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Spectatorship and Subjectivity

E. Deidre Pribram

The study of spectatorship is an attempt to understand why we choose to sit in the movie theater seat or on the living-room sofa captivated by a screen. What is it that makes the experience so pleasurable, desirable, meaningful – given that viewing subjects position themselves as filmic or televisual spectators voluntarily, in very large numbers, and with frequent repetition? What are the relationships between individual and filmic process: how are we linked to screen, narrative, character? Who exactly is the subject seated before the screen, involved in an activity which has been described as everything from passive absorption to active production of the text?

Concepts of the spectator are inseparable from theories of the human subject. That is, notions of spectatorship, while not identical to, change in conjunction with, evolving or altering conceptualizations of subjectivity. The three “subjects” discussed here – psychoanalytic, discursive, and social – are all post-structuralist in that they are constructed through socio-cultural and ideological forces. This is in contrast to the humanist subject of the age of Enlightenment through modernism, a unified, coherent being who is able to know “truth.” In the latter schema, the universe operates according to rules of logic and reason which “man” can ascertain. Rationality and science, emanating from the humanist subject, replace the earlier ordering of divine providence.

Post-structuralism, in contrast, posits a decentered, noncoherent, externally constructed rather than internally originating subject. The study of (post-structuralist) spectatorship is the search for what constitutes the person seated in front of the movie or television screen, and an exploration of which configurations, out of limitless possibilities, constitute viewing subjects so that they see themselves, the text, and the world(s) it represents within specific systems of meaning.

1 The Psychoanalytic Subject

The psychoanalytic concepts used in film studies are based on the work of French theorist Jacques Lacan, who, in turn, built upon Sigmund Freud's

pioneering work on the unconscious, sexuality, and subject formation. Freud hypothesized that children are introduced into sexuality in the first few, formative years of life. Believing that the myth of Oedipus Rex mirrors the desires and events of infant sexuality, Freud based his description on the Greek myth in which Oedipus, unwittingly, kills his father and marries his mother. In the Oedipus complex, the male infant develops a desire for his mother and comes to perceive his father, who is the rival for his mother's affection, as the obstacle to the fulfillment of his desire. The outcome is that the boy identifies strongly with the father in order that he can take the father's place vis-à-vis the mother. In other words, he *becomes* the father so that he can desire the mother, and so, "woman." For female infants, the process is similar but the inverse: the object of desire is the father and identification occurs in relation to the mother.

But in either case, the oedipal stage and its resolution enable the child to take up its assigned place in terms of gender identification, or "sexual difference." It is at this moment that the infant emerges into a world ordered by sexed selfhood, that is masculinity and femininity.

Indebted to Freud, Lacan was also extremely influenced by linguistics and structuralism, which attributed culture and consciousness to the acquisition of language. Without language, we cannot develop a sense of ourselves as individuated, cognitive beings. Integrating Freudian analysis with contemporary work on structural linguistics, Lacan's description of human formative development tracks how the infant becomes acculturated, how he or she is brought into being as a member of society. The penis of Freudian sexuality (which the girl infant is aware she lacks, the boy infant fearing a similar "castration") becomes the phallus – the bearer of male identity, that is, of patriarchal power. In this scenario the child emerges not only into sexual difference but into a larger patriarchal order. To resolve the Oedipus complex in language is to take one's place as a member within phallogocentric culture.

In Lacan's analysis, the first stage of this process for the infant is the Imaginary – "Imaginary" not only in the sense of illusory, but as a pre-linguistic order dominated by images. This is the world of the mother, a world of unity, connectedness, fullness, and satisfaction, in which the infant and mother are one. The infant has no sense of itself as a separate being but only as part of the mother. The second stage is the Mirror Phase, in which the infant recognizes its own reflected image, suggesting that it is a separate being. Finally, there is the Symbolic. This is the world of the father, the world of language, of meaning production, of law in the sense of cultural order, concepts of justice and morality, and so on. It is into the Symbolic that the infant steps at the end of its early, formative years, at the resolution of the Oedipus complex and at the moment of language acquisition. These three stages – the Imaginary, the Mirror Phase, and the Symbolic – together constitute the subject; in Lacan's system, the process of moving through these phases establishes the infant as subjective being.

As the stage of oneness with the mother, the Imaginary is considered illusory because such unity does not materially exist and because the phase, of necessity, must pass. However, the infant, as she or he grows, is "haunted by the memory of this original illusory experience of plenitude when baby and world were one" (Gledhill 1984: 30). This is the desire for the mother outlined in the Oedipus complex; it is a desire for connectedness and the longing to return to a state of fullness which stays with the child as he or she grows up and long after having entered the Symbolic.

The entry into the world of language occurs when the child realizes the concept of difference. The illusion of unity with the mother, and therefore with the world, is broken, and the infant becomes aware of itself as a separate being. The world becomes differentiated into the self or subject versus objects and others. The moment of entry into the Symbolic, into culture, is a function of realizing the difference between self and Other. The establishment of one's subjectivity cannot occur without comparison to an objectified Other.

While the Imaginary is a world of unity, the Symbolic is a world of separation and loss. But the child must accept entry into the Symbolic as the process of becoming an adult and taking up one's position as a social being. Simultaneously, however, the longing for the Imaginary is never lost, establishing the unconscious as the location for these unfulfilled desires. Further, the unity of the Imaginary can never be retrieved in its original state of wholeness or plenitude, but only as phantasy, in which other objects or representations act as temporary replacements or equivalences. This produces a never-ceasing sense of lack, provoking the subject into a constant search for the replenishment of unity and fullness, the achievement of which must always be deferred.

Film scholars such as Christian Metz have taken Lacan's work and theorized that the cinematic experience is one of the locations in which the drives and desires of the Imaginary surface and are played out. In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz examines cinema's role as "a technique of the imaginary":

[T]he subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother, desire as a pure effect of lack and endless pursuit, the initial core of the unconscious. . . . All this is undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other mirror*, the cinema screen, in this respect a veritable psychical substitute. (1982: 3-4)

In this analysis, the viewing experience triggers unconscious desires and phantasies in such a way that the screen-spectator relationship replicates – or substitutes for – the very operations of the unconscious. Moreover, it is film's activation of desires associated with the Imaginary which explains cinematic pleasure, the gratifying sensation of which prompts spectator's to return to the film-viewing experience repeatedly.

Metz then attempts to account for the mechanisms by which the material base of the medium, the images and sounds of the text, reenact or retrieve the unconscious. From "The Fiction Film and its Spectator" in *The Imaginary Signifier*:

[H]ow does the spectator effect the mental leap which alone can lead him [*sic*] from the perceptual *donnée*, consisting of moving visual and auditory impressions, to the constitution of a fictional universe, from an objectively real but denied signifier to an imaginary but psychologically real signified? (116)

Incorporating such work as Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Metz describes the "filmic state," the institutional, technological, and psychological conditions in which, or from which, the spectator views the film. It is this filmic state which causes the viewer to be lulled into a "waking sleep," a semi-regressive or phantasy state which accesses the unconscious.

However, the interaction of spectator and screen/film text doesn't simply pleasure a fixed, pre-existing subject, but actually produces or constitutes the viewer as subject in the process. "[F]ilm-viewing and subject-formation [are] reciprocal processes: something about our unconscious identity as subjects is reinforced in film viewing, and film viewing is effective because of our unconscious participation. . . . [T]he cinema 'reinscribes' those very deep and globally structuring processes which form the human psyche" (Flitterman-Lewis 1992: 124). In semiotic and post-structuralist conceptions of subjectivity, the subject is continually constructed through signifying or meaning-producing practices such as cinema.

In other words, psychoanalytic film theory is concerned with establishing the complex, myriad mechanisms by which the relationship of spectator to screen links the human psyche, particularly the unconscious, to the film text. Through the circulation of psychoanalytic attributes such as desire, phantasy, and identification, the spectator-screen process, among other cultural processes, constructs the psychoanalytic subject, also variously referred to as the desiring subject, the sexual subject, and the screen subject.

Another important cinematic arena that utilized Lacanian concepts of psychoanalysis was feminist film theory, investigating and adapting those concepts to fit, more appropriately, a political agenda. Combining Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis with studies in ideology, in the work of Louis Althusser and others, feminist film theory managed to invert psychoanalytic theories so that the theories fundamentally critiqued the phallogocentric structures they previously seemed to be simply describing or otherwise naturalizing.

The appeal of psychoanalytic theories for feminist film studies could be found in their description of gender as a culturally acquired series of attributes, rather than the effect of biological determinism (anatomy as destiny, women's "natural" place, etc.). The concept of cultural acquisition implies the potential for change, crucial to a political movement, while deterministic notions foreclose the pursuit of altered gender relations. The idea that gender acculturation occurs in the first few years of life, prior to the advent of memory, also seemed to account for the persistence of male domination over women across diverse cultures and historical eras, without proscribing the possibility of altered relations. Further, the

contention that sexual difference is such a primary source of self-identity, of subjectivity, opened up many possibilities for further feminist analyses.

The initiatory work of Laura Mulvey, Pam Cook, and Claire Johnston outlined how, within a patriarchal order, the male is constructed as subject while women are relegated to object, to the Other, against which male subjectivity is produced. In a short article first published in 1973, "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or 'You Don't Know What Is Happening, Do You, Mr. Jones?'," Laura Mulvey writes about sculptor Allen Jones and his "Women as Furniture" series, "in which life-size effigies of women, slave-like and sexually provocative, double as hat-stands, tables and chairs" (1989a: 6). Mulvey's point is that the sculptures, as with dominant forms of representation in general, do not reflect "real" women, that is, social beings existing in a material world. Nor do culturally pervasive representations of women reflect the female unconscious or women's phantasies. Rather, images of women mirror the male unconscious which produces those representations, and which does so on the basis of deep psychic structures of fear and desire. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989b), Mulvey goes on to describe the specific, complex processes, including scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishism, by which the male unconscious is enacted or performed upon the image/body of woman in cinema. Such "enactments" on women as an objectified Other, in film and other forms of representation, are central to the process of male subject formation, the primary controlling, organizing, and signifying presence in patriarchal culture. But women are necessary in this process of male subject formation, if only as Other, as sexual difference. In psychoanalytic terms, he is aware of his phallus because of her lack. In order to know who he is, he needs to have before him who he is not. In Claire Johnston's words, feminist film theory and practice "revealed how the economy of the classic realist text works towards the unquestioned Imaginary of the patriarchal order" (1992: 297).

In such feminist analyses, the look of the camera, the look of the characters within the text, and the position of narrative enunciation are all male. The film speaks from, for, and is addressed to the male unconscious, regardless of the gender of specific viewers. The cinematic apparatus and the film text position or construct an ideal male spectator as the terms in which the screen-spectator relationship occurs.

The contribution of feminist film theory based in psychoanalysis is its attempt to explain – with the hopes of dismantling – the exclusion of women from the dominant discourses and institutions of socio-cultural life as the function of male needs and drives for power. It was able to describe many of the mechanisms of phallic oppression (including psychoanalytic theory itself) and certainly opened up a wealth of new ways to read films.

However, psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory, and psychoanalytically based theories of cinema in general, pose significant, perhaps insurmountable, limitations as well. In the first instance, the theories are universalizing or totalizing, and so exclusionary, that is, they ignore historical and cultural differ-

ences. The subject, the individual psyche, appears to be the same, once gender differences are established, over time and social categories, despite class, race and ethnicity, nationality, sexual preference, and so on. The theory generalizes singular subject identities regardless of obvious differences between people, cultures, and eras.

In the second instance, it is difficult to accept the spectator as normatively male in the face of large numbers of social subjects – women who repeatedly attend the cinematic (and televisual) experience and do so with evident pleasure. Rather, one assumes that some manner of divergent signifying process(es) must occur for female spectators as well.

For feminist film theory, the theoretical conceptualizations, not solely the surrounding phallic economy, are monolithic and restrictive. Women are excluded from any legitimate position from which to view or to speak. As scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis have argued, the theory leaves us caught in the orbit of the male and not-male, while what is necessary (and desirable) aren't considerations of what it means to be "not-male," but rather what it means to be "women." The theories themselves, not just patriarchal culture, limit the ability to explore women's own fears and desires, and to give voice to women's psychic lives.

Feminist scholars originally were drawn to psychoanalytic theories because of their capacity to explain gender identity in cultural rather than biological terms. However, psychoanalytic theory led to similarly reductive or absolutist notions in which the problem of how to alter the psychoanalytic construction of sexual difference, so apparently early and fundamentally formative of identity, seemed nearly as insurmountable as arguments based on biological determinism.

The response of early feminist film theorists to such an apparently exclusionary and detrimental positioning of female spectators by dominant cinematic forms was to call for a denial of films which embodied traditional visual and narrative pleasures, as the title of Mulvey's article suggests (initiatory feminist analyses and critiques were very much aimed at classic realist film and not at the concept of cinema in toto). Films of traditional narrative pleasure were to be replaced, instead, by avant-garde work which made evident the workings of those traditional pleasures or created alternative modes of gratification for viewers. While a number of the films that resulted were striking, original, and successful, much of the work was textually difficult, tending to create specialized audiences, and so, ignoring or excluding wider bands of spectators, including, potentially and contradictorily, large numbers of women.

At the same time, the refusal to participate in forms of dominant culture seemed to position the feminist avant-garde as exacerbating or actively participating in the exclusion of women from the centers of cinematic production and reception. As it was unrealistic to assume that mainstream cinema was going to cease to be either mainstream or dominant, it made more sense to attempt to appropriate such forms in ways that benefited women. This entailed exploring other, more productive ways in which popular narrative cinema might provide its audiences with pleasures. The development of less restrictive theories and

practices was necessary in order that women could be represented in and addressed by cinema, as social subjects and as spectators, in alternative, independent, and dominant arenas – in other words, wherever and whenever film occurs.

2 The Discursive Subject

Feminist awareness of the need for reconceptualizing psychoanalytic theories coincided with – and helped enable – important shifts in the concepts of cinema, culture, and subjectivity. Evolving notions of subject formation, and therefore spectatorship, moved to respond to the two large problematics incurred by psychoanalysis. First, in post-structuralist theories beyond Lacan, the universalizing “sameness” of subjectivity is superseded by the discursive subject, a much more complex, multi-layered understanding of how the self is constituted. Second, the posited absence of social beings from the mechanisms and interactions of spectatorship is redressed in the audience studies and reception theories of cultural studies, via close examination of the viewing practices of specific social subjects (discussed in the following section).

In discursive theory, individual identity is not a function of singular, solely psychic or unaltering processes, but rather, subjectivity is constructed by the cultural forces of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing discourses. Sexual difference or gender, then, is one (or a plurality of) shaping discourse(s) among many others in the formation of identity. It is in Michel Foucault’s work that notions of the discursive subject are most clearly delineated.

In Foucault’s terms, discourses are systems of thought or domains of knowledge which form around certain thematics or ideologies, for instance, “justice.” A discursive practice, in this instance the juridical system, would involve institutions (courts, etc.) and technologies (laws, means of enforcing them). Together, the discourses, institutions, and technologies interact as the discursive formation of the law. The discursive formation of heterosexuality would involve institutions and technologies such as marriage, and discourses such as romance, love, and so on.

In discursive theory, the (humanistic) subject does not predate, conceive of, or invent the discourse; discourse is not a “phenomenon of expression” by a “transcendental subject” (Foucault 1972: 54–5). Rather, and very importantly, the subject is constituted by the discourse. So, the law-abiding citizen and the criminal are constructs of the discursive practice of the law, husbands and wives are the subjective effects of heterosexuality, and so on. In this account, the individual is the intersection or collection of discourses which constitute or articulate him or her. In other words, the self is the effect of cultural processes.

Originally influenced by structural linguistics, in Foucault’s later work discourse came to be inseparable from power. Speaking of the “traditional theme” in philosophy that “truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an

original affinity with freedom," Foucault argues that this conceptualization needs to be overturned because "truth is not by nature free" but "thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (1978: 60). Power is dispersed everywhere throughout culture, which is not to say that it is dispersed evenly or equitably, but that instances of the exertion of and struggle for power occur continually, at every level and in every configuration of culture.

Instead of the benevolent, forward-progressing, and freeing version of reason projected since the Enlightenment, Foucault argues a "reason," that is, regimes of knowledge, that are coercive, controlling, and driven by the mechanisms and forces of power – although it should also be said that Foucault does not understand power as simply oppressive, but sees it as a much more "productive" force, in its capacity for producing cultural relations.

Theorizing the discursive formation of sexuality, Foucault describes how experience – sexuality in this instance – is organized as a regime of knowledge/power in a threefold process. Sexuality is treated as "the correlation of a domain of knowledge, a type of normativity and a mode of relation to the self." The domain of knowledge is created by the constitution of sexuality as "a field of study (with its own concepts, theories, diverse disciplines)." Normativity is imposed by "a collection of rules (which differentiate the permissible from the forbidden, natural from monstrous, normal from pathological, what is decent from what is not, etc.)." And a mode of relation to the self occurs "between the individual and himself [*sic*] (which enables him to recognize himself as a sexual subject amid others)" (1984b: 333–4).

While the thematic of a discourse may remain constant, the meanings produced over historical eras change. To continue with the instance of sexuality, its occurrences in the seventeenth century marked a departure from previous experiences of it. "[T]hings were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results" (Foucault 1978: 27).

The function of systems of discourse and relations of power is precisely to constitute subjectivity, to organize "techniques for 'governing' individuals – that is, for 'guiding their conduct' – in domains as different as the school, the army, and the workshop" (1984b: 337–8). In the modern era, regimes of knowledge/power are less physically or externally coercive (punishment) than they are internalized or self-regulated (control), through the process of normatization.

The process of normatizing entails a discipline describing its own field of operation and creating its own object of study. So, for instance, psychiatry as a domain of knowledge was created by emerging discourses on madness. "[M]ental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own" (Foucault 1972: 32). However, in the process of constituting the object of study, the object in the sense of subject/object is also formulated. The conceptualization of the insane is

necessary to the process of normalizing acceptable behavior, the criminal is necessary to the description of the boundaries and parameters of law and order, and so on. By deploying the concept of 'insane,' the identity of the sane subject is described, or proscribed. Thus, discourses of what constitutes healthiness must always incorporate the ill, sanity include the mad, law-abiding the criminal, 'normal' sexuality the deviant, and so forth.

In a hypothesis structurally similar to the function of sexual difference in psychoanalytic theory, social relations are constructed upon conceptions of otherness or alterity. "The history of madness would be the history of the Other – of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger)" (Foucault 1973: xxiv). By attempting to make the danger of madness entirely "foreign" or exterior to the subject and instead locate it as embedded in the object or other – of the insane in this instance – the potential for its interiority or effect on the self is denied, and thereby its threat or the anxiety of its threat diminished.

It is critical in post-structuralist discursive theory to understand subjectivity as the invention or articulation of discourse. In the process of naming someone as mad, as object of study, or as Other, what is assembled are interpretations or judgments, not facts; what is constructed are *meanings*, not "truths."

Although extremely influential, Foucaultian discursive theory has not been applied to cinema studies in any kind of systematic manner, as was attempted by Metz and Mulvey with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. To date, most efforts have been deployed in the study of cultural discourses invoked by a particular text or set of texts which cite, group, or contest varying notions of the law, say, or sexuality. Those discursive practices specifically considered by Foucault have proven most accessible to film and television scholars – in the instance of sexuality, in gay and lesbian studies, in studies of the uses of the body, and so on.

While there are reasons that make it particularly difficult to systematically apply post-structuralist discursive theory to cinema studies (the polymorphous origins of discourse, its multiply produced effects, and the delineation of a fluid rather than a fixed subject), the theory's potential productivity for representational studies is enormous. Foucault's own preoccupation with the human or social sciences precluded specific analyses of forms of representation, but his work has certainly contributed to and enriched the way film and television studies are pursued, including, pivotally, their conceptions of the subject and spectatorship.

The result has been a broader, more complex notion of representation as a reflection of and a site for cultural struggles over meaning formation, that is, as a place where meaning production occurs and also where its structures of operation can be viewed. This is so because of the ability of representational forms to "stand in for" social processes via aesthetic and narrative codes (e.g. characters for social subjects), as well as their capacity to invoke or put into circulation wide-ranging occurrences of discursive formations or domains of knowledge (what films are "about"). At the core of these operations of meaning formation is the notion of the

subject, and its cinematic version, the spectator, as the convergence, accumulation, and reconfiguration of complementary/competing discourses. It is this spectator who has displaced the fixed, meaning-producing spectator of humanism/modernism, and the fixed, meaning-effect spectator of psychoanalysis.

Two examples of studies of representational forms consonant with discursive understandings of subjectivity, and so taken up and utilized by film theorists, are Stuart Hall's notions of encoding/decoding and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. Both theories focus on a diversity of subject positions and a multiplicity of textual meanings.

Stuart Hall understands encoding – the production of media texts – and decoding – the reception of media texts – as discursive practices. “Before this message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use,’ it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded” (1993: 93). The spectator has the potential to interpret, construct, or meaningfully produce the text from one of several positions in relation to it. First, he or she can make a dominant or preferred reading. Hall calls such readings “preferred” because while they are dominant in having “the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized,” they are not singular, fixed, or closed, “not univocal or uncontested” (98).

The viewer can also forge a negotiated reading which is “a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rules” (102). Third, the spectator can secure an oppositional reading in which the message is decoded in a “globally contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message with some alternative framework of reference” (103).

In this formulation, the spectator's own varying relationship to the discourses invoked by the text, and the ways they are invoked, allow for a slippage between potential readings or viewing positions in relation to the material of the text. However, while the spectator is no longer “sutured” to the text in a particular way, preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings continue to imply judgments of “better or worse” interpretations of the text for that particular viewer (depending on the viewer's or the interpreting critic's politics). A hierarchy is structured in which one kind of reading is chosen or prioritized over another – preferred, negotiated, oppositional – displacing or occurring in place of the others. This problematizes a more complex Foucaultian notion of multiple, varied, and simultaneous discourses operating on the subject, some of which may be complementary to each other, while others are competing.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, as outlined in *The Dialogic Imagination*, helps redress the limitations of a “pick or choose” or hierarchizing concept of readership, while retaining the complexity of Foucault's perspectives on discourse and subjectivity. Heteroglossia is “a notion of competing languages

and discourses applying equally to 'text' and 'context.' The role of the artistic text, within a Bakhtinian perspective, is not to represent real life 'existents' but to stage the conflicts, the coincidences and competitions of languages and discourses, inherent in heteroglossia" (Stam 1992: 197). As well as the simultaneity of complementary/competing discourses, Bakhtin's heteroglossia accounts for the simultaneous circulation and interaction of representational discourses (the text) and other socio-cultural discourses beyond representation (the context).

The most persistent criticism of Foucault's concept of discursive subjectivity is that it eliminates the possibility of "agency," that is, motivated, intentional action and reaction on the part of the subject. If the discursive subject is entirely the construct of culturally determining forces via discursive institutions and systems of knowledge, then the potential for internally driven response is pre-empted. How are individual or self-willed thoughts and actions possible? How can spectators actively select or reject readings if they, themselves, are the product or effect of cultural and textual processes? Much post-structuralist theory, certainly Foucault's, has been accused of negating the agency of the subject and therefore eliminating necessary conditions for the possibility of political activity and social change.

Such accusations have been countered by theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Judith Butler. Mouffe finds that a frequent misunderstanding of the anti-essentialist position "consists in believing that the critique of an essential identity must necessarily lead to the rejection of any concept of identity whatsoever" (1992: 381). Mouffe contends:

It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself, and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions, that we are in the position to theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination. . . . We have rather to approach it [the social agent] as a plurality, dependent on the various subject positions through which it is constituted within various discursive formations. . . . To deny the existence of an a priori, necessary link between subject positions does not mean that there are not constant efforts to establish between them historical, contingent, and variable links. (371-2)

She calls for the identification and investigation of the multiple and changing links between subject positions, within and between subjects, which together produce "identity." These are not an impediment to understanding the subject, but rather the only means to ascertain the equally multiple and changing forms of power and subordination.

In a similar argument, Judith Butler objects to the notion that questioning the construction of subjectivity is equated to "doing away with" the subject (1992: 15). "[T]o claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined" (12). If the subject is constructed, then agency, too, is a construction, not an a priori given.

[I]f we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, then agency can be *presumed* only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction. . . . We need instead to ask, what possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power? Where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes? (13)

While both Mouffe and Butler argue that the subject and her or his agency do not disappear but, instead, are constituted relationally, not absolutely, are never fixed but always evolving, many questions remain. Indeed, the areas insufficiently theorized by Foucault (What precisely causes discourses to alter historically? How do various, multiple discourses construct specific subjects and in what proportions or relations of impact? What are the mechanisms by which change and agency operate?) remain insufficiently understood in terms of their application to film studies as well as other disciplines. While the work of Hall, Bakhtin, Mouffe, Butler, and many other scholars marks fruitful beginnings, much is yet to be done on questions of representation and the discursive subject of film/media/art, and further, on the ways representation conflicts and collaborates with other cultural discourses.

How do viewers operationalize specific readings? That is, how do spectators select a specific reading(s) or shift among readings? Do different information effects, such as those provided by close readings, political engagement, etc., alter earlier, or what might have otherwise been different, subject positions and therefore alter interpretations of a text? What mechanisms are required in order to deploy particular readings or deactivate others?

How does the individual operationalize certain identities at specific moments: for instance, what enables a specific female spectator to read a text from the position of her gendered subjectivity and simultaneously understand its “intended” preferred meanings? What are the mechanisms which might account for that specific female spectator constructing an oppositional reading from her gendered subject position but a dominant reading from her perspective as a racialized identity? Among competing or simply differing discourses invoked by a text, what allows specific readings to take on greater significance – significance in both its senses of meaning and importance? Why do ‘some readings “matter” to a given spectator more than others? What permits a viewer to change his or her “mind” about previously held interpretations?

Do systems of representation such as film and television form their own discursive formation, or are they the confluence of multiple discourses, such as, in film, the narrative discourse(s) of the script, the cinematographic discourse(s) of the image, and so on? Do genres represent their own discrete discourses within a system of representation such as cinema or cut across modes of representations (film, TV, novels, poems), encompassing many diverse socio-cultural practices and artifacts? Do the romance genres – the “women’s weepies” of the 1940s or

today's "date movies" – form part of a discursive formation on romance which includes Harlequin romances, Hallmark cards, and Valentine's Day (rendering discipline-based analyses insufficient, thus helping to explain the prominence of cultural studies)? To what degree and in what ways are the many films (and TV shows) that follow the conventions of courtroom dramas, or resolve their dramatic dilemmas in courtrooms, part of a representational system of narrative conventions or an armature of dominant social discourses surrounding justice and the juridical system? While the likely answer is "both" to questions concerning the particular (representational) and general (socio-cultural) discursive formations invoked by any text, how do we conceptualize and articulate this? How we do so is of significance because, as a site where representational and social discourses intersect (and perhaps the media's impact can be partially explained by their ability to invoke both sorts of discourse relationally), it marks a promising point for agency and political intervention.

As a series of discursive formations, what kinds of knowledge/power are deployed by the representational to construct what kinds of subjectivity? In such post-structuralist theoretical configurations, spectatorship/readership are "technologies of the self," historical and cultural modes of subject formation. While Foucault's work does not focus on the relations of representation in detail, in an interview he offers a provocative suggestion concerning the need for creativity to displace Sartrean (and humanist) notions of authenticity. "I think that the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity – and not of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (1984a: 351). While Foucault's statement can be interpreted as invoking a romantic and modernist conception of art, it can also be understood as extending an alternative cultural metaphor or paradigm in which the truth-generating agency of authenticity and rational subjectivity are displaced by the meaning-generating agency of the creative subject.

3 The Social Subject

Although the discursive subject has not, to date, been formulated specifically in terms of spectatorship, it has had significant impact on cultural studies and the latter's concern with the social subject and identity formation.

Cultural studies marks a theoretical return to the "everyday experiences" or lived specificities of the material, historical subject. This realignment occurs in the face of the seeming "death of the subject" – because an entirely cultural construct – predicted by (or, some would argue, predicated on) post-structuralism.

Cultural studies' interest in the social subject is not, however, a replication of the humanist subject who creates "himself" and controls the surrounding world.

Acknowledging that individual subjects are multiply and complexly constructed, cultural studies is an attempt to integrate the discursive subject of post-structuralism as, on the one hand, the effect of representational and other signifying practices, and, on the other hand, an agent of socio-cultural constructs and institutions. While a Foucaultian might argue that the distinction between the signifying and the social is illusory in that all is signifying practice, cultural studies maintains the distinction in order to preserve a recognition of people's material existences, which can be made better or worse through political activity. "The problem for cultural studies has been to incorporate the significance of sliding signifiers and disappearing signifieds without asserting that meaning no longer exists, without giving up a politics, without lapsing into a radical moral relativism, without abandoning the interventionist commitment which has motivated the research of cultural theorists" (Slack and Whitt 1992: 583).

The concern to maintain a position for political intervention is consonant with the Marxist origins of cultural studies, as well as the considerable impact feminism, race and ethnicity studies, gay and lesbian studies, and other identity formations have had upon it, in addition to class. However, the formulation of an identity politics, or a politics of difference, seemingly necessitates the existence of a social subject with some range of conscious agency in order to enact or affect a political agenda.

More specifically, cultural studies works to apply varying notions of the post-structuralist subject to forms of representation in popular culture. It does so while seeking to avoid the totalizing overdetermination of psychoanalytic theory and Althusserian-based concepts of ideology, in which the subject is determined by dominant ideology as it is embedded in the text, that is, the text instructs the viewer how to understand it and so positions the spectator in subjectivity. Cultural studies is also a reaction against earlier paradigms of audience research that tended to focus on quantitative data such as audience demographics (what has been skeptically referred to as the "bums in the seats" approach), and that presumed a passive viewership, which surrendered itself to the overpowering effects of the media.

Instead, cultural studies argues that the spectator is the result of various discourses put in play by the text, but also the subject of social, economic, and political practices beyond the text, which are brought to bear at the moment of screen/viewer interaction. While the potentially innumerable configurations of such a balance have yet to be sufficiently mapped out, David Morley explains the intentions shaping this notion of the audience member / social subject:

The Althusserian drift of much early cultural studies work . . . would reduce [the individual subject] to the status of a mere personification of a given structure, "spoken" by the discourses which cross the space of his subjectivity. However, it is not simply Althusser who is at issue here; much of the psychoanalytic work on the theory of ideology generates an equally passive notion of subjectivity, in which the subject is precisely "spoken" by the discourses which constitute that person. I

want to try to formulate a position from which we can see the person actively producing meanings from the restricted range of cultural resources which his or her structural position has allowed them access to. (quoted in Turner 1992: 193-4)

In contrast to approaches in which spectators are “spoken” by the text, cultural studies theorists began to ask: What is actually occurring for viewers? How are social subjects using texts specifically, and to what ends? These concerns led to the ethnographic methodology associated with cultural studies, and to investigations of specific subordinate communities or sub-cultures, as exemplified in the work of David Morley, Janice Radway, Ien Ang, Dick Hebdidge, Angela McRobbie, and others.

Their work posited a much more active viewer than had been theorized previously in either textual/ideological studies or earlier audience research, a viewer capable of resisting dominant encodings and forging oppositional readings, readers who actively and continuously participate in the formation of their own identities. Analyzing the results of her study of elderly viewers of the British soap *Crossroads*, Dorothy Hobson comments:

Communication is by no means a one-way process and the contribution which the audience makes to *Crossroads* is as important as the messages which the program-makers put into the program. In this sense, what the *Crossroads* audience has revealed is that there can be as many interpretations of the program as the individual viewers bring to it. There is no overall intrinsic message or meaning in the work, but it comes alive and communicates when the viewers add their own interpretations of a program. (quoted in Turner 1992: 133)

The emergent spectator of cultural studies, then, contributes two significant variations to the notion of spectatorship. First, the text is produced only at the moment of interaction with the audience member, bringing the spectator/reader/viewer to the forefront of the mediated event (which in cultural studies, to date, has been far more extensively television analysis, not film). It becomes impossible to speak of the meanings of a text separately from its viewing subject, the two becoming indissoluble. Second, the viewing subject is composed of the interaction between the effects of discourses invoked by the text/representation *and* the effects of social and material discourses beyond. Spectatorship is formulated as the convergence of textual subjects and social subjects. “[T]he focus of critical attention in cultural studies switched from ideology and its effects toward audiences or readerships, since it is at this point that meanings generated in and by media discourses actually go live socially, where textual and social power intersect, and where the distinction between them is meaningless” (Hartley 1996: 225).

Further, the spectator is no longer positioned in subjectivity by the text, but, under the concept of hegemony, can offer resistance to the ideologies of the text. Indeed, cultural studies understands popular culture as the terrain where cultural power, relationships, and systems of meaning are negotiated and established – and, consequently, can be resisted and/or reestablished otherwise.

John Fiske describes one of the projects for cultural studies theorists as the discovery of:

how actual audience groups actively use television as part of their own cultures – that is, use it to make meanings that are useful to them in making sense of their own social experiences and therefore of themselves. . . . Exploring the strategies by which subordinate subcultures make their own meanings in resistance to the dominant is currently one of the most productive strands of cultural studies. (1992: 300, 304)

While this avenue of inquiry has indeed been productive, resulting in the identification and analysis of numerous specific communities of social and viewing subjects in terms of their uses of representational forms, it has also been critiqued for displaying a Utopian or ideal notion of resistance. That is, any sub-cultural manifestation of distinct identity can be received as a potential form of resistance beyond the parameters of dominant ideologies. No means have yet been established to determine which sub-cultural configurations of identity might prove beneficial or detrimental to that community vis-à-vis the resistance to or imposition of dominant discursive practices and institutions. What remains for cultural studies is to forge a position that avoids what David Morley has referred to as “the improper romanticism of consumer freedoms” while continuing to avert an earlier “paranoid fear of global control” (quoted in Ang 1996: 260).

Another problematic facing the ongoing endeavor of cultural studies is to develop what Janice Radway describes as “a rich and complex understanding of the different, multiple, everchanging configurations of subjectivity dialectically produced through the negotiation between historically produced individuals and material, social and discursive contexts” (1996: 238). Using her own work with women readers of romance novels as an example, Radway continues: “To construct her, then, as a ‘romance reader’ may be to isolate only one small portion of her life and to mistake that part for the whole. . . . The womanhood or femininity constructed through romance reading may well be at odds with the femininity constructed in the process of doing aerobics, watching *Roseanne*, or playing softball” (244–5). Audience (or any subject) analysis, then, is an attempt to contain what is the constant stream of subjectivity in order to study it, isolating one or a few of its aspects, applicable only for a given moment and specific location.

This complex stream of interwoven and changing subjectivities is what Ien Ang refers to as “radical contextualism,” which she welcomes as an opportunity to better understand the “chaotic” empirical landscape of audience experiences (1996: 257). Ang argues that the way to approach such a chaotic landscape of subjectivity is to work “within the framework of a particular cultural politics,” which then allows the researcher to “meaningfully decide which contexts we wish to foreground as particularly relevant, and which other ones could, for the moment, within this particular political conjuncture, be left unexplored” (258). While Ang’s approach addresses the difficulty of imagining “where to begin and where to end the analysis” (253), it raises the question of an a priori politics, and

therefore of an a priori social subject. Radway's suggestion is that cultural studies embrace the daunting task and "take the fluid process of articulation as its topic, that is, the process whereby the historical human subject is constructed through the linkage, clash and confluence of many different discourses, practices, and activities" (1996: 245).

In addition to mapping the complex processes of subjectivity, cultural studies has yet to delineate the mechanisms between text and society. As John Hartley points out:

If the media exert power and influence over their audiences – that is, socially – how is it done textually? And if media texts exert power, what is the place of meaning in the analysis of power? . . . In spite of Foucaultian, postmodernist, feminist and other interventions, or perhaps because of them, it seems as hard as ever to explain the link between textual and social power. (1996: 221, 224)

Additionally, cultural studies' emphasis on sub-cultural groups raises questions about the relationship of the individual to identifying communities, and the relationship of both, respectively, to dominant discourses. In what ways and to what degree is the individual merely a representative of the group(s) or the configuration of a "unique" individual in its accumulation of a multiple but specific series of subject positions?

Angela McRobbie suggests that: "What really is at stake is the nature and form of the relationships which bind these differences together and from which they accrue their meaning. It is in relation to each other that identity is formed. If meaning is relational, so too is identity" (1992: 726). If identity is the relational process of the confluence of differences within the individual, between the individual and specific communities of identity formation, and between identifying communities, how might this multitude of simultaneous registers of subject positions enact or allow slippage, selection, agency, and intervention?

Spectatorship has been theorized, variously and to date, as the construction of the viewing subject through psychic processes, discursive formations, and social and historical relations. It seems most productive to consider the spectator as the effect of such processes, formations, and relations as they operate concurrently, rather than thinking of each dynamic as singular or exclusive of the others. Less clear, then, are the complex and simultaneous interconnections between these dynamics, which may render the spectator as anything along a barometer of viewership from passive imbiber of pre-packaged ideology to active and successful resistant of these same oppressive psychic, discursive, and socio-historical forces. Each theorization – psychoanalytic, discursive, social – has contributed to the concept of spectatorship, while not managing to address all the problematics summoned up by the other, differing approaches.

While the social subject of cultural studies regains a political position in that the act of viewing and the meanings created are sites of struggle and contestation, the theory doesn't yet sufficiently explain the operations by which the viewing

subject attains a position of (some) power as the participant in the process of his or her own subject formation, able to resist, in however limited a manner, the dominance of social and cultural discourses. Similarly, although discursive theory offers a more complex way of understanding subjectivity than psychoanalytic theory, rendering the subject fluid rather than fixed, it has the same difficulties as cultural studies in elaborating the mechanisms by which such subjectivities might occur.

Limited and erroneous in its universalizing, unverifiable claims for the unconscious and its lack of participatory (hence political) position in the process of “becoming” a subject, psychoanalytic theory did, however, attempt to account for reasons why the viewer is “captured” by the text. Addressing the questions of what mechanisms operate to “fix” the viewer into an oppressive position in seeming opposition to her or his self-interests, and why, once the spectator realizes these are the operative mechanisms, she or he can’t break free of that captivation, psychoanalytic theory’s responses were the concepts of pleasure and desire, operating alongside social and ideological coercion.

Cultural studies developed, in part, out of resistance to the notion of the spectator/subject as “psychic dupe,” determined entirely by the robotic effects of his or her own unconscious processes – similar to the criticized concept of the public as cultural dupes, simplémindedly affected by the dominant ideologies embedded in the popular. Yet, neither the social subject nor the discursive subject adequately explains the determinants, the “why” of specific subject or spectatorial articulations, remaining open projects for both cultural studies and post-structuralism.

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