

Towards a Liminal Viewing of Film

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Liminal: noun. An indeterminate state in-between states. Coming from the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold."¹

How does film project time? Should it become a question of the intention behind a filmmaker's supposed fantasies that exist prior to producing a film and, thus, negating the time of seeing a film? Did King Kong "*really*" dominate Ann Darrow, or did Ann Darrow dominate King Kong with her so-called beauty? Did the filmmaker intend for us to want King Kong to dominate Ann Darrow or *vice versa*? If this game seems determined to have no end, the reason is that the end to whatever determination one identity may have over another identity in film becomes subordinate to the film itself. For instance, any identity in a film may terminate at any point within a film without ending the film. Thus, the duration of film succeeds any supposed absolute identity belonging to a character and calls into question, rather, the relevance of seeing film in the first place. The liminal viewing of film sees the duration of a film as indeterminate.

If the duration of film appears indeterminate, it is because any identification with a single gaze subsequently interrupts with its absence. Any identification with a dominant and hegemonic gaze via film also, consequently, is interrupted by its absence. Some films make this more explicit than others.

Any one identification with a gaze, which becomes dominant, will become absent in a process that recalls Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser's² theory of *overdetermination*. Althusser:

Whence the materialist precept that no individual, class, society or historical period should be judged by its 'self-consciousness'... This recommendation implies the primacy of the real over consciousness, of 'social being over social' (and individual) 'consciousness.' It further implies that one can distinguish consciousness from being.³

Overdetermination means the irreproducibility of causality in history. In other words, the location of cause and effect can only end *ad infinitum*. It then becomes impossible to place an original cause to history and becomes possible to say that no historical period can be judged solely by its self-consciousness.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>

² 16 October 1918 – 22 October 1990

³ Althusser, Louis, Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87, pp.188

This implies that any intended gaze by a filmmaker will change according to the time of its viewing, especially considering that such a *gaze in film finds itself interrupted by its disappearance according to the consequence of its sequence*. The indeterminacy of the gaze locates a liminal viewing of film by a deconstructing of the sequencing of images by the consequence of their disappearance.

No single identity in film may reproduce in subsequent screenings. Identity extends beyond the interest of just one identity in film as such. The reason: at any point in time, the film constitutes both a subject and an object, both a spectator and film and the relationship between spectator and film becomes temporal. What negates this temporality also negates the *liminal* viewing of film.

The *liminal* presents an alternative to the *sub-liminal* as a way of describing the relationship between film and spectator. Much film criticism⁴ seems to propose a one-to-one relationship between the gaze and an actor with whom identification occurs. A film can express a perspective by, supposedly, *only* identifying with a particular actor according to a Freudian psychoanalysis. There must be, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, an essential and phallogocentric gaze, a gaze that denies multiple identifications within film. Laura Mulvey, a psychoanalytic film theorist, writes:

[T]he function of women in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end.”⁵

What causes a so-called *real* lack versus an *unreal* lack? Also, what process speaks for women?

A liminal viewing of film opens identity to multiple possibilities (male, female, etc.) with which the spectator might, and, not exclusively, identify. A subliminal viewing would have it that a gaze identifies with a particular actor and an actor identifies with a particular gaze according to similar gender traits according to a Freudian psychoanalysis of film. The subliminal viewing says nothing of the temporal relationship between the gaze and identification. This supposedly anterior identification receives significance as long as it becomes subliminal and as long as it transcends the present relationship between spectator and film. It is an idealist notion of film. If the subliminal relationship between spectator and film mystifies the temporal relationship between identification and the gaze, then, the liminal locates the possibility of a temporal relationship between them.

⁴ Here I am referring most notably to film criticism coming from psychoanalysis.

⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 35

A transcendental signifier determines the identity that a gaze identifies within a film as the subliminal description would have it. Something anterior to the temporality of the film, anterior to the commonplace and transient aspects of living supposedly gives permanence to the relationship between gaze and identification. Yet, it becomes apparent that the viewing of films is not a simple repetition of identity.

The point here is to make history in flux, to discontinue the dominant and oppressive narratives that exploit by seeking to separate the subject from its object and the object from its subject. The subliminal viewing of film only separates the subject doing the viewing from the thing in view and it does this by supposing a transcendental identity to what always-already becomes signified. The result: the subject loses interest in the viewing because they have been usurped in a game which has no end. Conversely, I am proposing an interested viewing of film that has no end since interest seeks an endgame. Interest seeks to finish a game in order to realize another, different game. Interest, as it relates to film, involves seeing an end to a film in order to view its consequences. The liminal locates the interest of a subject with its object in order to subvert the authority of a naturalized, subliminal gaze that determines a game in which the subject is interested in ending. Why end the game?

I am not proposing that the ending of a game is any different than the playing of a game. I am, however, proposing an end to games that no longer hold a subject's interest—games that appear to have rules that preclude its end before beginning it. I am proposing a viewing of film that plays like a performance that does not seek to negate its end, but, instead, show its end as temporal.

A liminal viewing of film shows a verisimilitude between the image projected in film and the everyday images arising from chance. A subliminal viewing of film averts attention from everyday images to a supposedly sublime image that terrifies and gives permanence to an essential lack found in the images arising from chance. However, what the subliminal negates is the temporal and historical significance of the imagination.

Works Cited

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