



# If Žižek look awry at The Sleep of Endymion

## The Way of Seeing Painting in *S/Z*

Yuqi Pan<sup>1, a</sup>, Huachen Xiong<sup>2, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, Shantou, China

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of International Tourism and Management, City University of Macau, China

<sup>a</sup>22yqpan@stu.edu.cn; <sup>b</sup>BertXiong@163.com

**Abstract.** In the post-structuralist text *S/Z*, Roland Barthes believed that the "real meaning" of Anne-Louis Girodet's oil painting *The Sleep of Endymion* was "castration", and used "castration meaning" to cancel the interpretation of the art. Lacan, however, believes that there is still surplus after castration, and *object petit a* is the leftover of the Real. Slavoj Žižek further interprets Lacan and believes that art itself has been castrated in the works of art. However, because of the existence of *object petit a*, the leftover of the Real, he does not cancel the interpretation of the works of art, but instead advocates to squint and look at the existence of *object petit a* beyond the Symbolic Order of the art viewer, so as to explain why the "real meaning" is. This paper interprets the relevant texts in *S/Z* with "Looking awry", analyzes the Symbolic Order produced by the Marquis when she watches *The Sleep of Endymion* in the text, and obtains that the "real meaning" of this oil painting in *S/Z* is "feminine beauty".

**Keywords:** *S/Z*; *The Sleep of Endymion*; Looking awry; The real meaning

## 1 Introduction

John Keats praised in his poem "Endymion": *A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness*; Just like the image of *The Sleep of Endymion*, born in Greek mythology, embodied in sculpture, colored in oil painting, and filled with emotion in literary works.

The French painter Anne-Louis Girodet's *The Sleep of Endymion* (1791) (Figure 1) depicts such a picture: the sleeping Endymion lies naked on its side, with children opening the sheltered plants, revealing the dim moonlight and falling on the soft body and beautiful face. Here, moonlight expresses the metaphor of "fondling".



**Fig. 1.** Anne-Louis Girodet's *The Sleep of Endymion* (1791)<sup>1</sup>

Arriving at the French novelist Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Endymion entered the realistic novel and became "La Zambinella" - the "rich, sweet creations of ancient Greece"<sup>2</sup> in the eyes of the sculptor *Sarrasine*, but at the same time he was a castrated singer played by the Cardinal. Then, I went to Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, which changed *Sarrasine* (the story of a castration singer) into a "castration" story. Endymion (also known as "Zambinella") symbolized "castration" (i.e., "decentralized" man) in later structuralist texts. In other words, the "beauty" of Endymion is gradually disappearing, and "vanishes" in *S/Z*.

In *S/Z*, Barthes "castrated" the meaning of Endymion while taking "castration" as the meaning itself. In other words, "castration" is empty, and "real meaning" no longer exists. But Žižek believed that "the real event, the very dimension of the Real, was in how this reality appeared to observers and in the hopes thus awakened in them"<sup>3</sup>. This is because the subject in the Symbolic Order is difficult to find the lost *object petit a*, but is always attracted by *object petit a* to carry out observation activities - then, *object petit a* is both the reason and the purpose, and should be interpreted as the "real meaning" (this view will be further explained below). Therefore, the search for "real meaning" should be based on the Symbolic Order of the observer's active or passive awakening. Based on Lacan's "Symbolic Order", this paper will re-read the text of *S/Z* about *The Sleep of Endymion*, and interpret the "real meaning" of the oil painting *The Sleep of Endymion* for the viewers in the text.

## 2 The "real meaning" is "*object petit a*"

Among the three art schools mentioned above, their applications of *The Sleep of Endymion* is violent: romanticism destroys the rules, realism exposes the darkness, and post-structuralism "kills" the author. From this point of view, these artistic genres always achieve their goals by means of violence, thus gaining some significance and value. But in Žižek's view, Coca-Cola bottles can also occupy the lofty position of art.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, art is only an object placed in the artistic position. The meaning of this

object is explained by others, and it is not art itself. In other words, *The Sleep of Endymion*, which occupies the position of art, can be arbitrarily replaced (who can't say that it can't be a Coca-Cola bottle "killing" the author?). So, in this sense, what is "real art"? Does "real meaning" exist?

In combination with Lacan's Symbolic Order diagram (Figure 2), according to Žižek's interpretation,  $\Phi$  is composed of "Jouissance",  $S(A \setminus)$  embodies "the lack in the Other", *object petit a* is "the real object, lack and residue", and "starts the symbolic movement of interpretation", because *object petit a* always needs to be explained, but it is also the "blank" that cannot be obtained.<sup>5</sup> In short, the subject needs to be identified before entering the symbolic domain, which is what Lacan said. First, the fantasy of the mother should be castrated under the patriarchal system.  $S(A \setminus)$  is the subject after being castrated by the Symbolic Order, and *a* is the lost object of the castrated subject. It should be added that at this time, *object petit a* is not the original desire, but the perfect desire object, a "nonexistent object", which is constructed retroactively after the subject is castrated, always attracts the subject to carry out activities to maintain the operation of Symbolic Order. Then, in the Symbolic Order of art aesthetics, *object petit a* is the ultimate meaning of aesthetic behavior. In other words, the "real meaning" is *object petit a*, which cannot be obtained but always exists. "The non-existence of object a" just echoes the "artistic vacancy". To understand the operation of a certain aesthetic Symbolic Order, we should clarify the relationship between *object petit a*, the Other and Jouissance on the basis of finding out *object petit a* (the ultimate meaning).

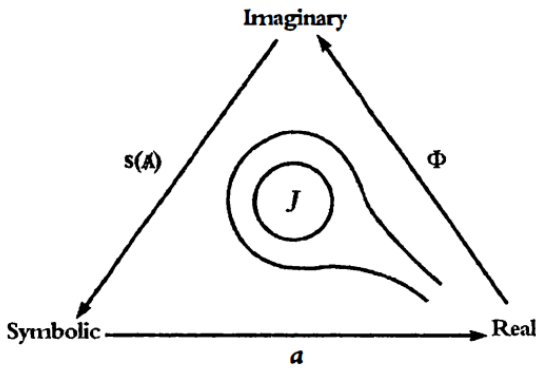


Fig. 2. (Žižek, S., 2008<sup>b</sup>: 209)<sup>5</sup>

Then the relationship between art object and "real art" is further discussed. In Žižek's view, objects become works of art only because they 'displayed in - made to occupy, to fill in - the sacred place of the Thing'<sup>3</sup>. He put forward the following points in *THE FRAGILE ABSOLUTE*:

The very fundamental matrix of sublimation, that of the central Void, the empty ('sacred') place of the Thing exempted from the circuit of everyday economy, which is then filled in by a positive object that is thereby 'elevated to the dignity of the Thing

(Lacan's definition of sublimation), seems to be increasingly under threat; what is threatened is the very gap between the empty Place and the (positive) element filling it in. If, then, the problem of traditional premodern art was how to fill in the sublime Void of the Thing (the pure Place) with an adequately beautiful object-how to succeed in elevating an ordinary object to the dignity of a Thing-the problem of modern art is, in a way, the opposite (and much more desperate) one.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, we can further understand that 'sacred position' is 'blank', and then 'real art' is also 'empty' that cannot be reached. He also pointed out that in terms of the choice of objects, traditional art is to seek perfect objects to complete the art, and hope to approach or even reach the lofty objects. Therefore, the 'sublime sense' of objects makes traditional art close to 'sublime objects', which makes us ignore the existence of empty spaces - for example, the mythical image of Endymion. Until the development of modern art, there has been a change in the choice of objects, and a piece of garbage can also become a work of art: a completely 'out of place' element occupies the 'pure position' of noble objects.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the difference between the nature of the object and the sublime object is no longer a gap, but is magnified to be detectable. At this time, the 'gap' between the 'art' and the 'art' will appear - because the 'art vacancy' can never be reached. Of course, this is not to say that only modern art has a 'gap' between objects and 'art'. We need to realize that 'the gap of art' has always existed. So no matter what kind of objects we choose to fill, 'real art' can never be reached.

Žižek has shown that our aesthetic objects are often 'to be taken literally', because they are not 'real' objects.<sup>4</sup> In other words, these artistic entities are only a symbol (a symbol, a name) of the aesthetic object, and there is no essential difference. So what matters is what the 'real object' is. For example, the painting *The Sleep of Endymion* by Girodie also symbolizes 'the liberation of human nature'<sup>①</sup> in Girodie, 'the dark feudal society' in *Sarrasine*, and 'the infection of castration' in *S/Z*. That is to say, the artistic entity is in the symbolic domain, and has different symbolic objects and meanings, but the real aesthetic object is in the real domain, which needs further exploration and excavation in the Symbolic Order. As shown in Figure 2, the symbolic domain and the real domain belong to the Symbolic Order. Lacan 'takes real as the starting point and basis of the symbolic process'<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the 'artistic entity' in the symbolic domain has been damaged by symbolization and lost its authenticity. Symbolization can tamper with real things at will, and it is the product of Symbolic Order. In this sense, the 'entity' of art not only occupies the 'empty space', but also becomes a completely 'irrelevant' 'symbol'. At this time, aesthetic experience is only related to 'real' objects. Therefore, the argument goes back to the original question: Why does *S/Z* use 'castration' as the meaning of oil painting?

First of all, we should understand what 'castration' is. In *Sarrasine*, the sculptor *Sarrasine* uses the imaginary Zambinella as a copy for sculpture, but in reality, Zambinella is a castrated singer who is not male but not female and is maimed by the custom of 'castration'. *S/Z* further rewrote the novel as a story of 'castration', and regarded the

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<sup>①</sup>The French painter Anne-Louis Girodet's *The Sleep of Endymion* (1791) was created in France at the end of the 18th century, during the period of transition from neoclassicism to romanticism, reflecting the emphasis on human emancipation and freedom of thought.

'castrated' Zambinella as the source of infection of 'castration', thus starting a series of 'castration' anecdotes. Since 'castration' has destroyed the traditional gender order, Barthes established the Symbolic Order of 'castration /being castrated': among them, the castrators include Mme de Lanty, Bouchardon and Sappho, and others; the castrated include Sarrasine, the narrator; the girl the narrator is in love with (the Marquis) and Zambinella are both castrating and castrated at the same time, 'sliding' between the two identities.<sup>2</sup> It is the uncertainty of identity brought about by this 'slip' that leads to the non-existence of the boundary, and the middle slash becomes the 'deleted slash'.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, 'castration /being castrated' has no opposite relationship, and the Symbolic Order is 'castration' ('emptiness') itself.

In addition to the symbolic meaning of "castration" of the characters, the works of art in *S/Z* are also related to "castration". Relevant sentences in the original text are as follows:

(1) it (the statue) implies ideally the plenitude and truth of the inside (which is why it is a tragedy that this inside is empty, castrated).

(2) The painting, by contrast, may have a back, but it has no inside: it cannot provoke the indiscreet act by which one might try to find out what there is behind the canvas...a canvas more simply, blurs (as happens, in its self-destruction, to the "unknown masterpiece").

(3) but writing extenuates stilt further the hallucination of the inside, for it has no other substance than the interstice.<sup>2</sup>

*S/Z* believes that "castrated" works of art will bring aesthetic risks of "castration" - because "castration is a pandemia"<sup>2</sup>, and the "castrated" works of art will infect the copy and viewer. In this way, these three artworks "slip" between the identity of "castration" and "castration" and become "castration" itself - which is also the meaning of these artworks.

In Žižek's view, this definition of meaning is an attempt to "remove the barriers or prohibitions that prevent access to it", hoping to touch the real "art" and the real aesthetic object - traditional artists have made many efforts to achieve "it", including a "suicide" that "carries information":

First there is, of course, suicide as an act that 'bears a message' (of protest against political, erotic, and so on, disappointment) ... for the simple reason that the subject who accomplishes it is sustained in it by the imagined scene of the effect his or her act will have on posterity, on its witnesses, on the public, on those who will learn about it... Then there is suicide in the Real: the subject's full and direct identification with the object.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, the "suicide" of "art" makes "self" become the real "self", and the subject and object are completely unified. The sculpture, oil painting and text in *S/Z* bear the identity of "castration" and "castration". The subject and object are completely unified, which is a kind of "suicide"; Moreover, *S/Z* itself is also a "suicide" of "carrying information" (declaring "the author is dead"): it has canceled the "narrative structure", "narrative grammar" or "narrative logic",<sup>2</sup> and deleted the external form of "text" as far as possible - *S/Z* describes the meaning of "castration" with the "castration" of "text".

Here, *S/Z* hopes to get "real text" - "the starred text" by killing "text".<sup>2</sup> So, can art reach "real art" after "suicide"?

As a matter of fact, once the aesthetic activities are produced, "real art" becomes impossible. According to the Lacan L diagram (as shown in Figure 3), subject *S(Es)* can only touch *a'(other)* in the imaginary domain and the other self *a(moi)* in the Symbolic. *S* is always seeking "real art", but does not know that *S* itself is only "the unconscious subject"<sup>7</sup> formed by the *A(Other)*. This is also what Žižek said, "the subject cannot recognize itself"<sup>4</sup> before it forms the subject. In other words, *S* is unconsciously castrated by *A* to produce residue without knowing it, then *S* will continue to "question" and the Symbolic Order (including *S* itself) will be maintained. So, for Žižek, "the only way to solve this paradox is to admit that there must be an undigested residue in the process of symbolization, namely *object petit a*".<sup>8</sup> Figuratively, no matter how close the subject (art object) and the object (real art) are to each other in the Moebius strip,<sup>4</sup> there is always a "gap" called *object petit a*. In this way, art can not only touch "real art", but can only get "emptiness" (that is, *object petit a*). Therefore, in the aesthetic activities, once the Symbolic Order is formed, the essence of the "plural text" obtained in *S/Z* is nothing - is not castration nothing? But not nothing! The obtained "meaning" exists in the imaginary and symbolic domains formed by the Great Other, "castration" can be interpreted more, but it does not touch the Real. So how can we find the "real meaning"?

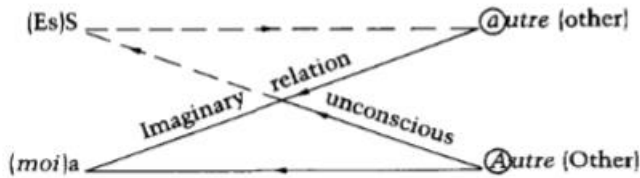


Fig. 3. (Ragland-Sullivan, E., 1987: 2)<sup>7</sup>

From the above analysis, we can see that in the Symbolic Order, the interpretation of the *Other* castrated the art object, leaving the *object petit a*. Therefore, here in Žižek, like *S/Z*, the ideal of destroying the Symbolic Order and moving towards an outside world that is not controlled by the *Other* is not tenable - because he believes that there is no subject and object outside the Symbolic Order. Based on this, this paper believes that the artistic aesthetics of *S/Z* is to show the "real art" that is not present with the presence of the art. Therefore, it focuses on the form of the presence of the art and the castration significance of the art (i.e., "internal illusion"). However, Žižek's artistic aesthetics is a parallax view, which makes the object a hidden in the previous symbolic

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<sup>2</sup>In Chapter of *S/Z*, *The Broken Text* (page 14), Barthes proposed that the meaning of reading is to obtain the plural of the text, which can outline the three-dimensional space of writing. At this time, the meaning unit obtained is not reunited and obtained again (that is, the meta meaning), which is the ultimate structure we give to the meaning unit. So after reading *Sarrasine*, Barthes devoted himself to writing "plural" (i.e. *S/Z*).

field appear in the new symbolic field.<sup>8</sup> So if we want to study the aesthetic problems of art in *S/Z*, we might as well squint to see the old *object petit a* in the new Symbolic Order.

### 3 *Object petit a* is a “Imaginary rival”

In chapter *From Sculpture to Painting*, *S/Z* refers to the aesthetics of three types of artwork: sculpture, painting and writing, and argues that sculpture is a facsimile of La Zambinella, painting is a facsimile of sculpture, and writing is a facsimile of all three, with the following relevant statements in the original text.

(1) Sarrasine dead, La Zambinella emigrates from statue to canvas: something dangerous has been contained, exorcised, pacified.

(2) As for the final avatar the passage of the canvas to written "representation,"...<sup>2</sup>

So what is this painting? And what is the object, the subject, of the aesthetic of this oil painting? *S/Z* contains the relevant description.

Passed down along the duplicative chain in the paintings of Vien and Girodet, the sinister story of La Zambinella grows distant, no longer exists save as a vague, moon-struck enigma, mysterious without being offensive (although the mere sight of the painted Adonis will reactivate the castrating metonymy: it is because she is seduced by it that the young woman provokes the narrator to the narrative that will castrate both of them).<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the canvases under discussion here are those of Vien and Girodet. But this oil painting should also be in the story of *Sarrasine*, which conveys the story of Zambinella, and it is Countess Rochefide's viewing of Vien's oil painting that gives rise to the narrator's narrative (the textual art to be discussed in the next chapter) and, therefore, to what we are discussing: Countess Rochefide gazing down, Vien's painting.

Returning to the text of *Sarrasine*, Countess Rochefide reacts as follows when viewing Vien's painting.

"Does such a perfect creature exist?" she asked me, after having, with a soft smile of contentment, examined the exquisite grace of the contours, the pose, the color, the hair; in short, the entire picture. "he is too beautiful for a man," she added, after an examination such as she might have made of some rival.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that the aesthetic experience of Countess Rochefide viewing the painting was one of jealousy. Adonis is a famous and beautiful man from ancient Greek mythology who was used as an object of emulation by artists from different fields such as Shakespeare and Titian. In Vien's painting, Countess Rochefide finds Adonis 'too beautiful' and even feels that she has 'an additional rival'.

As John Berger said, female is a sight.<sup>9</sup> One could say that when Countess Rochefide gazes at the painting, her inner self is also gazing at her outer self, seeing in the 'perfect' man her own 'imperfection' as a woman. In this sense, Adonis is a man in the painting, but also a landscape. Here, then, it is implied that Adonis, as a copy of Zambinella's copy, meets the aesthetic criteria of the female figure.

The *S/Z* already states that "La Zambinella is Super-Woman", but at the same time a "sub-man"<sup>12</sup> (i.e. a perfect woman and a castrated man by nature, both desirable and

absolutely abhorrent, and it is Adonis in the painting who is Adonis in the painting is the "Super-Woman" side). But it cannot be overlooked that the Adonis in the painting is also 'sub-masculine' in nature. In *S/Z*, it is described that:

a canvas more simply, blurs (as happens, in its self-destruction, to the "unknown masterpiece").<sup>2</sup>

It is also a risk, in the case of *S/Z*, that the risk of the painting lies in the desire for 'perfection', but the painting itself is a vertical aggregate of 'perfection/nothingness', with an emasculating nature.

However, in the context of the textual analysis of *Sarrasine*, this essay argues that the risk of the 'aesthetic of painting' is not so much a desire for 'perfection' as it is a desire for the 'perfect self'. In the context of psychoanalysis, when Countess Rochefide gazes at Adonis in the painting, she is in fact looking at herself in the 'mirror'. She sees Adonis as an 'imaginary rival' and, as John Berger argued above, Adonis then becomes a sight that has lost its masculinity and has only characteristics that can be compared to those of a woman. This is what Žižek calls the *cogito* of the 'post-traumatic subject', whose identity can no longer be defined through the telling of her own story.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, women lose their subjectivity under the male gaze. In this context, therefore, Countess Rochefide, by looking at Vien's painting, is in fact walking into the male gaze, losing her subjectivity - falling into a situation of 'emasculating', while the object of her gaze is Vien's painting, or the painting "The subject is Vien's painting, or the 'perfect' Adonis, which is essentially the 'feminine beauty'.

In this way, the "aesthetic of the painting" is in fact a Symbolic Order of "feminine beauty" under the male gaze. In the context of psychoanalytic theory, it is the male (the social attribute) who is the real *Other*, above the real woman (Countess Rochefide), who sees in the painting only a mirror image of the woman (Adonis in the painting), an image of the woman produced by the violent intervention of the male - the "perfect" woman who exists in the realm of the imagination. The "perfect" woman, and the woman who seeks "perfection" in the Symbolic. The real *object petit a*, however, is the real 'perfection', that is, the 'feminine beauty'. For Žižek, "feminine beauty is absolute, it is the appearance of the absolute", but the seductive body inevitably turns into a decaying body.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the seduction of 'feminine beauty' leads one into a spiral of nothingness - because the essence of *object petit a* is 'nothingness'.

According to Žižek's vision of art, the painting (and Adonis in the painting) is placed in the empty space of art, representing the 'femal beauty' that is created by the male gaze, the rift between the Real and the Symbolic, and the impossible *object petit a*. Therefore, it is not only men who are looking for their perfect female object, but also women who are seeking perfection in themselves in order to meet the male standard of 'perfection'. In this context, women stare at women (or men with the quality of 'feminine beauty', the neutral) as endless 'imaginary rivals' developed for them by men, who can always see their own imperfections and seek a 'perfection' that can never be reached. Women are always able to see their own imperfections, to seek the "perfection" that they can never achieve, and to feel pain and fear as a result. It is clear that the "male gaze" is a kind of "female subject" hidden under a false one.

The subjectivity of Countess Rochefide is denied by the violence of society's male gaze and is unable to establish an independent Symbolic Order. In the postmodern



feminist vision, where men and women are one and the same, it is only then that we can look at them from different angles (look awry) and see that the so-called 'feminine beauty' is in fact based on the discipline of masculinity. Interestingly, when Countess Rochefide 'castrates' the narrator (refusing to be 'sexual'), she does so by 'self-castrating' - "she dresses up this retreat from sex, dignifies it by putting it under the comforting and ennobling authority of a high moral code"<sup>2</sup> says Barthes - also because she loses her subjectivity under the male gaze and can only speak of the pessimisation of her self-identity (including her sexual relationships) in terms of the "moral code" of male society, rejecting the narrator by denying herself. The 'male gaze' here is therefore a 'culturalisation of politics' that emphasises the competitiveness of female appearance and exerts tremendous collective pressure to weaken other female forces in sex market, thereby the male domination of society is maintained.<sup>5</sup> This externally imposed violence is often seen as part of an internal construction of subjectivity - a culture that the 'I' sees as 'my culture', against which there is no resistance. For example, women in a patriarchal society see sexual attraction as the highest power and think they can therefore take the initiative. At this point, the subject no longer sees self-examination as a pain, but as a spontaneous drive, an act of transformation that Žižek calls "tolerance": "Tolerance is their post-political ersatz."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the subject becomes a "freely chosen subject" in a culture of "tolerance", and this "tolerated violence" is a kind of root violence that exists in order to dissipate the pain caused by self-inflicted violence. This "tolerated violence" is a kind of root violence, which exists in order to counteract the suffering caused by self-inflicted violence.

It is clear from the above that the 'aesthetic of the painting' is actually carried out within the Symbolic Order of the 'male gaze', and that the 'feminine beauty' as an aesthetic object is essentially an impossible, inaccessible object. The "feminine beauty" as an aesthetic object is essentially an impossible, inaccessible object. This "feminine beauty" becomes a source of inspiration for men, allowing them to develop a constant stream of "imaginary rivals" that make women jealous. In the Symbolic Order of the 'male gaze', women are unable to see the 'violence of the gaze' to which they are subjected. That is to say, women blame their own defects and fear that they may not live up to male aesthetic standards. Looking awry at *The Sleep of Endymion*, then, the viewer's view is that I am seeking a 'feminine beauty' that I cannot attain under the Symbolic Order of the 'male gaze'.

## 4 Conclusion

To sum up, in *S/Z* Barthes uses 'castration' as a decentered and deleted axis, i.e. 'castration' exists as the ultimate meaning. Placed in the context of the artwork, this "castration" is what Žižek calls the "emptiness" of the artistic position. Thus, when *S/Z* gazes at *The Sleep of Endymion*, it considers it to be a painting of "castration" and is able to transmit that "castration" to the viewer, who is "castrated" by it. It is the nature of its emptiness that makes the viewer perceive meaning as invalid. But in the context of Lacan's Symbolic Order, this 'castration' implies the loss of the subject, and the lost object is the *a*, meanwhile the *objet petit a* is the 'real meaning'. Žižek further points

out that if one can stand outside this Symbolic Order and look at it awry, one can see the *object petit a* of *S/Z* as "emasculated". Thus, by analysing the overall construction of the Symbolic Order in which the Countess Rochefide looks at *The Sleep of Endymion*, this paper obtains that the 'true meaning' of *The Sleep of Endymion* in *S/Z* is the 'feminine beauty' under the 'male gaze'. The "true meaning" of "The Eternal Sleep of Endymion" in *S/Z* is the "feminine beauty" of the "male gaze". Therefore, in the opinion of this essay, there is nothing wrong with *S/Z* considering "castration" to be the "true meaning" of the painting, but the "gap" of "castration" here is not filled. The 'gap' cannot be filled, but it is possible to read this *object petit a* as 'feminine beauty' outside the Symbolic Order in which the viewer is placed -an absolute beauty.

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