

THE MOVIEGOER

I am attracted to movie stars but not for the usual reasons. I have no desire to speak to Holden or get his autograph. It is their peculiar reality which astounds me. The Yankee boy is well aware of it, even though he pretends to ignore Holden. Clearly he would like nothing better than to take Holden over to his fraternity house in the most casual way. "Bill, I want you to meet Phil. Phil, Bill Holden," he would say and go sauntering off in the best seafaring style.

(wincing) Powerful being. In my eyes read that slumber which women love.

Panic in the Streets with Richard Widmark is playing on Tchoupitoulas Street. The movie was filmed in New Orleans. Richard Widmark is a public health inspector who learns that a culture of cholera bacilli has gotten loose in the city. Kate watches, lips parted and dry. She understands my moviegoing but in her own antic fashion. There is a scene which shows the very neighborhood of the theatre. Kate gives me a look – it is understood that we do not speak during the movie.

Afterwards in the street, she looks around the neighborhood. "Yes, it is certified now."

Both then were silent?

Silent, each contemplating the other in both mirrors of the reciprocal flesh of theirhisnothis fellowfaces.

She refers to a phenomenon of moviegoing which I have called certification. Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighbourhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere.

She sounds better but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy, best of all buddies and most privy to my little researches. In spite of everything she finds herself, even now, playing out the role. In her long nightmare, this our old friendship now itself falls victim to the grisly transmogrification by which she unfailingly turns everything she touches to horror.

Laughing witch! The hand that rocks the cradle.

For her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense. She understands the chaos to come. It seems so plain when I see it through her eyes.

With indirect and direct verbal allusions or affirmations: with subdued affection and admiration: with description: with impediment: with suggestion.

THE FAN

(folded akimbo against her waist) Is me her was you dreamed before? Was then she him you us since knew? Am all them and the same now me?

It reminds me of a movie I saw last month out by Lake Pontchartrain. Linda and I went to a theatre in a new suburb. It was evident somebody had miscalculated, for the suburb had quit growing and here was the theatre, a pink stucco cube, sitting out in a field all by itself. A strong wind whipped the waves against the seawall; even inside you could hear the racket. The movie was about a man who lost his memory in an accident and as a result lost everything: his family, his friends, his money. He found himself a stranger in a strange city. Here he had to make a fresh start, find a new place to live, a new job, a new girl. It was supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal. On the other hand, things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian.

Faithful Portraits incorporates into its form the conditions that demonstrate (as Barthes has shown) that film language or codification cannot be fully grasped in its naturalized vision, but only as an artifact, the still:

The still offers us the *inside* of the fragment . . . [the still] is not a specimen chemically extracted from the substance of film, but rather the trace of a superior *distribution* of traits which the film as experienced in its animated flow would give no more than one text among others. The still, then, is the fragment of a second text *whose existence never exceeds the fragment*; film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is *on top* of the other or that one is *extracted* from the other.¹

The still, by disrupting narrative sequence or cinematic time, allows for a reading which is both instantaneous and vertical as it disassociates the mode of cinematic vision which subordinates the signifier to its image.

Appropriating images as similiar artifacts of vision, Normoyle's process of photographic displacement begins with culling images (utilizing 2¼ inch negatives) from the movie screen. The tendency to uphold narrative in perception is reduced to a textual trace as the image is photocopied and processed as a series of reversals by which the negative asserts its presence as a positive. This analogical (or continuous coding) impression of film reality neither annuls nor cancels the referentiality of the image, but preserves its position within it by retaining simultaneously the inscriptions which support the dominant positions of cinematic signification and a critique which deconstructs this representation at the moment of its elaboration. As a mutation of the "original", Normoyle's reproductions diffuse semiotic codification and the spatial and temporal structures of cinematic identification, but retain the imitative transparency of the screen to engage an open system of signifiers which deconstruct the symbolic order of film reality. As a deconstruction of cinematic conventions—the exploration of specific codes and their effects on the relations of subject production—a dialectic is formed between specific denotations, without which film discourse would not be possible, and connotations or analogical codings which address the spectator, not as a codified subject of cinematic vision, but within a space allowing movement in signifying practices.

Michelle Normoyle has repeatedly displayed in her work a fascination with the cultural formations of new communication technologies and their emergence within generic conditions. Normoyle's photographic reproductions have articulated the role of the symbolic within the hegemony of mass produced and mass circulated images. By submitting the image to an analysis of the messages or codes it may contain, Normoyle constructs a textual analysis within which a critical mutation may occur. In *Faithful Portraits*, this mutation explores the relations and terms of cinematic vision and conditions of desire by positing a problematic of cinematic "seeing" and identification. Questioning the codes of cinematic identification must simultaneously recognize the role of both image and narrative; taken up self-reflexively as a re-reading of this engagement, representation in mainstream commercial films is revealed as structured *a priori* by both cinematic discourse and the film apparatus. *Faithful Portraits* both produce and break the conventions of this cinematic engagement, but positioned in contrast to many contemporary critiques of the image within representative codification of popular culture, Normoyle's appropriations are without perversity. Instead, they suggest a moment of cultural accuracy and possible pleasure.

As a critique of the closures of cinematic codification, Normoyle provides access to subjective identification within a nexus of representation that suggests the workings of the "popular" imagination. But as images are rendered more imprecise, as representative qualities are indeterminate, the spectator assumes other spaces of identification that engage a reading outside of the complicity of meaning within cinematic narrative form. This re-reading does not obliterate references, but renders them ambiguous or open, and enables them to "refer" more accurately. As a result of this problematizing of pictorial codes, the interiority of subjective depth is no longer defined within the "perfectibility" of cinematic representation but acts as a rupture of the expressive rational of the cinematic image—the illusions which hold subject identification to determinate conditions of narrative form. The structures of cinematic vision are displaced, not within a transformation or a changing order, but as a transmutation or deconstruction of signification, that cuts across the symbolic inscriptions of desire structured by classical narrative cinema.

In order to deconstruct the privileged realm within which a mastery of cinematic reception is assured by naturalized vision and illusionist aesthetic, Normoyle positions the problematic of subject identification within the reproduction of these same codes by sustaining the vision of the spectator as a surface quality or "situation". This aesthetic of situation exposes the elements of cinematic form and expression to be unabashedly artificial in their metaphysics of cultural presence. As this "reading against the grain" becomes both methodology and form, generic film images are revealed as coded mechanisms which convey the functions of the unconscious processes of subjective identification.

As portraits "faithfully reconstructed" from the spectacle of film, this situation aesthetic also suggests a disruption of the engagement of visual pleasure within narrative form and the reproductions of cinematic vision. The reception of visual pleasure in the narrative film raises questions about the process of objectification that structures positions of desire. This problematic of objectification within the process of cinematic identification can not be dismissed from the re-positioning of the feminine subject that is inherent in much of Normoyle's work. The relationship of the spectator to the film image is, therefore, questioned as two processes. The subjectification of the film image is immersed within effects of objectification. The relation between the signifier and signification in the film image can not be considered arbitrary, but as firmly grounded in the social. As both processes are structured through narrative, the symbolic patterns of mainstream film are inseparable from the ability to recognize the "I or the not I" as the site where the subjective and the social are articulated.² A feminist mediation, must therefore recognize the hegemony of cinematic identification as not only a unitary vision within image and narrative form, but as a verisimilitude of vision that fails to provide access to the feminine within the historical subjects of film practice.

Using psychoanalytic theory, Laura Mulvey argued that the visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema are based on an active voyeuristic spectator intent on a "direct, scopophilia contact with the female form" displayed for masculine enjoyment, in contrast to the feminine position which remains objectified within the masculine gaze.³ This process of reception within the cinematic image exerts a pleasurable identification with the male protagonist, and through the mastery of this role as subjective position, the female character remains the object and support for the representation of male desires. Normoyle's undercutting of symbolic order in *Faithful Portraits* has selected, more often than not, the masculine subject as the representative generic mode. In this reference, the masculine is deconstructed or deferred from exerting influence as the active subject of identification within the cinematic gaze.

These mutations are also implicit in suggesting the position available to the woman spectator, within the mechanisms which support the mastery of cinematic vision. As Normoyle positions as central, the process of cinematic vision, or a rupture of the terms of cinematic engagement, as guided by both image and narrative, consequently pleasure and subjective production, re-reading of the symbolic order of cinematic codes may no longer be guided by the motivations of fetishistic and voyeuristic modes of subject identification, the mediations of presence but remain in situation to establish as problematic the *realities* of cinematic vision.

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1. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 67.
2. Paul Willeman, "Cinematic Discourse—The Problem of Inner Speech," *Screen 22*, #3 (1981), p. 74-75.
Willeman's inquiry into cinematic discourse explores the distinctions between language and the moving image within the articulation of textual systems, which are inseparable from social discourse and unconscious signification in terms of forms grounded in verbal language, but as cultural texts, this relationship is viewed as operating within a heterogenous signifying chain.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen 16*, #3 (1975), p. 13.

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