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# Is Seeing Really Believing? Interpreting the Experience of the Film Audienc

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# Interpreting the Experience of the Film Audience

Alexis E. Dolphin

*October 31ˢᵗ 1998: "Let's do the time warp again..."*

*There in my own living room, as I played the "hostess with the mostest" at my Halloween party, I witnessed film theory in practice! The party had focused suddenly...all eyes were on the television set...what was going on here? Then I heard it and I understood. "Let'ssss doooo the time warp agaaiiiin!" The infamous* Rocky Horror Picture Show *was on and everything else in the world had stopped. I was instantly amazed that a group of 20 or so people, virtual strangers with different life histories, were laughing together, "doing the time warp" and talking to the screen. As I sat down and joined the group we all yelled "Close-up!" and "Cut!" at the same points in the film. We were laughing at ourselves and at our shared experience. We sang along with the motorcyclin' Meatloaf and the fabulous Frank N. Furter. Participation was the name of the game and we all had the apparatus with which to do so as a group. I began to think about what this scene said to me about theories regarding the experience of the cinematic audience... but then I had to put that thought on hold as I was too busy dissuading people from throwing toast and water at the television...*

My experience with the Rocky Horror Picture Show this past Halloween serves to illustrate the point that the film theories to be discussed within this paper have a real-life, practical dimension. In essence, theories hypothesize suggested guidelines that structure our understanding of the world in which we live. It is not always easy to comprehend how a given theory relates to practice however. Particularly in the case of film study, there is a degree of dislocation between the theory and the practice of watching a film, of being part of an audience. It appears that researchers have faced difficulties in their attempts to put their finger on exactly what role the audience, whether referred to at the group- or individual-level, plays in the cinematic experience.

Prior experience with academic film journals has lead me to discern a strong focus upon analyses about the structure of a film, and/or the text through which the director has tried to convey meaning to the audience. Yet, what happens once the lights dim and the audience settles in for their monies worth?

The relationship between the audience and the cinematic image is undoubtedly a complex one that may be approached from multiple directions. This paper will tackle the issue by examining the suggested power dynamics inherent in the process of viewing and interpreting films. A brief overview of the nature of film theories that deal with the experience of the audience will be followed by an introduction to Foucault's Panopticon (1979). Foucault's thoughts on the power of seeing and being seen have been readily applied to the analysis of what it means to be an audience member. While not explicitly mentioned in many cases, the panoptic gaze is central to a number of varied writings that focus on the viewer. These writings will be presented and discussed here in accordance to my own particular reading of the materials.

The discussion of what it means to be an audience member and how, as such, the audience responds to the influences of the cinema, is a somewhat new approach to film studies. In the 1970's, analyses of the works of Freud, Jung, Lacan and others contributed to a new psychoanalytical approach to film critique (Maltby 1996). What came to be called "cine-psychoanalysis" was preoccupied with the concept of the subconscious mind and its function as a repository of deeper meanings. Lacan's reworking of Freudian theories of the subconscious allowed for the generalization of the subconscious beyond the level of the individual. He introduced the idea of the collective unconscious, an idea that was taken up by film critics as a justification for their comments upon the social dimensions of cinema-going (Maltby 1996). This paradigm shift opened up new lines of questioning for film critics who were interested in going beyond the analysis of a film's technical structure or the representation of reality. Now they found tools that would allow

them to question how reality was being constructed by the cinema for the audience, and by the audience for itself.

Cine-psychoanalysis introduced an apparatus for delving into questions of how films engage the psyche of the viewer, and in turn, whose interests are served by this engagement? What motives are involved in film production and what are the effects of their manifestation? As the spectator became central to cinematic analyses an exploration of power dynamics began to emerge. The spectator of the cine-psychological world is not regarded as a person as much as "a conceptual 'space'…[that] anyone can fill" (Maltby 1996:432). As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis put it, the viewer is seen "not as a person, a flesh-and-blood individual, but as an artificial construct, produced and activated by the cinematic apparatus" (cited in Maltby 1996:431). While this theoretical approach to understanding the experiences of the audience was important to film critique in the recent past, and continues to influence current research questions, a post-structuralist movement soon knocked cine-psychoanalysis from its lofty perch. The 1980's brought in a call for the deconstruction of textual meaning and a rejection of the claim to Grand Theories regarding how films were viewed (Maltby 1996). Just as anthropologists began to experiment with the role of multivocality in the writing of ethnographies, film critics were turning away from a monolithic Film Theory in favour of the multiple perspectives provided by film theories.

This introduction to the theoretical evolution of film studies is important to keep in mind when examining the competing analytical perspectives covering the experience of the audience. As our studies in anthropology have taught us, context is everything. This debate within the discipline of film studies is remarkable in its similarity to past and current issues in anthropology. Both disciplines, being relatively young, continue to struggle with staking their claim to authority in a world of post-modern skepticism. They share the goal of trying to explain society, with one trying to represent the exotic to the West, the other trying to represent the West to itself.

Each discipline's shared interest in the understanding of how people construct their worlds may find some inspiration in the works of Michel Foucault. As previously mentioned, Foucault's theories have been strongly felt in the realm of film analysis, permeating discussions of what it means to be a member of an audience. What are the characteristics of the political relationship between film producers and consumers? Can such a dichotomous comparison of cinema image versus viewer be made? These questions have been addressed in both the current anthropological and film literature. Film studies and anthropology attempt to understand the communication of power upon social action through various media in similar ways, regardless of whether the medium is an ethnography, a mainstream movie, or an ethnographic film. A brief review is in order concerning Foucault's perspective on the gaze as a means of gaining power and knowledge.

Although I hardly pretend to hold a vast knowledge of all the works of Michel Foucault with their many complexities, a brief overview of the Panopticon is called for, as interpretations of its fundamental principles will arise again and again in the written works of others. Conceptualized by Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was an architectural design for the ideal prison that was put into practice in the nineteenth century. This design involved a tower with wide windows placed within a ring-like building (Foucault 1979). The windows of the tower faced the inner windows of the peripheral building that was made up of cells, each containing an inmate, and separating them from other inmates. Another window on the exterior side of the ring allowed light to pass through the cells, at all times illuminating the activities of those within. It was then possible to constantly see the minutiae of everyday existence (Foucault 1979). The inmate is seen but does not see. Foucault's interest in such an architectural machine is founded on the notion that power and discipline may be maintained with minimal effort on the part of those in the tower. Basically, an inmate realizes that they may be seen at any time, yet, cannot know when. As such, they internalize the possibility of "constant and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1979:214). Thus, inmates play a role in the reproduction and maintenance of the power of observation, altering their behavior in accordance with the perceived surveillance. The power being exercised by the central tower over the inmates essentially serves the "registration of knowledge" (Foucault 1980:148). Knowledge and its relationship to power is key to the process

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discussed here. In what Foucault regards as the surveillance society, within which we now live, power and knowledge are equated with vision, being communicated by a gaze:

> An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. (Foucault,1980:155)

The Panopticon is, in the end, not in the hands of one person. Everyone is caught up in this machine that eventually no one owns. Whether the guards are in the tower or in the cells while the inmate's gaze, the power dynamic is the same (Foucault 1980). The mechanism is not simply one of unidirectional or imposed will; the control is subtler than that. The person or society that is viewed is at the same time being disciplined; they are free to act but their actions are being structured by their own perceptions of what they should be doing.

But what can prison systems of discipline possibly have to do with film studies? Foucault himself argued that the allure of the Panopticon design is that it provides a formula for control that can be applied to many domains (Foucault 1980). Film critics have attempted to incorporate Foucault's notions of the gaze and its ability to empower and disempower individuals or groups into their analyses of the cinema-going experience. When fundamental questions regarding the relationship between the cinema and the audience were considered by these critics they fell upon the formula of the Panopticon and its potential as an explanatory force. While not strictly lining-up in diametrically opposed camps, film theorists have seemingly focused upon one of two common readings of Foucault's panoptic theory.

The first and most "traditional" theoretical perspective is that the audience is passively disciplined and controlled by the images which cinema produces. Not originating with Foucault's writings, the film critics of the early 1970's initially drew upon the notions of Freud and the subconscious. The subconscious of the individual was a blank slate on which the cinema could act. Foucault's Panopticon complimented this approach by providing a mechanistic model of exactly how the gaze could be internalized, or transform the subconscious.

While not explicitly discussed in any of the works cited here, I present my interpretation of the rationale behind the analogies being made to Foucault, in support of the idea that the cinema is disciplining the audience. The most common argument for how such a process of manipulation of the subconscious occurs, is one that purports that the viewer is turned into a voyeur who internalizes and perpetuates their own needs, thus accepting the power of the gaze. While a voyeur is most often described as someone who takes and interest in morbid sights (Denzin1995: 6), the sense in which this word is utilized in the argument of the film critics is broader. Voyeurism as it relates to this particular argument seems to be more of a fascination with seeing and surveying others. The writings of those such as Norman K. Denzin, a sociologist and film critic, state that we are all voyeurs and, as such, we are merely products of the cinematic gaze (1995:1). The act of gazing by the viewer is likened to voyeurism in that, when going to the movies, the viewer sits for a length of time in surveillance of the activities of others on the screen. Indeed, the movie's characters are presented as 'real' people, just like the audience itself. The suspension of disbelief comes into play here as the cinematic reality and the viewer's own experiential everyday reality intersect for a short time. We have all experienced this "suspended disbelief" as the fiction unfolds in front of our eyes. Every time someone screams at the knife behind the shower curtain, or cries when the love of Forrest Gump's life dies, is experiencing the emotions of the screen for themselves, as if the action involved them directly. The voyeur/audience members experience is likened to the "knowing eye" of the gaze from Foucault's Panopticon, which would suggest initially that the film viewer is holding some sort of power over whom it is that they are looking at (Denzin 1995). They are doing the looking, so they are also disciplining. Some film critics would argue, however, that this is not so. It is the cinema that is creating this voyeur and what they are to look at. The cinema is creating this need to "see", those who cannot see the viewer, in terms of providing the pleasure of feeling various emotions; even the emotions of someone else.

The question is who is doing the "seeing" and what are they "seeing"? The argument that we are all just created voyeurs is incomplete. The audience member surely does the seeing, but he or she is not analogous to the tower guard because

they are not able to choose what they will see and when they will do so. If the audience is being disciplined in the Foucauldian sense of the Panopticon, they are actually being restricted in their vision by the language of the cinema.

The language of the cinema and its ability to structure what the viewer sees is an essential part of the argument that the audience is, in fact, being manipulated or disciplined by any given film. A "new visual literacy was produced" during the early years of cinema that provided a shared language through which the viewer was taught to look and see things that they had not seen before (Denzin 1995). The language of these early films was limited in part by the technology of the time, such as the immobile camera, but also by the problem of producing a continuity of ideas while compressing time and space (Cook 1996). How would one tell the story of a character's development through their lifetime without filming for years? This question may seem silly and obviously solvable to those of us who are today more than skilled in the grammar and syntax of the language of cinema, but the concept of editing was the most essential innovation in the development of the film as a mode of communication. Unlike the early films that consisted of single scenes of real-time footage, editing allowed the creator of a film to play with time. A character's lifetime could be depicted within one hour or one minute depending upon the editorial choices made. Editing allowed the narrative possibilities of film to develop greater complexities of meaning at the same time that the language of cinema was being established. The "close-up", for example, is an editing device that communicates certain ideas. When we see a close-up we instantly know that what we are seeing is important, and that the subtle expression of a character's thoughts and emotions are to be noted. The close-up was reportedly confusing to the first audiences that witnessed its use in film (Cook 1996:79). Today though, we know the language of the cinema well enough that we can receive the message of a close-up without consciously realizing that such a device has been used. It is an integral part of our film vocabulary.

Realizing that editing is the key to communicating ideas in film is essential to the argument that the cinema in a Foucauldian sense is disciplining the audience. As it is common for anthropologists to recognize that "the way in which text is structured influences how meaning is created by the readers interpretation" (Birth 1990:553), so too are film critics aware of this phenomenon. A film may be "read" like a text where the audience member understands the language of the cinema. Both films and texts are bound by the language in which they are written; both involve choices on the part of the "author" in terms of what information to leave in and what must be edited out. This editing creates conceptual frames that may serve several purposes (Birth 1990). One might argue that editing is about furthering a narrative and making it communicable to the audience. This perspective must also recognize, however, that these conceptual frames serve to guarantee that a limited number of variations of a story are interpretable. Editing serves to exclude messages, just as much as it serves to provide them (Birth 1990). The creation and editing of frames tells the viewer to think in a certain way, a way in which they might not normally think outside of the frame. Thus, editing and the conceptual frames it allows, act as a metacommunicative device that aids the viewer in understanding what is occurring in the film (Birth 1990). Those who are involved in the creation of films are then allowing some trains of thought and restricting others. This notion of being restricted in the act of viewing by editing, and the conceptual frames it creates, is seen by some film critics as being analogous to Foucault's notions of the power of seeing. Is the viewer actually seeing or are they being manipulated by the language of film into believing that they are seeing what is happening in a given event on screen? If sight is restricted, how does the viewer know that they are even seeing the "truth"? A critic of the likes of Denzin would likely answer these questions by arguing that the viewer is not actually seeing much at all. Like the cell-bound inmate residing within the Panopticon, the audience is only seeing what it is allowed to see. Thus, it could be argued that the cinema is disciplining the audience. Again, the picture is not complete.

If the purpose of the Panopticon is to "penetrate into men's behaviour" (Foucault 1979:216), perhaps a similar argument can be made for the cinema? Some film critics would agree with such an application of Foucault to the film medium. Many would, in fact, suggest that films have "become a technology and apparatus of power that would organize and bring meaning to everyday lives" (Maltby 1996:134). This perspective has held a prominent place in film

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theory/theories since the first decades of this century. Emerging not in Hollywood, but in the early Russian cinema, artists believed that a film could "articulate [the audience's] understanding in terms of a political agenda that went beyond intellectual critique to embrace total social revolution" (Thomas 1994:278). Even though this belief in the power of the cinema to affect the fate of a society is still adhered to today by creators and critics of film alike, study is less often focused upon social revolution than upon how the cinema is used to maintain norms. The norms of society, or alternatively the norms that the state wishes to instill in the individual, are frequently discussed in film classes and in critical texts. Thus, the purpose of film (aside from entertainment value) is to reinforce the "official ideologies of truth" (Denzin 1995:46) through the apparatus of the language of the cinema and its restrictive conceptual frames. Whether a text is written as an anthropologist's ethnography or a film maker's final cut, the way in which the language is structured is often persuasive (Birth 1990). Concepts of persuasion follow from the understanding that there is an inherent language of film that we all speak without being consciously aware of it. Denzin (1995) reasons that it is this link between the language of the cinema and the viewer's subconscious that allows for persuasion. The ideological powers of cinematic texts are able to discipline so readily simply because their messages are often internalized by the viewer without their knowledge.

The key to using the language of film to manipulate the audience is regarded in terms of targeting the audience member. It may be argued that genre is used in such a way. A film belongs to a given genre if it is of a certain recognizable type, characterized by preestablished conventions (Giannetti 1996). Well-known genres include westerns, teen flicks and horror films. In the case of each genre, the spectators are being located by the filmmakers (Denzin 1995) and are systematized according to their race, gender, age or income. Women in particular have traditionally been targeted with romantic story lines, exotic locales and hunky men, and have more recently been approached with "girl power" spins on the conventional. It is suggested that each of these groupings of viewers is being subjected to certain cultural norms. The woman, for example, is expected to be more interested in a romantic comedy than in a war film. The categorization of

individuals by genre films (particularly in the case of Western or Hollywood film) reinforces the ideological notion that there are implicit differences that separate and characterize people. It is suggested that each of these divisions and categorizations serves to "reproduce the strength of patriarchy (and racism) by implementing a concept of looking which objectifies women and non-whites" (Denzin 1995:14). Thus, the idea is that film perpetuates stereotypes of appropriate behaviour, which the viewer is said to internalize and incorporate over time into their own interactions with themselves and with others. So here we have one purported motive for manipulation of the audience. Portraying individuals and the situations in which they find themselves in terms of the dominant ideology of a society may reinforce norms of behaviour.

Regardless of how the nature of the power relationship is characterized, the essential point being addressed here is that there are multiple motives for and consequences of disciplining the viewing audience. By reinforcing the dominant ideology in these ways, the viewer is further given a tool for self-evaluation. The norms or ideals projected by the cinema allow the audience member to compare themselves to these dominant cultural norms and perhaps adjust their behaviour or beliefs accordingly. This sounds unlikely when thinking about the effect of one or two films, but in actuality, many of us are exposed to these messages daily throughout our lives. Much of this theory appears to rest upon a kind of additive effect whereby exposure to the norms being communicated by the dominant ideology of a society occurs over a period of years through multiple media outlets (this is hardly just a phenomenon of film). Thus, as an extension of the ideas of Foucault, film theorists such as Denzin are interested in the additive control of vision over the audience.

All of the concepts discussed above work together in the minds of many film critics in order to facilitate the discipline of the audience in Foucauldian terms. By creating the film viewer as a voyeur, the cinema makes the audience members want to 'view' the characters in the films and to feel their emotions. The very nature of the language of film depends upon editing as a narrative device, which is intrinsically linked to the deliberate direction of a viewer's interpretation of the events in a film, according to particular conceptual frames. All of this comes together to

discipline the viewer by manipulating their notion of what is "normal or ideal" in their society, and thus provides a template for their own behaviour. So, in the end, are the members of any given audience being disciplined by a process analogous to that suggested by Foucault's Panopticon? A number of film critics would answer with resounding agreement. Viewers are voyeurs and, as such, are surveying the images of people on the screen. The cinema creates the voyeuristic audience, thus, the interest in viewing is artificially constructed by a force outside of the individual viewer's realm of control.

The language of the cinema is by nature restrictive; limiting what the viewer may see, and guiding the directions in which their understandings of the images will flow. Thus, the audience member has inadvertently found him/herself in a cell within the Panopticon. They are not afforded the choice of complete sight by the basic structural conventions of film, and have been taught through exposure to the ideological norms implicit in the ways in which their sight is limited, to accept such norms. The viewer internalizes this tendency to normalize society and attempts to perform according to the standards that are now theirs, as well as the film's, through association with the characters. Thus, the major elements of Foucault's panoptic gaze appear to provide an interesting analogy to theories regarding the relationship between the cinema and the audience.

While one might find the previous argument convincing, it is certainly not the only one to be made. The theory that the audience member is merely the passive recipient of the disciplinary power of the cinema is just that…a theory. And where you get one theory you are sure to find another, especially one that takes the extreme opposite point of view. This case is no different. In recent years the postmodern/poststructuralist boom has caused an altogether different group of film critics to argue that the viewer is far from passive and in fact constructs the film far more than previously considered. While the more traditional perspective relies greatly upon the principles of the subconscious that are central to the cinepsychoanalysis, the postmodern approach highlights the power of the individual to consciously choose and act. As Knauft points out, Foucault's writing "only thinly addresses issues of human agency or practice" (1996:167) so the

panoptic argument receives some heavy fire once questions about the choices made by individuals are considered.

Do all people go to see every film playing at the local cinema? We all know the answer - very rarely. One of the simplest and most fundamental arguments of postmodern film theory is that the initial choice of whether a particular film will be viewed is solely dependent upon the individual. A film is never a guaranteed box-office success; it is made successful by the audience members who choose to go and see it (Turner 1993). Box-office success is an important aspect of both the traditional and postmodern approaches to film theories. The traditionalist would say that success is required in order to get the film's disciplinary message out to as many people as possible, while postmodernists see this success as an affirmation of the power of the individual to make-or-break the potential of a film to communicate to others.

Whatever the theoretical importance of box-office success, it has certainly continued to be a mystery to the movie companies themselves! For example, just remember the Godzilla fiasco of the summer of 1998. Promotional film trailers were in movie theatres months before the May 1998 release of the film and the creators were careful to peak peoples curiosity by only hinting at the appearance of this new and improved Godzilla before the opening-night screenings. What's more, a cartoon series was already in the works, with Godzilla toys lining the shelves at Toys R Us[TM], as well as, special Taco Bell[TM] Godzilla cups being flashed to kids' on television screens at home long before the monster film was ever actually viewed by an audience. Yet, when it was viewed, what happened? It was panned by the critics and, much more importantly, by the audience. This little story reminds us all that sensational or misleading promotional advertising does not always work in the long run. Basically, all of the hype in the world could not save Godzilla from the judgement of audiences everywhere.

Turner discusses cinematic success in terms of a film "finding its audience" (1993:95). A film finds its audience usually by word of mouth. A good review from a friend who shares your cinematic tastes is worth a million dollars in advertising to a film company. One fact that both the traditional and postmodern theorists tend to forget is that there is also a strong practical business side to the making of a film. With Hollywood films in particular, economic

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limitations placed upon films, whether to stay under budget or generate enormous ticket-sales, are often weighed more heavily than concerns about how the narrative may or may not discipline the audience.

As the box-office success of a film is a seemingly mysterious gift provided by judging audiences it has been suggested by postmodern film critics that there are significant choices being made at the individual level whenever a viewer decides to see a given film. Of course, movie companies have aces up their sleeves. A film's likelihood of attracting an audience may be enhanced by the involvement of a certain director or star, or even by choosing a particular genre. Film advertising often tries to build upon the current fad by announcing that a film is "The Best Film Since….[fill in recent blockbuster's title here]". But in the end, a film will never have guaranteed success as the wants and needs of the audience are always changing.

Audiences have very specific requirements of the films that they choose to view (Turner 1993). Unlike in past decades, people are much less likely to maintain a weekly routine of going to the movies to see whatever it is the theater is playing. Nowadays people generally go to the movies only if a specific film is playing. Postmodern film critics refer to this initial phase of the relationship between a film and an audience as being one of individual choice. Unlike the panoptic vision of critics such as Denzin, these scholars believe that the viewer decides whether they want to expose themselves to the disciplinary gaze of the cinema. One might argue from the traditionalist/Foucauldian perspective though, that no choices are being made, as all decisions regarding films are a direct result of the internalization of the voyeuristic need to see and act in accordance to self-imposed normative judgements of behaviour. Following through with the postmodern critiques, however, other lines of evidence also suggest that the choices and life histories of the individuals who view a film directly affect its success.

The mantra of anthropology is also the mantra of the postmodern film critique: context, context, context! The extent and ways in which a given film will affect an individual or an audience will be shaped according to their own identities and life histories. All viewers do not get the same things out of the same arrangement of images in a film. If that were true, and the audience was merely a passive receiver of information, nobody would ever watch the Oscars because we would all know who the winner would be. Communicating "the meaning" of a film is often difficult to carry out in any exact sense as people's tastes and readings of a particular film will likely differ. While some limitations are placed upon the viewer by the editorial choices made by the director, the impact of a film varies according to where the viewer is coming from. Shanks suggests that a text should be read for what it says to the reader at that point in time, in a particular realm of their experience at that moment (Shanks 1990). If an audience member is doing this, taking in and editing out the information provided by a film according their own life histories, then they are bound to each see a film in their own way. This is precisely why films are never just rated as two thumbs up or two thumbs down. Siskel and Ebert often disagreed and found themselves proclaiming that a film received "one thumb up and one down". The experiences of individuals thus allow for different, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of any given film or scene within that film.

Postmodern film critics would argue that the traditional view that films shape society (and in essence the individual) neglects this important element of the viewing experience. There is a difference then between the "textual and extra-textual", or internal and external, factors that influence what the audience takes away from a film (Turner 1993:123). Thus, in a sense, films are made by the audiences who view them. Some critics would derive from this notion that the cinema in fact creates a realm in which the audience is in a position of complete mastery. Unlike the unseeing spectator of more traditional interpretations, the viewer of postmodern critique is regarded as being empowered by film. The viewer is empowered by their ability to interpret and understand the events that they are surveying in the film, even as those portrayed in the film go about without knowledge (Turner 1993). A good example of this would be the usual horror film. Everyone in the audience knows that the young woman should not look behind that door…. they may even yell out "DON'T LOOK BEHIND THE DOOR!", yet, the character has no control, and usually gets hacked to bits. In an argument such as this, the positive rewards of the editing techniques actually enhance the knowledge and thus the power of the viewer. Film critics are here arguing

that the past experiences of the audience members, and the knowledge gleaned by them from the film itself, may work together to enable the individual to interpret the film and empower themselves on their own terms.

An empowered viewer is completely different from the passive viewer discussed by traditional film critics such as Denzin. While traditional arguments would argue that the cinema provides a medium for communicating societal norms, what of the question of resistance? Postmodern critics would argue that if film can be used to maintain norms, it may also provide an outlet for individuals who wish to question the dominant ideology of their culture. If we return once more to the infamous Rocky Horror Picture Show, we may catch a glimpse of how film may be used to facilitate the celebration of alternatives to society's norms. The Rocky Horror Picture Show is not your typical film. The main character, Frank N. Furter, is a "sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvannia" who is in actuality a space alien from another planet. The film is about sexual, spiritual and mental growth, which blatantly contradicts the usual array of Hollywood moral values. The Rocky Horror Picture Show has somewhat unexpectedly grown in appeal since it first debuted almost twenty-five years ago because it questions the norms of society and/or Hollywood. The film is also still popular because its audience has chosen to use it as a medium for expression in opposition to these norms. As I witnessed first hand at the Halloween party, there is an audience-centered ritual of viewing and participating that characterizes the Rocky Horror Picture Show experience. Throwing things at the screen, yelling out to the characters, calling out the editing techniques used, and dressing up and dancing are all commonly associated with this film. The performance quality of this particular viewing experience allows the viewer to comment upon and participate in the film's questioning of cultural norms. This action on the part of the audience, by its very nature, challenges the panoptic perspective that the viewer is made to passively react to the disciplinary cinema. Passivity cannot be claimed by the audience of the Rocky Horror Picture Show as there is a definite performance quality associated with its viewing (Turner 1993). Whether the performance requires wearing garter-belts or turning to your co-viewer and saying "hey! Watch this bit coming up...", it may be argued that people collaborate in the development of the images unfolding before their eyes.

The ideas presented here provide only a very cursory sampling of the approaches to film taken by the postmodern film critics of the 1980's and 1990's. The majority of the responses of these critics is to question how exactly the audience experiences film viewing. Generally their theories fly directly in the face of the more traditional film critics. The crucial difference lies with the differential interpretation of the power relationship between the viewer and the images that they see. While critics such as Denzin see the cinema as disciplining the audience in the Foucauldian sense of the Panopticon, the postmodern view contends the basic tenets of this analogy. By suggesting that the first step in viewing a film is a conscious choice made solely by the individual, post-modern critics questions the assumption of traditional critics that the viewer is a 'zombie-like created voyeur' who cannot stop themselves from going to the cinema. Also, while the language of the cinema is understood by postmodern and traditional critics alike, the postmodern critics argue that this cinematic language is a tool engaged by individuals to empower themselves. Also, the editorial language of a film provides the viewer with knowledge that the character in the film does not have. Finally, the norms of society used to discipline the audience in traditional terms have the potential to be played with and manipulated by the viewer in order to resist the dominant ideology of society. The Rocky Horror Picture Show exemplifies this interactive, viewer driven, dynamic of a film that is overlooked by the traditional panoptic view of the image.

Although this paper has been structured in a way that suggests a dichotomous split within the discipline of film studies regarding the role of the audience in the film experience, it should not be interpreted as such. Not every film critic is a Denzin or a Turner, just as every not every anthropologist is a Binford or a Shanks. As human beings, film critics are not a homogenous bunch and should not be regarded as such. They too have their own life histories which influence their perspective(s) on certain issues. Thus, a false dichotomy was used here in order to merely facilitate the understanding of the two generally conflicting theories regarding the role of the audience.

The dichotomy may be broken down further when it is considered that these conflicting

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interpretations of the audience as passive zombies, versus creative seers are simply two sides of the same coin. The same issues are at stake here: the act of seeing, the language of the cinema and the concept of the communication of societal norms. While a traditionalist sees a film as perpetuating norms, a postmodernist would see the individual as engaged in a dynamic process of creating and questioning these norms. The language of the cinema may be regarded as limiting the viewing abilities of the audience, or as a means for empowering the viewer through communicating knowledge that those within the film do not hold. The amazing thing about human experience, and our understanding of it, is that there is no right answer. Because of this fact, any film critic who feels the need to attempt to accurately understand the audience, to which they themselves communicate, must try to approach their questions from multiple perspectives. The issues discussed in many of the sources for this paper took one stance or another and ignored the possibilities around them. By taking multiple theories into consideration the postmodern film critic is on a promising path of inquiry. They must, however, beware of constructing themselves, and their tendency to deconstruct, strictly in terms of trying to reject what came before. What came before provides another take on an issue.

It is interesting to find that many of the film theories trying to understand the audience appear to neglect some possible points for discussion. For example, what about sound? Most viewers have five senses that aid and undoubtedly contribute to their interpretation of the world around them. If I may borrow the term from Martin Jay, the competing theories of the role of the audience seemed to be quite "occularcentric" (1994:174). Also, how about discussing the ways in which other aspects of an individual's existence shape his or her experience? The viewer certainly perceives other messages in the world outside of the cinema.

I often found myself questioning the assumptions and motives of the traditional film critics. By virtually disregarding individual-level approaches to film, the panoptic perspective failed to recognize that, as a shared experience, the audience members always discuss what they are seeing or have seen with others. The individual does not simply walk into the theatre, have their brain zapped full of societal norms, and then leave without speaking about their perception of the

images to anyone. The 'sharedness' of films is fascinating, in that total strangers may find themselves contemplating the same film discourse. A far greater examination of this phenomenon of discussing and reconstructing your own individual perspective on a film well after the last image fades from the screen, would provide a valuable line of inquiry to the understanding of the complete audience experience. These sorts of issues are at the heart of debates within anthropology regarding the motives and consequences of ethnographic films and the social relationships that they support and construct.

A far more general sort of critique grew out of my recognizing an analogous relationship between film studies and anthropology. While reading I found myself pondering how similar the two disciplines are. Both have a traditional positivist approach being opposed by the postmodern deconstructionist perspective. Are the traditional film critics such as Denzin choosing to employ some Foucauldian ideas merely to assert their own authority? Are they simply trying to establish a sense of "truth" at the subconscious level that may only be properly understood by trained professionals? These same questions have been asked of anthropology and by the anthropologists themselves, and I suspect that these questions have been asked to the majority of academic disciplines in recent years. I felt the need to mention in passing this observation as I believe that it points out the shared nature of knowledge in academia. No one discipline is an island unto itself and, as such, multidisciplinary approaches should likely provide great rewards for those researchers who are brave enough to step out into the world and attempt them.

This paper has illustrated the framework of the competing perspectives on how audiences experience the films they see. Foucault's theories on the Panopticon serve more traditional arguments adeptly, but do not appear to hold up under scrutiny at the individual level. Foucault's ideas are far more complex than are discussed here in this paper, yet the arguments played out in this paper should serve to show that theories are subject to multiple readings. The reading of Foucault by traditional film critics is not the same as a postmodern political scientist. This kaleidoscope of thought is to be expected and aspired to, as theories are essentially mere tools that may be used to serve an additional building of

new ideas within and across disciplinary boundaries.

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