cinematic and audiovisual works. This approach can be applied to research involving feature films, short films, television series, music videos, and other fictional audiovisual materials<sup>1</sup>, provided they meet the criterion of portraying two subjects in a romantic relationship. The analysis focuses on desire and power dynamics by selecting key scenes and examining how these are portrayed and conveyed through visual elements in the *mise-en-scène*.

<sup>1</sup> Although this methodology can be applied to films, television series, and other audiovisual materials, I will henceforth refer to all potential selected materials simply as "films" or "selected films" throughout this article. This terminology should be understood as encompassing all possible types of audiovisual content to which the methodology could be applied.

The triangulation of desire methodology proposes an organization into three analytical chapters, each dedicated to a specific structural component. This structure allows for a detailed investigation of each element and a comprehensive exploration of how desire and power dynamics are portrayed in the selected films. By differentiating the dynamics of each structural component, I argue that it is possible to analyse in detail the movements of desire and how it is depicted through the *mise-en-scène*. In the following pages, I will outline the methodology, its potential for analysis, and what it could contribute to the field of film studies.

The first chapter that this methodology proposes focuses on the lover, the initial vertex of the triangulation of desire. This section will analyze the portrayal of the main character, examining how their subjectivity is depicted and setting the foundation for understanding their interactions with other characters in the narrative.

The second chapter delves into the beloved, the second vertex. This analysis defines the beloved's role within the triangulation, exploring the romantic dynamics between the protagonist and their object of desire, and how these relationships unfold on screen.

The third chapter investigates the barrier, assessing the qualities or presences that serve as obstacles between the lover and beloved. The analysis examines how the *mise-en-scène* reflects these barriers and how they are perceived by other characters, particularly the beloved.

By structuring film research in this way, I propose a thorough dissection of the triangulation of desire in film form. This approach enables a deep understanding of the protagonists' portrayal and the *mise-en-scène* of their romantic relationships. My aim is to propose a methodology that could critically assess the stylistic choices that convey the characters' experiences and desires on screen.

### **3.1. The Lover**

The first step of the triangulation of desire methodology involves analyzing the initial structural component: the lover. This stage focuses on investigating how the main characters, who embody this role, are depicted in the selected films. The core research question guiding this step is:

*How does the mise-en-scène depict and convey the subjectivity of the characters representing 'the lover' in the selected film(s)?*

This initial section examines the portrayal of the main characters as autonomous subjects, specifically in their role as 'the lover.' It aims to understand how their subjectivity is represented within the narrative, before exploring their interactions with other characters. By analyzing these aspects early on, this step also sets the stage for a broader understanding of the narrative universe, plot, and characters, which will be essential for the following chapters.

As this is a psychoanalytic-driven methodology, this proposal suggests the analysis of the lover's subjectivity by investigating how the Imaginary Order, a Lacanian concept, manifests in the selected films. It is relevant to note that the Imaginary has already been a topic of discussion and thorough examination by film scholars, notably, perhaps one of the most influential analyses would be that of Christian Metz:



The imaginary, by definition, combines within it a certain presence and a certain absence. In the cinema it is not just the fictional signified, if there is one, that is thus made present in the mode of absence, it is from the outset the signifier... the activity of perception which [cinema] involves is real (the cinema is not a phantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror. (Metz, 1982, p. 44)

In the quote above, Metz contends that cinema operates by creating a sense of absence and presence. The spectators immerse themselves in the projected images, concentrating solely on what is displayed before them. However, these images are not the actual objects themselves; rather, they are projections akin to those found in an individual's Imaginary realm. Metz suggests that cinema can thus be viewed as a new form of mirror, one that affords recognition dynamics with the image and its interpretations.

Building on Lacan's mirror stage, Kaja Silverman elaborates on how identification operates within the Imaginary Order, "[t]he mirror stage represents a *méconnaissance*, because the subject identifies with what he or she is not. On the other hand, what he or she sees... is literally his or her own image" (Silverman, 1996, p. 10).

This misrecognition—the identification with an idealized version of oneself—becomes an essential lens for analyzing how the lover is portrayed in film. Silverman's work suggests that scenes where a character engages with literal or metaphorical reflections (mirrors, photographs, or analogous mechanisms such as reflections in water) offer critical insights into their subjectivity.

To apply this framework, this step recommends selecting and analyzing scenes where the lover confronts their reflection or engages with a visual representation that functions as a mirror. Such moments provide opportunities to explore the character's internal world and their sense of self within the narrative.

Points of interest for analysis include camera framings, exploring how the camera lingers on the reflected image and frames the subject. The interaction of *mise-en-scène* elements—such as lighting, staging, spatial arrangements, and costuming—also plays a significant role in constructing the character's subjectivity, as defended by Gibbs (2002). Moreover, it is crucial to observe how the scene evokes feelings of "wholeness" or "unity," simulating the idealized ego associated with the mirror stage. As argued by Silverman, "[w]hereas the impossibility of approximating an ideal image is apprehended by the subject through the fantasy of bodily disintegration, the successful imaginary alignment with an image evokes values like 'wholeness' and 'unity'" (Silverman, 1996, p. 20).

The lover's sense of self is often depicted through carefully crafted visual coherence in these scenes, reflecting the unity and idealization associated with the mirror stage. This process requires analyzing the *mise-en-scène* for its ability to highlight the character's inner world and the tensions between their idealized self and the fragmented reality they inhabit.

However, as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith caution, visual elements like angles, staging and "[f]ramings don't carry absolute or general meanings... Making and watching movies would be a lot simpler if framings carried such hard-and-fast meanings. But the individual films would lose their uniqueness and richness" (Bordwell

et al, 2019, p. 190). This warning is particularly relevant when analyzing the lover's subjectivity. For instance, while low angles might traditionally suggest power, their meaning depends on the specific narrative and aesthetic context of the film. A careful, context-sensitive approach ensures that the richness and uniqueness of each film are preserved.

Finally, Anne Carson's reflections on the lover's pursuit of the beloved provide a deeper understanding of the lover's desires. Carson describes the lover's pursuit not as a quest for unity with the beloved, but as a continuous act of reaching:

It is not the number 'one,' as we have seen in example after example, to which the lover's mind inclines when he is given a chance to express his desire. Maneuvers of triangulation disclose him. For his delight is in reaching; to reach for something perfect would be perfect delight. (Carson, 1986, p. 100)

The lover's desire is driven by an endless pursuit, fueled by *eros*. The very "wholeness" of facing the beloved can be overwhelming, even potentially annihilating. Hence, the study of this unity—or realization of lack when looking at oneself—serves its purpose. This pursuit becomes more complex when a second subject, the beloved, enters, activating the triangulation of desire. Fully understanding this dynamic requires analyzing how the lover's desires interact with the beloved, which will be the focus of the subsequent chapter.

### 3.2. The Beloved

This step focuses on the second structural component of the triangulation of desire: the beloved. It aims to analyze the romantic relationships between the main characters and their objects of desire in the selected films, posing the central question:

*How are the relationship and power dynamics between the lover and the beloved depicted through mise-en-scène in the selected film(s)?*

In contrast to the first chapter, which concentrated on the lover's subjectivity, this chapter delves into the interplay of desire within the romantic relationship between lovers and beloveds, with particular attention to how the gaze and the look are exchanged. Drawing from film and psychoanalytic theory, this step distinguishes between the two modes of perception, exploring their significance in shaping the portrayal of desire and its inherent power dynamics.

The methodology recommends selecting scenes that highlight the exchange of the gaze and look between the lover and the beloved. These moments are analyzed through the *mise-en-scène* to determine who is gazing, who is being gazed at, and how these dynamics construct desire within the cinematic frame. The gaze—whether reciprocal or not—plays a critical role in establishing or dismantling these power structures.

The gaze refers not to simply looking at a subject but rather to the act of gazing upon an object of desire. This gaze carries an uncanny quality, often emanating from an unknown or detached entity that feels more like an object than a subject. Slavoj Žižek explains this phenomenon through the example of a protagonist in a suspense film approaching a house: "The subject's eye sees the house, but the house—the object—

seems somehow to return the Gaze” (Žižek, 2001, p.34). Here, the house represents the unknown object, which returns the gaze to the subject, emphasizing the unsettling power of being gazed at.

Similarly, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze<sup>2</sup> highlights how women are objectified in cinema:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19)

Mulvey argues that the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist, whose gaze transfers to the audience. As a result, the female characters become objects of desire for both the protagonist and the spectator, reinforcing a sense of male omnipotence. In this dynamic, the beloved often plays a passive role, existing to fulfill scopophilic desires, rather than to drive the plot forward.

Kaja Silverman builds on this idea by exploring how the camera functions as an extension of the gaze, shaping the spectator’s experience and positioning them within a visual hierarchy. She argues that the camera is not simply a mechanical device but a complex system of relations: "The camera is less a machine... than a complex field of relations. Some of these relations are extrinsic to the camera... others stem from its particular representational logic" (Silverman, 1996, p. 136). The screen, as Silverman further explains, acts as a mediator between the subject, the gaze, and the spectator, embedding cultural and ideological differences into the visual field: "The screen represents the site at which the gaze is defined for a particular society, and is consequently responsible both for the way... its inhabitants experience the gaze’s effects and for... the visual regime" (Silverman, 1996, p. 135).

The beloved’s role may be one of passive pursuit, trapped by their beauty and out of reach for the lover. Yet, a shift in the trajectory of desire can occur when the beloved gazes back at the lover, actively engaging in the dynamic. As Teresa de Lauretis notes “[i]n the very act of assuming and speaking from the position of subject, a woman could concurrently recognize women as subjects and as objects of female desire” (de Lauretis, 1994, p.5). This shift opens the possibility of mutual recognition between lover and beloved, where both are acknowledged as subjects.

Elsässer and Hagener further clarify the distinction between the gaze and the look:

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Laura Mulvey did not strictly adhere to the term “gaze” from a Lacanian perspective. Jacob Johanssen and Steffen Krüger explain the differentiation as: For Lacan, the gaze is not the same as a look, or a one - directional taking - in of an object by a subject. On the contrary, the gaze is a disturbing phenomenon that, rather than providing instances for feelings of mastery or identification, throws us off course and reveals a hole within both ourselves and our field of vision... Mulvey, although she may have used the notion of the gaze without much regard for its original definition, was more interested in how female bodies are represented and how the look of the male protagonist intersects with this representation. (Johanssen & Krüger, 2022, p. 50) Mulvey did not differentiate between "look" and "gaze" and applied a definition of the gaze that diverges from Lacan's, which emphasizes the gaze as originating from another, unknown entity. However, Mulvey's argument remains significant and has introduced a groundbreaking term to film studies.

[In Lacanian terms], the gaze is linked to the object, while the look pertains to the subject. Despite any illusion of control over our gaze and its perceived influence on the object, any voyeuristic sense of power ultimately derives from the gaze. (Elsässer & Hagener, 2010, pp.102–103)

In this analysis, the gaze implies being observed by an object, while the look suggests a subject actively engaging with their own subjectivity.

To begin the analysis, it is essential to establish a clear framework for scene selection. Identifying scenes where the lover and beloved interact visually is a crucial first step, as these moments allow for an examination of how the gaze and power dynamics are exchanged between the two. Specifically, scenes that feature the lover and beloved in direct engagement—such as shot/reverse-shot sequences—offer valuable material for analysis. Additionally, moments where one character observes the other without reciprocity—or where the gaze is unexpectedly returned—serve as key moments for examining the construction of desire and its potential disruptions. These selected scenes should foreground the relational dynamics between the lover and beloved in the selected films.

Look for scenes where the camera’s framing creates a distinct relationship between the spectator and the subject. This involves noting how the camera positions the viewer as part of a visual hierarchy. “The camera might be said to ‘use’ the pilot who is obliged to click its shutter every time he drops a bomb” (Silverman, 1996, p. 145). In film analysis, study how the camera dictates what is visible and the power relations it enforces between subjects within the frame and the audience.

Examine how the screen introduces cultural and ideological variability into the visual field. Focus on the interplay between what is shown and what is obscured. “[The screen] intervenes... between the gaze and the subject-as-look, and between the object and the subject-as-look” (Silverman, 1996, p. 174). Study the screen’s opacity and its role in substituting ideological constructs for reality. For example, identify moments where the frame draws attention to itself, breaking the illusion of seamless visibility.

Pay attention to how male and female characters are framed differently, particularly in terms of agency and visibility and the presence, or not, of the male gaze. “Woman is subordinated to the male look to realize how precarious or even impossible this alignment is” (Silverman, 1996, p. 140). In shot/reverse-shot sequences, note how gender roles shape the viewer’s identification with the gaze. Analyze how women are often rendered passive or objectified within the visual field.

Analyze the use of lighting, composition, and spatial organization to understand how they create meaning and reinforce or challenge power dynamics. “[T]he wide end of the triangle... signifies not visual mastery... but rather ‘to be in the picture,’ ‘photographed’ by the camera/gaze” (Silverman, 1996, p. 141). Identify how light or framing conveys the subject’s position within spectacle or power hierarchies. For instance, pay attention to whether characters are lit to dominate the frame or to be dominated by it.

Scenes where the beloved gazes back at the lover often reveal a moment of equivalence, where neither character is objectified, and power is more balanced. The beloved’s role in the triangulation of desire is not just to be passively pursued but to reflect the lover’s

desire back, prompting the lover to confront their own lack. Anne Carson describes this shift:

Reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself, the lover is provoked to notice that self and its limits. From a new vantage point, which we might call self-consciousness, he looks back and sees a hole. Where does that hole come from? It comes from the lover's classificatory process... Two lacks become one (Carson, 1986, p.55).

By gazing back, the beloved forces the lover to reflect on the boundaries of their own subjectivity. This reciprocal dynamic allows the characters to assert themselves as subjects within the relationship, contributing actively to the triangulation of desire, rather than merely serving as an object of pursuit.

### 3.3. The Barrier

The third and final step of the triangulation of desire methodology focuses on analyzing the barrier. After establishing the lover's subjectivity and their interactions with the beloved in previous chapters, this step delves into the element that stands between them—the barrier. The barrier is the crucial component that both connects and separates the lover and the beloved, enabling desire by providing the lack that fuels the pursuit. As Lacan succinctly articulates, “[d]esire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but the lack of being whereby the being exists” (Lacan, 1988, p.223). Thus, the barrier is not just an external obstacle but an intrinsic component of desire itself. This chapter aims to answer:

*How is the barrier portrayed in the mise-en-scène of the selected film(s)?*

The barrier can take many forms: a person, a situation, a physical space, or any obstacle that prevents the lover from fully attaining the beloved. Without this third element, the triangulation of desire would collapse, and the narrative tension would dissipate. As Bordwell, Thompson and Smith explain, in classical narrative structures, there is always a "blocking element: an opposition that creates conflict" (Bordwell et al, 2019, p.99). This opposition sustains the lover's pursuit by introducing complications that prevent a quick resolution. Furthermore, obstacles such as physical separation, rival characters, or authority figures function as narrative tools to intensify the tension, as the authors note: “To pile on the obstacles to true love, we could add rivals, unreliable friends, advice-giving confidants, or authority figures such as parents and bosses” (Bordwell et al, 2019, p.328).

To analyze the barrier, this step begins with selecting scenes where the obstacle between the lover and beloved is most apparent. Scenes that highlight physical separation, miscommunication, or moments where external forces interfere with the characters' connection are particularly relevant. For example, shot/reverse-shot sequences where the barrier is visually or symbolically present can emphasize the separation or tension between the characters. Similarly, moments where the characters confront the barrier—whether through direct interaction or through its indirect consequences—should be prioritized.

The analysis should focus on how the barrier is visually and narratively represented within the mise-en-scène. This includes examining its physical manifestation (e.g.,

walls, doors, or physical distance) as well as symbolic representations (e.g., social class, jealousy, or emotional distance). The barrier's role as both a connector and a separator must also be explored. While it may prevent the lover from fully attaining the beloved, it simultaneously fosters moments of tension and interaction, indirectly drawing them closer. As Žižek suggests, "The drive's goal—to reach its object—is 'false,' it masks its 'true' aim, which is to reproduce its own circular movement by way of repeatedly missing its object" (Žižek, 2012, p.294). The barrier thus perpetuates this circular pursuit, maintaining the energy of desire through its very unattainability.

The methodology also suggests analyzing how the barrier fits into the power dynamics established in earlier chapters. Does the barrier reinforce the lover's control over the beloved, or does it amplify the beloved's autonomy? Who ultimately benefits from the barrier, and how does its presence influence the broader narrative? The interplay of power within the *mise-en-scène*—through elements such as framing, spatial arrangements, and lighting—must be scrutinized. For instance, scenes where the lover is framed as actively attempting to overcome the barrier can reflect their dominance, while scenes where the beloved is positioned as distant or out of reach might emphasize their agency or resistance.

This analysis shows that barriers can manifest in various forms and functions within the narrative. While one barrier may serve primarily to separate, another may connect, yet all barriers play a role in sustaining desire by preventing complete union. In psychoanalytic terms, the barrier represents the structural "lack" that is always present in desire, ensuring that the pursuit continues.

In conclusion, this chapter explores how barriers influence the power dynamics within the triangulation of desire. Whether it is a person, an object, or a situation, the barrier always introduces a lack that shapes the lover's pursuit and deepens the complexity of the relationship. Through this analysis, the triangulation of desire in film form reveals how eros operates within these unsound structures, highlighting the tension that both unites and estranges the characters.

## **4. Conclusion**

The triangulation of desire methodology seeks to address key questions regarding what is seen, who holds power, and how these dynamics are portrayed in film narratives. To achieve this, the proposal draws on key theoretical frameworks, particularly the works of Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis, as well as Anne Carson, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey.

### **4.1 Summary of Key Findings**

The definition of the triangulation of desire is central to this framework. Anne Carson's explanation of desire as inherently triangular—comprising the lover, the beloved, and the barrier—was especially significant. As Carson states: "Desire cannot be perceived apart from these three angles... Eros is always a story in which lover, beloved, and the difference between them interact" (Carson, 1986, pp. 218–219). This methodology builds on Carson's concept of desire rooted in lack, arguing that a barrier is essential for

sustaining the pursuit between lover and beloved. Without this obstacle, the desire would be fulfilled, and thus extinguished.

The methodology proposes isolating each component—lover, beloved, and barrier—within the film to better understand the dynamics of desire and how the characters are depicted through the act of seeing and being seen. Through this structure, the research clarifies how these relationships play out on screen.

The key questions surrounding how each character is perceived by the lover and beloved remain central to this analysis. Understanding the roles within the triangulation is crucial to comprehending the dynamics of desire: the lover must continuously strive to bridge the gap between themselves and the beloved, without fully closing it. The beloved, in turn, must return the gaze to avoid being reduced to a passive figure, asserting their subjectivity. The barrier ensures that the lack—the driving force of desire—remains, either drawing the lovers together or keeping them apart. This constant tension between proximity and separation is essential to the structure of the triangulation.

By tracing the triangulation of desire, this methodology offers a tool for assessing whether a film presents non-objectifying and non-passive representations of romantic relationships. It provides a valuable lens for exploring the portrayal of power dynamics, whether they reinforce or challenge traditional cinematic representations of desire.

## **4.2 Limitations**

The triangulation of desire is a methodology designed to study the portrayal of desire and its power dynamics in romantic relationships within film. While its structured framework provides a clear and focused approach, it also introduces certain limitations. Rooted in psychoanalysis and its foundational concept of desire as lack, the methodology is inherently rigid. It is tailored specifically for the analysis of romantic narratives and struggles to adapt to broader contexts, such as platonic or non-romantic relationships.

Furthermore, the outcomes of a triangulation of desire analysis are shaped by the selected films, their time periods, and their genres. Cinema is a product of its historical, cultural, and social contexts, meaning that focusing exclusively on desire risks overlooking the broader forces that contribute to a film's narrative. Political, economic, and cultural factors often influence how relationships and power dynamics are depicted, and neglecting these dimensions can limit the scope and depth of the analysis.

Another significant limitation lies in the exclusive reliance on psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis offers valuable insights into the unconscious dynamics of desire, it tends to abstract these dynamics from their social realities. As such, it is less equipped to account for intersectional factors, such as class, race, or gender orientations, which are integral to shaping both the characters and their relationships. For instance, how gender intersects with power is central to the gaze, while class and racial hierarchies can define how characters are positioned within a narrative. Failing to address these dimensions risks reducing the complexity of the narratives under scrutiny.

To overcome these challenges, complementary methodologies such as intersectional feminist perspectives and discourse analysis can enrich the triangulation of desire

framework. Judith Butler's theories on the performative nature of gender (1990) and Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis (1997) provide critical tools for interrogating how social hierarchies and identities are constructed and represented in media. These approaches allow for an examination of how systems of oppression—such as patriarchy, racism, and classism—intersect to shape the relationships depicted on screen.

Discourse analysis, as articulated by Michel Foucault (1972), also offers a way to uncover the power relations embedded in language and visual representation. This method could be used to analyze how a film's dialogue, narrative, and *mise-en-scène* work together to reinforce or challenge existing power structures. By integrating these additional perspectives, the triangulation of desire methodology can broaden its scope, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how societal, political, and economic forces interact with desire and its representation.

Ultimately, while the triangulation of desire provides a robust and focused framework for examining romantic relationships in film, it benefits from being paired with complementary approaches. Expanding the methodology to incorporate intersectional and discursive perspectives would enhance its ability to engage with the multifaceted dynamics of power and desire, ensuring a more comprehensive and socially attuned analysis of cinematic narratives.

### **4.3 Future Applications of the Methodology**

The triangulation of desire methodology was devised with cinema in mind, encompassing feature films, short films, television series, video art, and other forms of fictional audiovisual material. Its primary aim is to analyze romantic relationships and their associated power dynamics as represented through the visual and narrative elements of cinema. By focusing on *mise-en-scène* and employing a psychoanalytic framework, the methodology provides a structured approach for studying desire and its manifestations on screen.

While the methodology was specifically designed for film studies, its potential application could potentially extend beyond this domain. For instance, future research could explore whether the methodology might be adapted for analyzing visual and narrative structures in other areas of communication studies, such as social media, advertising, or digital storytelling. Although these extensions were not part of the original scope envisioned in this proposal, they present intriguing possibilities for future inquiry.

Within the domain of film studies, the methodology holds significant promise for analyzing a wide range of genres, eras, and cultural contexts. For example, it could be applied to examine romantic relationships in classical Hollywood cinema, exploring how the barriers in these narratives reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles. Alternatively, it could analyze contemporary global cinema to investigate how cultural specificities shape the dynamics of lover, beloved, and barrier. Romantic comedies, historical dramas, and even science fiction films provide fertile ground for applying the methodology to diverse cinematic traditions as these genres could offer different representations of barriers and power dynamics.

Moreover, as questions of intersectionality become increasingly central to academic discourse, this methodology could serve as a foundation for studying how class, race, gen-



der, and sexuality intersect within cinematic representations of romantic desire. For instance, applying this framework to films that center LGBTQ+ relationships or narratives from underrepresented cultures could yield valuable insights into how power and desire are constructed in non-dominant contexts.

In conclusion, while the triangulation of desire methodology was designed specifically for cinema, it offers a flexible and adaptable framework for investigating desire and power dynamics. Future studies might expand its scope to other media or refine its application to address a broader range of social, cultural, and technological contexts.

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<https://doi.org/10.3917/rip.261.0439>

**Funding:** The research project has no funding.

**Conflict of interest:** the authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**English translation:** provided by the authors.

#### HOW TO CITE (APA 7<sup>a</sup>)

De Martini Melo, H. (2024). The Triangulation of Desire: A Psychoanalytic Three-Part Structure of Desire and Power in Film. *Comunicación & Métodos - Communication & Methods*, 6(2), 34-51. <https://doi.org/10.35951/v6i2.232>