

Filmic Visuality, Cultural Identity

A film about how film was first invented in Germany, Wim Wenders's *Die Brüder Skladanowsky (The Brothers Skladanowsky)* (Part I) (1994) offers important clues to the contentious relationship between film and cultural identity. Using the shooting and editing skills, and style of the silent era, and filming with an antique hand-crank camera, Wenders and students from the Munich Academy for Television and Film recast this originary moment in cinematic history as the tale of a loved one lost and found: disturbed by her Uncle Eugen's imminent departure on a long journey, Max Skladanowsky's five-year-old daughter implores the adults – her father and his other brother, Emil – to bring Eugen back into her life. She gets her wish. As she waves goodbye to Uncle Eugen, the little girl is told that he is still with them, inside the box containing the film they had made of him before he departed. And soon, lo and behold, she is overjoyed by what she sees through the 'Bioscop' invented by her father: a life-size Uncle Eugen flickering on the screen, making funny expressions and performing acrobatic feats just as when he was still with them. Uncle Eugen has disappeared in person but has reappeared on film – and, we may add, he will be there forever.

In an elegant and moving manner, Wenders's film about the beginning of film reminds us of the key features of the medium of signification that was novel in the 1890s. First, film (and here I intend photography as well as cinema) is, structurally, a story about the relationship between absence and presence, between disappearance and reappearance. Filmic representation reproduces the world with a resemblance unknown to artists before its arrival. Be the object captured a human face, a body, a thing, or a place, the illusion of presence generated is such that a new kind of realism, one that vies with life itself, aggressively asserts itself. If cultural identity is something that always finds anchoring in specific media of representation (such as print, music, art, and now, increasingly, digital media), it is easy to see why, in modernity, the modes of illusory presence made possible by film would become such strong contenders in the competitive negotiations of cultural identity. Second, in a manner that summarises the essence of many early, silent films, Wenders's work draws attention to the agile movements of the human body as they are captured by the equipment built by Max Skladanowsky. Because sound and dialogue were not yet available, the filmmaker had to turn the ingredients he had into so many spatial inscriptions on the screen. What could have better conveyed the liveliness of this new illusory world than the exaggerated,

hieroglyphic motions of the human body, coming across as a series of moving images? The compelling sense of photographic realism in film is thus punctuated with an equally compelling sense of melodrama – of technologically magnified and exaggerated movements that highlight the presences unfolding on the screen as artificial and constructed experiments. Melodrama here is not so much the result of sentimental narration as it is the effect of a caricatured defamiliarization of a familiar form (the human body and its recognizable gestures). Made possible by the innovative maneuvers of light and temporality, of exposure and speed, such defamiliarization has direct bearings on the new manners of seeing and showing.

The co-existence of an unprecedented realism and a novel melodramatization means that, from the very earliest moments, the modes of identity construction offered by film were modes of *relativity* and *relations* rather than essences and fixities. Well-known film techniques used around the world, such as montage, close-ups, panoramic shots, long shots, jump cuts, slow motion, flashback, and so forth, which result in processes of introjection, projection, or rejection that take place between the images and narratives shown on the screen, on the one hand, and audiences' sense of self, place, history, collective belonging, and pleasure, on the other, confirm the predominance of such modes of relativity and relations. With film, people's identification of who they are can no longer be regarded as a mere ontological or phenomenological event. Such identification is now profoundly enmeshed with technological intervention, which ensures that even (and especially) when the camera seems the least intrusive, the permeation of the filmic spectacle by the apparatus is complete and unquestionable. And, it is the completeness of the effect of illusion that makes the interpretation of filmic visuality controversial to this day.

It was the understanding of this fundamentally manipulable constitution of film – this open-ended relation between spectacle and audience due, paradoxically, to the completeness of technological permeation – which led Walter Benjamin to associate film with revolutionary production and with political change.¹ For, as Benjamin speculated in the 1930s, film's thoroughly *mediated* nature makes it a cultural opportunity to be seized for political purposes. Just as for the film actor, performing in front of the camera is a kind of exile from his own body because it demands the simulation of emotional continuity in what is technically a disjointed process of production, so for the audience, Benjamin writes, the new attitude of reception is distraction and manipulation. As opposed to the absorption and concentration required by the traditional novel, which has to be read in solitude and in private, film requires a mode of interaction that is public and collective, and that allows audiences to take control of their situation

¹ See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-51; and "The Author as Producer", in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 220-38.

by adopting changing, rather than stable, positions. Film, in other words, turns the recipient potentially into a producer, who plays an active rather than passive role in the shaping of his/her cultural environment.

Whereas Benjamin in his Marxist, Brechtian moments was willing to grant to a movie audience the significance of an organized mob, later generations of film critics, notably feminist critics with a training in psychoanalysis, would elaborate the agency of the viewer with much greater complexity by way of processes of subjectivity formation. Such critics would argue that fantasies, memories, and other unconscious experiences, as well as the gender roles imposed by the dominant culture at large, play important roles in mediating the impact of the spectacle.

The crucial theoretical concept informing psychoanalytic interpretations of identity is 'suture'. In the context of cinema, 'suture' refers to the interactions between the enunciation of the filmic apparatus, the spectacle, and the viewing subject – interactions which, by soliciting or 'interpellating' the viewing subject in a series of shifting positions, allow it to gain access to coherent meaning.² As Kaja Silverman writes, "The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, 'Yes, that's me', or 'That's what I see'".³ As expressed through suture – literally a 'sewing up' or a 'stitching together' of gaps – cinematic identification is an eminently ideological process: subjectivity is imagined primarily as a lack, which is then exploited, through its desire to know, by the visual field enunciated by the omnipotent filmic apparatus, which withholds more than it reveals. In order to have access to the plenitude that is the basis for identity, the subject must give up something of its own in order to be 'hooked up' with the Other, the visual field, which is, nonetheless, forever beyond its grasp. No matter how successful, therefore, the subject's possession of meaning is by definition compensatory and incomplete. (This process of subject formation through suture is comparable to an individual's attempt to acquire identity in certain social situations. For instance, in order to gain acceptance into a particular social group, an individual must be willing to sacrifice, to part with certain things to which s/he feels personally attached but which are not socially acceptable; such personal sacrifices, however, are not guarantees that the social identity acquired is complete or permanent because, as is often the case, the social group is capricious and arbitrary in its demands.)

Because it foregrounds processes of identification through relations of visibility, cinema is one of the most explicit systems of suturing, the operations of which can be explained effectively through the simple acts of seeing. Meanwhile, cinema also offers a homology with the dominant culture at large, in that the latter, too, may be seen as a repressive system in which individual subjects gain access to their identities only by forsaking parts of themselves, parts that are, moreover, never fully found again.

² For the concept of "interpellation" see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-86; see also Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

³ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 205.

(The work of Freud and Lacan have definitely left their imprints on this way of understanding identity.)

Using suture, ideology, and other related psychoanalytic concepts, Anglo-American feminist critics concerned with identitarian politics have, since Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work in 1970s, been steadily exposing the masculinism of mainstream cinema as well as of the dominant, heterosexist culture of the West.⁴ As a means of countering the repressive effects of dominant modes of visibility and identification, some go on to analyse in detail the ambiguities of the visual representations of women,⁵ while others make use of the problematic of spectatorship, notably the spectatorship of women audiences, to theorise alternative ways of seeing, of constructing subjectivities and identities.

Once identity is linked to spectatorship, a new spectrum of theoretical possibilities opens up. For instance, critics who have been influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* can now make the connection that orientalism, as the system of signification that represents non-Western cultures to Western recipients in the course of Western imperialism, operates visually as well as narratologically to subject 'the orient' to ideological manipulation. They point out that, much like representations of women in classical narrative cinema, representations of 'the orient' are often fetishized objects manufactured for the satiation of the masculinist gaze of the West. As a means to expose the culturally imperialist assumptions behind European and American cinemas, the spectatorship of non-Western audiences thus also takes on vital significance.⁶

Because it conceptualises identity non-negotiably as the effect of a repressive but necessary closure, suture has by and large been theoretically preemptive – that is, it has been explicitly or implicitly accepted as the unquestionable path to identity formation. This can be seen in the two major ways in which the relationship between film and identity is usually investigated. For both, an acceptance of suture is indispensable.

This acceptance may function negatively, when the understanding of suture is used as a way to debunk and criticise certain kinds of identity – as ideologically conditioned by patriarchy and imperialism, for instance. Or, this acceptance may function positively and *implicitly*, in the counter critical practice of demonstrating that some types of films may serve as places for the construction of other (usually marginalized) types of identities. It is important to remember, however, that even when critics who are intent on subverting mainstream culture assert that 'alternative' cinemas give rise to 'alternative' identities, as long as they imagine identities exclusively by way of the classic 'interpellation' of subjectivities, they are not departing theoretically from the fundamental operations of suture. In fact, one may go as far as saying that it is when critics attempt to idealise the 'other' identities claimed for 'other' cinemas, that they tend to run the

⁴ See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge; London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 57-68.

⁵ See, for instance, Judith Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question: Feminism and Soviet Silent Film* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989); and essays included in Mary Ann Doane et al., eds., *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1984), and in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory*, and Penley and Sharon Willis, eds., *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁶ See for example Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 3-33.

greatest risk of reinscribing the ideologically coercive processes of identification through suturing.

For these reasons, I would propose that any attempt to theorise filmic visuality and cultural identity should try to move beyond both the criticism and the implicit reinscription of the effects of suture. In this light, it might be productive to return to aspects of film which may not immediately seem to be concerned with identity as such but which, arguably, offer alternatives to the impasses created by suture.

Let us think more closely about the implications of the modes of visuality unleashed by film. To go back to the story of the Skladanowsky brothers, what does it mean for Uncle Eugen to 'appear' when he is physically absent? From an anthropocentric perspective, we would probably say that 'the person' Eugen was the 'origin', the 'reality' that gave rise to the film which then became a document, a record of him. From the perspective of the filmic images, however, this assumption of 'origin' is no longer essential, for Eugen is now a movie, which has taken on an independent, mechanically reproducible existence of its own. With the passage of time, more and more reprints can be made and every one of them will be the same. The 'original' Uncle Eugen will no longer be of relevance.

Film, precisely because it signifies the thorough permeation of reality by the mechanical apparatus and thus the production of a seamless resemblance to reality itself, displaces once and for all the sovereignty of the so called 'original', which is now often an imperfect and less long-lasting copy of 'itself': Uncle Eugen's image remains long after he was dead. This obvious aspect of filmic reproduction is what underlies Benjamin's argument about the decline of the 'aura', the term he uses to describe the irreplaceable sense of 'presence' that was unique to traditional works of art when such works of art were rooted in specific times and spaces.⁷ What was alarming about the arrival of film (as it was for many poets and artists) was precisely the destruction of the 'aura', a destruction that is programmed into film's mode of reproduction and that is part of film's 'nature' as a medium. This essential *iconoclasm* of filmic reproduction is encapsulated in Wenders's story by the phantasmagorically alive and replay-able image of Uncle Eugen *in his own absence*. This image signifies the end of the aura and the sacredness that used to be attached to the 'original' human figure, to the human figure as the 'original'. It also signifies a change in terms of the agency of seeing: the realist accuracy of the image announces that a mechanical eye, the eye of the camera, has replaced the human eye altogether in its capacity to capture and reproduce the world with precision.⁸ As the effects of mechanicity, filmic images carry with them an inhuman quality even as they are filled with human contents. This is the reason why film has been compared to a process of embalming, to fossilization, and to death.⁹

⁷ See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

⁸ See Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible" in Teresa de Lauretis e Stephen Heath. eds., *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London: MacMillan, 1978), 121-42.

⁹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 9-16.

But what film destroys in terms of the aura, it gains in portability and transmissibility. With ‘death’ come new, previously undreamt of possibilities of experimentation, as the mechanically reproduced images become sites of the elaboration of what Benedict Anderson, in a study of the emergence of nationalism in modern history, calls “imagined communities”.¹⁰ We see this, for instance, in the mundane, anonymous sights of the big city that are typical of early silent films such as Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin – Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: The Symphony of the Big City*) (1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Scenes of workers going to work, housewives shopping, schoolchildren assembling for school, passengers traveling by train; scenes of carriages, engines, automobiles, train stations, typewriters, phones, gutters, street lamps, shop fronts – all such scenes testify to a certain fascination with the potentialities of seeing, of what can be made visible. The mechanically reproduced image has brought about a perception of the world as an infinite collection of objects and people permanently on display in their humdrum existence. At the same time, because film is not only reproducible but also transportable, it can be shown in different places, usually remote from the ones where they are originally made. Coinciding with upheavals of traditional populations bound to the land and with massive migrations from the countryside to metropolitan areas around the world, film ubiquitously assumes the significance of the monumental: the cinema auditorium, as Paul Virilio writes, puts order into visual chaos like a cenotaph. As the activity of movie-going gratifies “the wish of migrant workers for a lasting and even eternal homeland”, cinema becomes the site of “a new aboriginality in the midst of demographic anarchy”.¹¹

The iconoclastic, portable imprints of filmic images and the metropolitan, migratory constitution of their audiences mean that film is always a rich means of exploring cultural crisis – of exploring culture itself as a crisis. We have seen many examples of such uses of film in various cinemas of the post-Second World War period: the existentialist portrayals of the difficulty and breakdown of human communication in Italian neo-realist and French avant-garde films; the sentimental middle-class family melodramas of Hollywood; the aesthetic experiments with vision and narration in Japanese cinema; the self-conscious parodies of fascism in the New German Cinema; the explosive renderings of diaspora and ‘otherness’ in what is called “third cinema”.¹² By the 1980s and early 1990s, with the films of the mainland Chinese Fifth Generation directors, it becomes clear that film can be used for the exploration of crises especially in cultures whose experience of modernity is marked, as it were, by conflicts between an indigenous tradition and foreign influences, between the demands of nationalism and the demands of Westernization.

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹¹ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989).

¹² Si veda Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in J. Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222-237; see also essays in Jim Pines e Paul Willemen, eds., *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

For mainland Chinese directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Nuanxin, reflecting on 'culture' inevitably involves the rethinking of origins – the 'pasts' that give rise to the present moment; the narratives, myths, rituals, customs, and practices that account for how a people becomes what it is. Because such rethinking plays on the historical relation between what is absent and what is present, film becomes, for these directors and their counterparts elsewhere in Asia, an ideal medium:¹³ its projectional mechanism means that the elaboration of the past – as what is bygone, what is behind us – can simultaneously take the form of images moving, in their vivid luminosity, in front of us. The simple, dialectical relationship between visual absence and visual presence that was dramatized by film from the very first thus lends itself appropriately to an articulation of the dilemmas and contradictions, the nostalgias and hopes, that characterise struggles toward modernity. In such struggles, as we see in films such as *Yellow Earth*, *Sacrifice Youth*, *Judou*, or *Raise the Red Lantern*, the definitively modernist effort to reconceptualise 'origins' typically attributes to indigenous traditions the significance of a 'primitive' past in all the ambiguous senses of 'primitivism'. This special intersection between film and primitivism has been described in terms of "primitive passions".¹⁴ Even closer to our time, the visually spectacular films by directors such as Taiwan's Tsai Ming-liang (e.g., *Vive l'amour*, *The River*, *What Time Is It There?*) and Hong Kong's Wong Kar-wai (e.g., *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood for Love*) continue to foreground filmic visuality as the medium, the surface on which the banal yet persistent psychodramas of modernity are played out in fragmented forms.

As the viewing of film does not require literacy in the traditional sense of knowing how to read and write, film signals the transformation of word-based cultures into cultures that are increasingly dominated by the visual image, a transformation that may be understood as a special kind of translation in the postmodern, postcolonial world. Intersemiotic in nature, film-as-translation involves histories and populations hitherto excluded by the restricted sense of literacy, and challenges the class hierarchies long established by such literacy in societies West and East.¹⁵ And, insofar as its images are permanently inscribed, film also functions as an immense visual archive, assimilating literature, popular culture, architecture, fashion, memorabilia, and the contents of junk shops, waiting to be properly inspected for its meanings and uses.¹⁶

Any attempt to discuss film and cultural identity would therefore need to take into account the multiple significations of filmic visuality in modernity. This is especially so when modernity is part of postcoloniality, as in the case of many non-Western cultures, in which to become 'modern' signifies an ongoing re-visioning of indigenous cultural traditions alongside the obligatory turns toward the West or 'the world at large'. In this light, it

¹³ See essays in Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1988).

¹⁴ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 322-323.

is worth remembering that film has always been, since its inception, a *transcultural* phenomenon, having as it does the capacity to transcend 'culture' – to create modes of fascination which are readily accessible and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities. Consider, for instance, the greatly popular versions of fairy tale romance, sex, kitsch, science fiction, and violence from Hollywood; alternatively, consider the greatly popular slapstick humor and action films of Jackie Chan from Hong Kong. To be sure, such popular films can inevitably be read as so many constructions of national, sexual, cultural identities; as so many impositions of Western, American, or other types of ideologies upon the rest of the world. While I would not for a moment deny that to be the case, it seems to me equally noteworthy that the world-wide appeal of many such films has something to do, rather, with their *not* being bound by well-defined identities, so that it is their specifically *filmic*, indeed phantasmagoric, significations of masculinity, moral righteousness, love, loyalty, family, and horror that speak to audiences across the globe, regardless of their own languages and cultures. (Hitchcock is reputed to have commented while making *Psycho* that he wanted Japanese audiences to scream at the same places as Hollywood audiences.)

The phantasmagoric effects of illusion on the movie screen are reminders once again of the iconoclasm, the fundamental replacement of human perception by the machine that is film's very constitution. This originary iconoclasm, this power of the technologized visual image to communicate beyond verbal language, should perhaps be beheld as a useful enigma, one that serves to unsettle any easy assumption we may have of the processes of identification generated by film as a medium, be such identification in relation to subjectivity or to differing cultural contexts. In a theoretical climate in which identities tend to be imagined – a bit too hastily I think – as being 'sutured' with specific times, places, practices, groups, and cultures, thinking through this problematic of film's transcultural appeal should prove to be an instructive and productive exercise.