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Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game. Todd McGowan. Bloomsbury, 2015 (179 pages).

James Driscoll

Todd McGowan's *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* offers a non-technical introduction to Lacanian thought and its role in current psychoanalytic film theory. His theoretical reference is the Žižekian interpretation of Jacques Lacan, which emphasises the real as a productively impossible impasse of subjectivity and the *objet a* as the paradoxically insubstantial cause of desire. This tendency translates into McGowan's work as a turn away from Screen theory's preoccupation with imaginary spectator identity towards the ways narrative films represent the necessary failures of such imaginary cohesion. We are thus offered a standard epiphanic theory of spectatorship modelled on the psychoanalytic situation: just as "the point of psychoanalysis is to bring the subject to the point where it can recognize itself in its seemingly alien unconscious desire", film, mainly through its use of the *objet a* as an aural/visual blind spot within narrative enunciation, can rouse spectators to similar awakenings (McGowan 18).

In the first section of the book, McGowan explains the Lacanian concepts that inform his approach and argues for their efficacy in the interpretation of film texts. In expository terms McGowan is very clear and considerate of his reader, as for example in his explanation of the difficult need-demand interaction so integral to the Lacanian conceptions of language acquisition and the constitution of desire (25–9). Moreover, McGowan's insistence on the alien natures of both the unconscious and the desire it harbours (17–23), as well as the negativity of enjoyment (53–6), well enough represent the Lacanian orientation and its avowed commitment to the originality and continued relevance of Freudian ideas. In filmic terms, things are a bit shakier. Although the comparison McGowan draws between the independence of the signifier in the analytic session and the social independence of filmic form is suggestive, if underdeveloped (30–1), the text is full of suspicious equivocations, such as: "Every film utilizes the distinction between the objet a and the object of desire" (47), "[f]ilm is an inherently excessive art" (55), and "[f]ilm relies on the gaze and voice to arouse the spectator's desire" (78). This tendency represents a larger problem with McGowan's theory as a theory of film, to which I will attend below. Nonetheless, I am convinced by McGowan's interpretation of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), in which he offers Harry's (Gene Hackman) disastrous mishearing of the duplicitous couple's conversation as evidence that what everyday subjects hear is both dependent upon yet independent from their desire as listeners (77–8).

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In the second section, McGowan then applies the concepts he has developed to a close analysis of Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*, 1939). But rather than evaluate his hermeneutic, which is effective like any other, I want to focus on McGowan's critique of Screen theory and its centrality to his project. McGowan separates himself from Screen theory by arguing that the latter was not actually psychoanalytic but rather a political appropriation of Lacan marred by theoretical misunderstanding. To this end, he accuses Screen theory of two main infractions: (1) its "subject" with which spectators are said to identify is overly deterministic and does not reflect the reality of the Lacanian concepts from which it is built; (2) Screen theory cannot account for either the desire or the enjoyment of the spectator, since the determined subject position it elaborates cannot accommodate the inherent alienations of desire or the real excesses of enjoyment (56–63, 168–9). Since for McGowan the matters of desire and enjoyment constitute a first principle of film analysis, it thus follows that Screen theory has no bearing on the reality of film (17). As McGowan puts it, in dismissive language that should by now sound routine, "popular spectatorship is a political nightmare from which Screen theorists dream of emancipating us. But this is a nightmare of their own creation that has nothing to do with actual psychoanalytic theory or actual spectatorship" (60).

Now, it is really only the negation of the first supposed error, the assumption of a subject, which leaves McGowan free to confirm through narrative film that desire and enjoyment condition spectatorship. This requisite dismissal is not particular to McGowan but rather reflects the definitive abandonment in film studies of Totality and its Subject, which has yielded our most common methodological paradox: the totalising gesture is over with, so pick and apply your worldview. McGowan's book is a clear example of the reification that founds this methodology in that he layers Lacanian concepts onto the social field, which is acceptable, but then transparently applies them to film as though film were not a representational practice operating in relative autonomy within the social field.

Thus when it comes time to model "actual spectatorship" on these concepts, McGowan's text immediately invites us to revisit questions of social-historical determination and a mediating subject. For example, when McGowan correctly explains that fantasy determines the Other as falsely whole, but then notes that late Tarantino films represent the ideological dangers of such determination, we should ask: what exactly connects these different instances of the Other (49–52)? What subjective structures function such that fantasy, as found in the general social field or the analytic session, can be depicted or experienced in film? These questions also challenge McGowan's assumption that Joan Copjec's critique of Screen theory is unanswerable (63–7). This critique, which predates and influences McGowan's present work, maintains that whereas apparatus theory determines its subject by the mere perception of representation, a Lacanian conception of the visual field understands the subject of representation as motivated by that which *escapes* her initial sense (Copjec 59, 65–71). Apparatus theory can only account for what is avowedly there, *hic et nunc,* while Lacanian representational experience is founded precisely on what is *absent* from representation, namely a surmise of the Other's desire. Thus, for Copjec, apparatus theory—which McGowan presently conflates with Screen theory—is not Lacanian but Foucauldian, in that its posited apparatus always exercises the same generative power, with no heed paid to the negative, subtractive elements of subjectivity (62).

If we are not careful, we will fail to notice that, in the hands of McGowan and Copjec, these critiques and their objects are in fact competing worldviews, not theories of film. While Copjec is correct to point out that Screen theory operated in ignorance of the structural gaps Lacan installed in vision, it remains unexplained how a more authentically Lacanian visual field actually transfers to a historical-social visual field that is nonetheless very much determined. There is absolutely no mention in Copjec's text of medium specificity or the changes that occur when life-world subjectivity, Lacanian or not, becomes viewing subjectivity. With this in mind, we are better able to understand the disagreement between Copjec and Raymond Bellour over Copjec's text that McGowan narrates and interprets (65–6). While it may be true that Raymond Bellour betrays a defensive theoretical incapacity in his reply to Copjec, he is also right that her revisions of the Lacanian aspects of Screen theory do not neutralise its aim as a knowledge practice, which was the placement of film within a historical-material totality.

The point is that if we fail to account for the social ontology of viewing subjectivity, McGowan's privileged concepts of desire and enjoyment cannot be found in film beyond thematic content interpretation and conceptual analogue. And if the rejection of hitherto theories of this ontology presently rests on egregiously simplified criticisms, such as McGowan's attribution to Jean-Louis Baudry that "[i]n the cinema, one can gain a sense of identity through the act of seeing heroic figures on the screen. I see Sandra Bullock or Denzel Washington acting in a specific way, and I model myself on them" (59), we should feel obliged to respond with scrutiny. Thus, as both a corrective to McGowan's methodological assumptions and an attempt to better situate his discourse, I think it worthwhile to quickly rehearse the construction of Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus subject, with an eye towards integrating McGowan's basic questions of desire and enjoyment.

Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" is also implicitly based on a question: how did the film camera acquire its social function as a privileged means of representing reality? To find the answer, Baudry looks back to the pictorial convention of perspective. According to Baudry, at a certain moment in Western history representation began providing spectators with a localised intuition of Being in its entirety. Although each perspective painting depicts particular content and reflects the style of its producer, perspective as a conventional grid confirms for the spectator that what she sees is firstly a communication from the infinite anonymity of reality (Baudry, "Ideological Effects " 41–2). Perspective accomplishes the serial reproduction of this sense by formally standardising an ideational horizon that (a) understands abstract space as the physical and experiential origin of the world and (b) sees in all phenomenal appearance a primary affirmation of that anonymous, conditional space (Hauser 388–9). This dialectical tandem of ideational horizon and formal materialisation is serially transferred via an anonymous "subject", or an apperceived way of looking that is enacted and displaced by the particular contents of each perspective frame.

Baudry argues that the film camera is functionally determined to adopt and improve this ideational standard of neutral space and appearance ("Ideological Effects" 42–4). It adopts this standard by effacing the differences between individual photographs and restoring to captured moments their continuity of movement. Reality is thus better reproduced in its spatial nature. However, in so doing, the camera does not reproduce the "subject" of spatial representation but

embodies it as a mobile subject now wandering that space. This embodiment materialises an ideational transition from the reality of spatial anonymity to a reality of infinite availability.

At this point *alienation* shows itself as conditioning the relationship between the camera-subject and the reality it sees/captures. In the first place, the idea of infinite reality and its mobile visibility are the conditions of all diegesis, no matter how abstract or fantastical. There is diegesis because a sense of plausible reality is spontaneously attached to any figurative film representation. However, since this idea conditions all diegesis, and thus functions as an intangible origin, it can never be directly experienced, only displaced through apperception. Consequently, reality as the ideational horizon of diegesis always retains an alienated independence from the representations it occasions.

Apparatus theory sees in this alienation between conditional idea and conditioned representation a translation of the reified alienation between appearance and reality. Here we reach an important and necessary revision; apparatus/Screen theories are not psychoanalytic theories but theories of reification. If we define reification as the experience of external reality as malevolently independent, and reorient these theories towards such a view of the social field, we can better understand Daniel Dayan's remarks that "the film-discourse presents itself as *a product without a producer*, *a discourse without an origin*. It speaks. Who speaks? *Things speak for themselves and of course, they tell the truth*" (qtd. in McGowan, 62; emphasis added). These phrases, which call to mind John Ellis's profound formula that in narrative cinema "it seems as though reality is telling itself" (60), are direct translations of Georg Lukács's insight that reified individuals experience reality as though it produced itself from nothing.

The camera-subject of apparatus theory sees reality in this way, and the "subject-effect" it yields, the "transcendental subject", is modelled on the subjective/objective alienation that produces a reified world; just as humanity actually produces its world yet experiences that world as self-generating, the camera as "transcendental subject" produces representations that it then experiences as though it did not produce them. Scholars tend to ignore or stumble over this conception because they believe Baudry cannot provide either the ontology of or the motivation for an identification with this subject. Both can be supplied. Regarding its ontology, I have insisted on the ideational horizon of space/reality precisely because the spectator-subject position of the apparatus is not an A-to-B effect but the production in time of a concrete ideational stance already operative in the social field. The transcendental subject is a trans-individual subject that expresses a specific and determined way we *already* look at the world, since the film camera is socially understood as itself a subject who, like spectators, sees the world firstly as an *ex nihilio* field of alienated appearance. Thus, to speak of "identification with" the camera is not exactly accurate, since apparatus spectatorship is not a matter of occupying *the same position as* the camera but a position *alongside* the camera. This position must be taken literally for one to grasp Baudry's theory: the spectator does not identify with the camera but watches reality unfold along with the camera.

Regarding motivation, we should note that Baudry actually posits that the production and experience of alienated diegesis is predicated on desire. In his second article, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema", Baudry contends that film is rooted in the wish to "[obtain] from reality a position, a condition in which what is

perceived would no longer be distinguished from representations" (Baudry, "Apparatus" 121). When he describes the filmic determination of this wish as a "quasi-hallucination endowed with [a] real-effect which cannot be compared to that which results from ordinary perception", he translates reification into a visual field in which appearance verifies the reality it represents but retains an ontologically mystified separation from it ("Apparatus" 122). Moreover, Baudry's dictum that "the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees" suggests to me that we understand the camera as a desiring subject whose desire inspires the spectator to look (Baudry, "Ideological Effects" 45). Since the camera cannot actually command the subject to see but is rather a trans-subjective element of a social field, its rhetorical "obliging" resonates well with McGowan's Hegelian-Kojèvean axiom that subjects only begin to desire when they surmise that the Other does so (McGowan 27–8). That is, the spectator identifies with the camera because he or she suspects that what the camera sees, in this conception alienated reality as representation, is desirable.

The notion of a desiring camera becomes even more plausible when we consider that the camera-subject actually *enjoys* this type of display. In his 1976 study of *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), Thomas Elsaesser demonstrates that the film was so successful, but also so culturally confusing, because it provided audiences a unique opportunity to enjoy their daily experience of alienation. Importantly, Elsaesser contends that viewers experience this enjoyment not as a result of character identification but rather because the film activates their desire to see the world as determined beyond their reach (195–7). Textually speaking, this reading explains why the film's implied viewer enjoys when Alex (Malcolm McDowell) meets with situations that go against his interests; the film's most stirring moments are not those depicting the droogs' antisocial behaviour but rather those in which Alex meets with a determined fate, such as his late run-in with the droogs-turned-policemen or his subjection during the Ludovico demonstration. In each case, the desire of the spectator is enacted by Wendy (credited as Walter) Carlos's electronic rendition of "Funeral for Queen Mary", which functions as *objet a* in McGowan's sense by implicating the spectator's desire for determinism and thus exposing the dependency of the frame on that very desire (McGowan 75).

Left thusly, we would have a tenuous social-formal verification of McGowan's insistence that enjoyment is an excessive and self-negating experience (53–6). However, when we add to this reading Charles Barr's empirical observation that British critics enjoyed the film precisely because they confused alienation with camera objectivity, McGowan's axiom in turn verifies our tandem theses that (a) the camera is a subject who desires alienation and (b) this desire expresses and enacts a fundamental desire of spectators. That is, the case of *A Clockwork Orange* provides an example of the camera as an enjoying subject who through the desire for and enjoyment of alienation unifies the historical-material ontology of spectator positioning with the historical particularities of text and audience.

I am as unsure as McGowan whether this conception constitutes a "political nightmare", but it does seem closer to what "actual spectatorship" might be (McGowan 60). My point in this exercise is that when we approach film from the historical-material view Baudry represents, we end up doing more with McGowan's concepts than he himself is capable of. We integrate his aims and concepts into a more comprehensive knowledge.

Now, McGowan of course does not want comprehension but a theory of spectatorial awakening in which narrative film shows us that the status quo is sufficiently antagonistic. By "antagonism" McGowan means the productive impossibility of social harmony, which he describes thusly in his rejection of Jung's preference for symbolic *opposition*: "For psychoanalysis, however, the real antagonism not only dooms every symbolic order to failure; it is also the condition of possibility for the symbolic order's existence" (36). Three pages later we get the prescription, founded on this necessity, that "we should not imagine that we can do anything but instead recognize our capacity for doing the impossible amid the antagonistic constraints that the symbolic order proffers" (39). While one might be tempted to read in this diagnosis a translation of the analytic aim, I suggest rather that with the opposition apparatus/McGowan we are once again in the presence of cultural-critical world visions, which I am tempted to name castration/antagonism vs. alienation/reconciliation.

With this opposition I do not wish to demonise McGowan's position as apolitical in some facile invocation of alternative representation as a horizon for social change. Rather, I want to point out that McGowan's own emphasis on the capacity of conventional narrative film to awaken spectatorial desire is a disingenuous and equally facile rendition of the ethic of the "duped", which in Lacanianism names a somewhat aristocratic abandonment to the necessary alienations we face as speaking beings. But whereas the duped asks that one dramatically and even spiritually revel in the impossibilities of knowledge, desire, and transparent self-expression, McGowan only seems interested in emphasising the virtues of viewing conventional narrative films. That is, for McGowan the duped is a way to be anti-elitist.

In any case, from my perspective this implicit emphasis on the already-radical nature of the status quo, which in fact motivates the inadequately transparent application of his concepts to film *as film*, explains why McGowan is both incapable of integrating other film practices into his theory yet avowedly hostile to them. For example, because he limits himself to narrative film, McGowan could have no way of seeing that the formal similarities between Peter Gidal's Structuralist/Materialist film *Clouds* (1969) and the opening shots of Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982) invite us to ponder film history as an impossible antagonism between diegesis and abstraction, which, as Baudry points out, the camera in fact enacts ("Ideological Effects" 42). Such a task would involve positing determined modes of spectatorship, tied to determined forms, which are elaborated and contested within extrafilmic discourses such as theory, interviews, etc. Attention to desire and enjoyment would undoubtedly be of use here, but McGowan can only tell us that the early Godard is more political because he is more enjoyable, and that reflexive filmmaking hides desire from spectators (73, 90). And so, if I cannot convince anyone of the continued relevance of apparatus theory, I at least hope to have shown that reified academic theories have much lower ceilings than those with historical-material ambitions.

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