



# Faculty Forum



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## LIMINALITY AND FILM SPECTATORSHIP

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How much can film viewers identify with an on-screen character from a different race, gender, or class? Film theorists such as Manthia Diawara, Judith Mayne, and Belle Gieseking have identified several problematic issues dealing with the relationship of race and spectatorship. One of the most important is the paradox presented to people of color in traditional Hollywood narrative when, as spectators, they are forced to associate themselves with negative, tainted, and unrealistic images of their own race or to suspend their disbelief to associate themselves with a white character. This problem has been addressed in recent years by filmmakers as film has become a powerful medium of self-expression for traditionally marginalized race and gender groups. In addition, interest in multiculturalism has spawned scholarship that advocates the examination of this self-expression for the dual purpose of exposing members of diverse cultures to issues and values outside of their own sphere of experience and persuading them to appreciate the merits of other cultures. The combination of the recent increase in the number of filmmakers who seek to explore these issues as representative members of their own cultural groups and the current scholarly interest in multicultural issues, however, creates a problematic situation. Al-

though such films may aim to foster multicultural appreciation, the rhetorical appeal often excludes those from whom it would ostensibly garner identification, invoking racial barriers that still prevent audience members from associating themselves with the protagonist and which enable them to identify only with secondary, often negative characters.

The driving force behind this essay is the lament of many film scholars, representing various perspectives, who feel that the existing theories of spectatorship are limited when cultural identification is considered. I aim to extend the boundaries of current scholarship by considering the prospects of shared spectatorship through liminal features of cultural identity. I argue that characters who experience identity crises and are forced into positions of exploring their own identities become rhetorical implements that are used to persuade audiences to appreciate facets of other cultures and to help foster cross-cultural identification. This phenomenon occurs as these characters bridge the gap between different identities, enabling two or more cultural groups to have significant identification with a single character. Because these characters appeal across cultures, the filmmaker is better able to persuade spectators of different racial and cultural backgrounds to experience both the struggle of the character to fit into the culture that is foreign to the spectator (which often mirrors the spectator's own struggle to understand this other culture), and to experience the character's frustration with

the spectator's own culture (which reveals to the spectator the manner in which his or her culture might be perceived by the foreign culture). Through this shared recognition, the spectator gains greater insight and appreciation for both cultures and the diverse levels of their interaction. This condition of liminality blurs the lines of traditional binary theories of spectatorship and continues what I perceive to be the trajectory toward multiplicity in models of spectatorship (as revealed by recent writings on the subject).

### Spectatorship and Cultural Perspective

Laura Mulvey established the foundation of spectatorial theory in her classic 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She argues that cinema viewers derive two types of pleasure from viewing: the pleasure of unfettered looking (which Sigmund Freud labeled scopophilia), and narcissism that comes from associating oneself with onscreen characters. This second pleasure, Mulvey argues, is based on what Jacques Lacan labeled "the mirror stage" of identity construction. "The mirror phase," Mulvey writes, "occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences in his own body" (125). The pleasure one experiences through recognition of one's likeness on screen produces a psychological identification with the film character that is the most visually like the viewer. This process has deep impact on the beliefs or behaviors of the viewer, because as Mulvey argues, "the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego" (125). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" exposed the structures of the cinema apparatus that teach men to look/women to-be-looked-at, and opened a discussion about how the psychology of viewing

impacts the identity of viewers. But the article perhaps dwells too much on gender identification, and neglects other aspects of identity and visual identification. Mulvey's article established a critical bias in which the binary of female/male (and by extension color/white, gay/straight, etc.) determines the psychological impact of a film on a given spectator.

Many contemporary critics believe that spectatorial association with screen characters is far more sophisticated and subtly defined than that allowed in a binary model. For example, Manthia Diawara, as he interrogates traditional spectatorial theory and its reliance upon the psychoanalytic connection of the mirror phase of recognition, notes that identity is both "socially and historically as well as psychically constituted," and he argues that "there are instances of film consumption which reveal the inadequacies of this approach and which implicitly question certain aspects of the prevailing problematic around spectatorship" (212). He insists that spectatorial theory must account for the fact that deviations within "the components of 'difference' among elements of race, gender, and sexuality give rise to different reading of the same material" (212). Similarly, James Snead argues that when one examines the cultural codes which inform film stereotypes, and the way in which these stereotypes are reproduced on film for white consumption, the "ethnographic" nature of this type of film turns the revelatory gaze back upon the producing society and can "reveal to its spectators the diversity and ambivalence of spectatorship" (44). bell hooks argues that these attempts to address the diverse forces that inform the identity of a single spectator are inadequate, that the plural aspects of identity pose questions about the application of these theories:

Black female spectators who refused to identify with White womanhood, who would not take on the phallogen-

tric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed. (295)

She asserts, for example, that feminist revisionist arguments began the process of exploring the nuances of viewer identification and how this process is engineered, yet neglected the race issue. "Feminist film criticism" she writes, which "has most claimed the terrain of woman's identity, representation, subjectivity as its field of analysis, remains aggressively silent on the subject of Blackness, and specifically on representations of Black womanhood" (297). This frustration stems from concerns about the exclusion of race and spectatorship from scholarly discourse at large, but more specifically from the lack of attention to race by feminist scholars whose effort is directed at exploring the limits of a binary interpretation in identification. It also results, as Michele Wallace suggests, from the insufficient definitions of how subjectivity is defined and identity is constructed:

. . . I haven't always been able to see the notion of a black female subject as separate from the notion of a white female subject. Would this mean, after all, that there were Asian, Indian, and African female subjects as well? Is subjectivity really divided by race, nationality, ethnicity? I don't think so. I'm not saying that subjectivity isn't divided. I think that it probably is divided in some manner, but I'm not sure that it can therefore be viewed as historically and materially specific, and that it divides easily by ethnicity, nationality, or any other constructed or natural rubric. Certainly "spectatorship" as it is constructed by the dominant discourse is not. (99)

The divisions Wallace outlines are not easily

discerned on screen, even if, as she doubts, one can isolate them as divisions of subjectivity. What type of ideal spectator, for example, will identify with a character that possesses physical traits that make the character's race or biological sex difficult to ascertain? Based on appearance alone the spectator may not have enough information make a psychological connection. This type of identity ambiguity blurs the spectatorial view; it confuses traditional recognition of one's "like" at the same time that it creates a possibility for association with spectators from diverse backgrounds. The critics examined above suggest that other factors besides appearance may be necessary to establish the social codes that create the psychological narcissism so essential to spectatorial association.

#### Questioning the Binary: A New Trajectory

The initial strokes of the revisionist hammer referred to by hooks can be perhaps attributed to Teresa de Lauretis and Mulvey herself. De Lauretis's scrutiny of the female viewing position and her speculation about the concept of "double-identification" (where the female spectator can, in certain instances, shift back and forth between the subject and object positions) argues that identification is more complex than the traditional binary of subject/object. She argues that the subject should be recognized as a plural rather than singular identity position and presents the possibility of several concurrent interpretations and identifications.

Mulvey suggests a similar alteration in a reexamination of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey notes that her remarks were "written during the polemical spirit that belongs properly to the early confrontational moments of the movement" (141), and reconsiders her advocacy of strict binary categories in that work:

There is a sense in which this argument, important as it is for

analyzing the existing state of things, hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms. The polarization only allows for an "either/or." As the two terms (masculine/feminine, voyeuristic/exhibitionist, active/passive) remain dependent on each other for meaning, their only possible movement is into inversion. They cannot be shifted easily into a new phase or new significance. There can be no in-between or space outside such a pairing. (142)

Mulvey asserts that the only progress that can be made within such a system is a reversal of the power positions rather than a deconstruction of the apparatus. While power reversal itself is often considered a victory from the standpoint of the oppressed, it nonetheless perpetuates issues of exclusion in society as a whole, and creates a new group of spectators who cannot associate themselves with the dominant culture.

Judith Mayne argues that a reconsideration of the binary subject/object viewing process is vital to the development of spectatorial theory. The primary focus of Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship* is on reexamining the construction of spectator positioning, and throughout the work she suggests that the old theories are confining and flawed. She suggests, for example, that an interrogation of racial viewing positions is in order, urging that "the consideration of race and spectatorship needs to account for what it means to be a white spectator; otherwise, spectatorship only acquires the contours of race through the classic dichotomy of dominance and marginality" (145). Using the feminist critical position as a model, she advocates a definition of spectatorship that relies on plural positions and interactions, specifically "the intersection

of different and differing gendered modes" (145).

The model that I propose allows for the positive aspects of ambiguity to exist, and for the mutual illumination of both cultures to occur, but lessens the negative impact bias. Instead of merely involving the viewers in the interpretation process, and asking them to select from numerous possible interpretations, the approach proposed below positions viewers so that they must invest some of themselves in the interpretation process and thus engage their own cultural biases.

### Liminality and Identity Crisis

Having surveyed some of the inequalities and barriers which scholars have observed in regard to racial viewing, and having examined some of the extensions of the boundaries of race and spectatorial theory, I am brought to the conclusion that there are still many unanswered questions about how identity construction and viewing intersect in the cinematic apparatus. With this in mind, I wish to explore the concept of liminality in character identity and how this presents a rare rhetorical position in which a shared identification is possible between viewers of different racial and cultural backgrounds. As I explained in the introduction, such a sharing of identification within a single character interrogates both cultures concurrently and on many levels for each spectator; the situation gives each viewer a better understanding of the way each viewer's culture is perceived by the other while simultaneously informing each viewer's perspective about the position of the foreign culture.

For this shared identification to be possible, the character must be in a liminal position; the narrative must examine this character while he or she is moving from one secure identity position to another. The liminal position is valuable because it presents a less biased view as the person crosses the

threshold between the familiar and the foreign culture. In narrative terms, for liminality to exist there must be a crisis of identity where through a particular set of circumstances the character experiences a legitimate questioning of his or her own identity and draws the viewer into a less biased exploration of the nature of identity and the perception of racial experience.

This model is an extension of the ideas of racial "passing" or "ethnic syncretism," in which a character travels through the world of the "other" and reveals much about this foreign culture to the viewer through her or his experience. The major difference is the rhetorical position, which is much more ambivalent in the liminality model than in those previously discussed. When one examines the rhetorical foundation of the type of revelatory "visiting" experience described above, the danger arises that such studies are, as was noted earlier, "crypto-anthropological in nature, always one culture pretending an objective definition of another" (Winokur 193). The character who "passes" is secure in his or her identity and merely interprets experiences from that perspective; the experience becomes, as Snead notes in his work cited above, an "ethnographic" journey which may criticize or valorize the character's position, but nonetheless remains secure in that position as a vehicle which "reveals one society to itself" (44). In contrast, as the liminal character is driven to discover identity, he or she must both question familiar perspectives and experiment with new, unfamiliar perspectives and experiences.

I am not arguing that the concept of liminality is completely free from the colonial interpretations inherent in "passing" narratives. Yet the character in the liminal position—an experience I contend must be driven by a crisis of identity—presents a valuable rhetorical implement that provides a more

even-handed approach than that of other forms of identity inquiry, which are perhaps informed by curiosity, subject marketability, or a vague sense of liberal responsibility.

Varieties of this liminal experience have surfaced in many films. In *Thunderheart* (Michael Apted, 1992), for example, the narrative centers on the crisis of identity experienced by Ray Levoi (Val Kilmer), a young FBI agent who is sent to the Sioux reservation in South Dakota during the 1970s hostilities surrounding the activities of the American Indian Movement—hostilities spawned by questions of native identity and the extension of civil rights. Despite the fact that Levoi is part Sioux, he has always thought of himself as white, and the film reinforces this by introducing him in his convertible sports car on the highway, comfortable amid the trappings of white Los Angeles consumption culture. Levoi's identity crisis begins when he discovers that he is being transferred to the reservation not for his professional merits, as he initially supposed, but because he is part Sioux and the government wants to use him as a token liaison with the native people. While on the reservation he is confronted with the corruption of his FBI supervisor Frank Coutelle (Sam Shepard). From this juncture the narrative ostensibly takes the form of a mystery thriller as Levoi tries to uncover and defeat this corruption, yet the primary thrust of the narrative is about the crisis of identity that Levoi experiences.

When Levoi first encounters the traditions of the Sioux he treats them with scorn, as ridiculous customs that are disconnected completely from his white, sophisticated existence. As the action progresses, however, he has experiences that cause him to question his identity and to consider the merits of Sioux culture. He experiences visions, receives help from a metaphysically-oriented tribal police officer, and gains spiritual knowledge from a native shaman. As he pur-

sues the details of Coutelle's corruption and his own identity, he comes to rely more heavily upon the Sioux spiritualism he had scorned, until his actions are almost completely driven by this connection to his newly discovered heritage.

Unlike Kevin Costner's Lt. John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and characters in other films in which one character travels through a foreign culture and valorizes or rejects aspects of this culture for the viewer, Levoi has an investment in a deep and open-minded exploration of aspects of native and white culture and how the cultures perceive and interact with one another. Levoi is not "passing," but searching, and his identity depends upon the outcome of his search. *Thunderheart* and *Dances with Wolves* are similar in that *Dances with Wolves* reinscribes the stereotype of the "noble savage" and interrogates white colonial culture, and Levoi's experience in *Thunderheart* reveals the juxtapositions of dominant white culture/marginalized native culture and celebrates native spiritualism. But unlike the former film, *Thunderheart* also displays corruption and abuses between factions within the Sioux nation; there is less of an "either/or" consideration of race, but rather a discovery on the part of Ray Levoi of positive and negative aspects of both his former and newly realized identities.

Another film in which similar issues are raised and in which liminality comes into play is *A Family Thing* (Richard Pearce, 1996). In this film, a white Arkansas owner of a rental company, Earl Pilcher (Robert Duvall), reads a letter from his mother after her death and discovers that he is actually the product of rape, the son of his white father and a black woman who was a servant in his home. He is extremely disturbed by these revelations. He begins to consider his appearance closely in mirrors as if looking for physical traces of his African heritage, and he

lashes out at his wife and children in his frustration. Finally, he sets out to fulfill his mother's dying wish, to find his birth mother's older son and "know him as his family." He travels to Chicago and locates his half-brother, Ray Murdock (James Earl Jones), who validates the circumstances of his birth and dismisses him. Both men are uncomfortable with the situation and seek to flee from their relationship, but when small-town, racist Pilcher makes himself a target for a group of thugs, Murdock reluctantly cares for him in his home. Throughout the rest of the film, Earl and Ray begin to bond as brothers as they discover common bonds of Christian faith, war service, devotion to family, and respect for their dead mother. In the end, Ray travels to Arkansas with Earl to visit the grave of their mother, and so that Earl can introduce Ray—and his newly discovered and appreciated heritage—to his family. Like *Thunderheart*, this film explores positive and negative aspects of both races: the brutality of the young black assailants is juxtaposed with the friendly nature of other members of Murdock's urban community, the families of both men are upset by the discovery of their family ties, and the racism of each character is represented. There are no "either/or" villains or saints in this film, but rather a consideration of a multiplicity of perspectives as Earl explores the ramifications of his emerging new identity.

Each of these films meets the criteria that I argue must be present for the liminal rhetorical position to exist. In each case the narrative examines a protagonist who is moving between two cultures and facing a crisis of identity. The films avoid the "ethnographic" or "crypto-anthropological" perspective, with its accompanying biases, by presenting the positive and negative of more than one culture simultaneously. As the cultures intersect within the experience of the protagonist, each culture is "mutually illuminated" for character and viewer alike. This is

not a "passing" experience because each character has a vested interest in making a thoughtful exploration of both his former culture and the new culture toward which he is now oriented. The films argue for tolerance and open-mindedness, and allow for spectators from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds to identify with Ray Levoi and Earl Pilcher. While they will not allow every viewer to associate themselves with these characters on a meaningful level (women, for example, may find it more difficult to identify with these male characters), they are excellent examples of how the liminal rhetorical position operates. (If the characters were moving through boundaries of gender, sexuality, or class, however, the films would appeal rhetorically to a different audience.) The rhetorical goal of this liminal position is not to be an all-encompassing envelope of identification, but to foster cultural appreciation, to broaden the opportunity for viewer identification, and to diffuse the dominant/marginal binary.

#### The Fluidity of Interpretation

In her discussion quoted above, Mayne argues that when spectatorial identification is understood as "shifting" or fluid, "cinematic identification [becomes] as fragile and unstable as identity itself" (27). Identity is not established through any singular biological, social, or psychological trait (although individuals may value certain aspects of their identity above others), but rather through a combination of factors. The primary problem with traditional spectatorial theory is that it relies upon a single facet of identity for viewer identification, which results in exclusion for those without access to this trait. The concept of liminality in spectatorship relies instead upon a situation of unstable identity, upon the investment of the

character in the discovery and acceptance of the many diverse facets of his or her own cultural and personal identity. The liminal position invites rather than excludes; it presents numerous aspects of the cultures in question and cultivates cross-cultural identification. Liminality will not have universal application within every film that explores multicultural issues, but in films where a crisis of identity is presented, the rhetorical nuances of liminality and the ways in which shared identification blurs binary identification should be considered.

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