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# Viewing Positions

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Ways of Seeing Film



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viewers turns out to be a "locus of impossibility,"<sup>1</sup> of self-denial or masochism.

I will not reiterate the by now ritual critique of that type of film theory, whether concerning its epistemological and methodological shortcuts, its monolithic notion of classical cinema, or its abstract, passive conception of the spectator and processes of reception; these were important issues when the theory was still current. What I find more interesting is that the very category of *the* spectator developed by psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory seems to have become obsolete—not only because new scholarship has displaced it with historically and culturally more specific models but because the mode of reception this spectator was supposed to epitomize is itself becoming a matter of the past. The historical significance of 1970s theories of spectatorship may well be that they emerged at the threshold of a paradigmatic transformation of the ways films are disseminated and consumed. In other words, even as those theories set out to unmask the ideological effects of the classical Hollywood cinema, they might effectively, and perhaps unwittingly, have mummified the spectator-subject of classical cinema.

We are only now beginning to understand the massive changes that have assailed the institution of cinema over the past two decades. Those changes are the result of a combination of technological and economic developments that have displaced the cinema as the only and primary site of film consumption. New electronic technologies propped onto television, in particular video playback, satellite, and cable systems, have shifted the venues for film viewing in the direction of domestic space and have profoundly changed the terms on which viewers can interact with films. The spatioperceptual configuration of television within the domestic environment has broken the spell of the classical diegesis; the compulsive temporality of public projection has given way to ostensibly more self-regulated yet privatized, distracted, and fragmented acts of consumption. As critics have observed, an aesthetics of the glance is replacing the aesthetics of the gaze—the illusionist absorption of the viewer that is considered one of the hallmarks of classical cinema.<sup>2</sup>

These changes have in turn affected the cinema in the old sense: as the public, commercial projection of films on theatrical premises. For one thing, there have never—not since the days of the nickelodeon—been as many complaints about people talking during the shows as in the American press of recent months, with pundits charging that the vulgar-ians simply can't tell the difference between watching a movie in the

Miriam Hansen

## Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere

There tends to be a moment, in the development of cultural practices, when discourses of the recent past become history; they are no longer merely outdated but, like bell-bottom jeans, miniskirts, and platform shoes, acquire historicity. This is what seems to have happened with film theory of the 1970s and early 1980s, in particular as it revolved around the notion of the spectator. I am thinking here of psychoanalytic-semiotic approaches, often inflected with Marxist and feminist politics, associated with the names of Jean-Louis Baudry, the later Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Stephen Heath, and Laura Mulvey, to mention only a few. As has been pointed out widely, the paradigmatic distinction of 1970s film theory—its break with earlier film theory—consisted in a shift of focus from textual structures or ontologies of the medium to processes of reception and spectatorship. Whether concerned with the cinematic apparatus or with textual operations of enunciation and address, these approaches converged in the question of how the cinema works to construct, interpellate, and reproduce its viewer as subject and how it solicits actual moviegoers to identify with and through ideologically marked positions of subjectivity. In either case, the inquiry hinged on the hypothetical term of an *ideal* spectator, a unified and unifying position offered by the text or apparatus even though, as feminist and, more recently, subaltern critics have pointed out, this position for some

This is a slightly expanded version of an essay that originally appeared in *Screen* 34:3 (Autumn 1993), 197–210. Reprinted by permission of the author and *Screen*.

theater and watching a video in their living room. What such complaints signal is that the classical principle by which reception is controlled by the film as an integral product and commodity is weakened by the social proliferation of film consumption in institutionally less regulated viewing situations. For another, the increased dependence of film production on the video market has exacerbated the crisis of the audience that Hollywood has confronted in various forms at least since the popularization of television in the 1950s. Blockbuster films, for instance, are catering to as many diverse constituencies as possible, confronting the problem of, as Timothy Corrigan puts it, "an audience fragmented beyond any controllable identity."<sup>3</sup> Such films—from *Gremilins* through the *Terminator* films to *Bram Stoker's Dracula*—no longer attempt to homogenize empirically diverse viewers by way of unifying strategies of spectator positioning (as 1970s film theorists claimed with regard to classical films). Rather, the blockbuster gamble consists of offering something to everyone, of appealing to diverse interests with a diversity of attractions and multiple levels of textuality. All this is not to say that the classical mode of spectatorship has vanished without a trace; on the contrary, it makes powerful returns in the nostalgia mode. But it has become one of a number of options, often contextualized and ironized, and it no longer functions as the totalitarian norm it is supposed to have been during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>4</sup>

On a geopolitical level, the shift in film-spectator relations corresponds to the emergence of new, transnational corporate networks that circulate movies and videos along with music, foods, fashions, advertising, information, and communication technologies. While systems of distribution and exchange are interconnected and unified on a global scale, the process is characterized by a burgeoning diversification of products and, at the same time, increased privatization of the modes and venues of consumption.<sup>5</sup> New forms and genres of diasporic and indigenized mass culture have emerged, at once syncretistic and original, and imported products are transformed and appropriated through highly specific forms of reception.<sup>6</sup> Thus, parallel with the demise of classical cinema, we have been witnessing the end of so-called modern mass culture—the kind of mass culture that prevailed, roughly, from the 1920s through the 1960s and is commonly associated with a Fordist economy, with standardized production and social homogenization, and with critical keywords like secondary exploitation, Americanization, and cultural imperialism. Today's postmodern, globalized culture of consumption has developed new, and ever more elusive, technologies of power and com-

modification, to be sure, operating through diversification rather than homogenization: the worldwide manufacture of diversity does anything but automatically translate into a "new culture politics of difference."<sup>7</sup> But it has also multiplied the junctures at which such a politics could—and, in many places has—come into existence, in particular with alternative practices in film and video.<sup>8</sup> At any rate, whatever political score one may assign to these developments, it is obvious that they require different theories of reception and identification from those predicated on classical Hollywood cinema and the American model of mass culture.

As classical forms of film consumption seem to be unraveling on a worldwide scale, the situation has a certain *déjà-vu* effect. In more than one way, contemporary forms of media culture evoke the parallel of early cinema. As recent scholarship has stressed, the paradigmatic distinction of early cinema from classical cinema involved not only different conceptions of space, time, narrative, and genre but, above all, a different conception of the relations between film and viewer. That difference has been traced both at the stylistic level—in textual modes of representation and address—and at the level of exhibition practices—the performance of films in commercial settings.

Aiming at the specificity of early film-viewer relations, Tom Gunning has coined the by now familiar phrase *cinema of attractions*, which plays on the Eisensteinian sense of *attraction* as well as its more colloquial usage in the context of fairgrounds, circuses, variety shows, dime museums, and other commercial entertainment venues that had also inspired Eisenstein's use of the term.<sup>9</sup> Early cinema inherited from those venues a diversity of genres and topics such as boxing matches, scenes from the wild west and passion plays, travelogues in the manner of the stereopticon lectures, trick films in the tradition of magic shows, sight gags and comic skits from the burlesque or vaudeville stage, pornographic flicks in the peep-show vein, and highlights from popular plays and operas. With this tradition, early films adopted a particular aesthetics of display, of showmanship, defined by the goal of assaulting viewers with sensational, supernatural, scientific, sentimental, or otherwise stimulating sights, as opposed to enveloping them into the illusion of a fictional narrative. The style of early films was presentational rather than representational; that is, they tended to address the viewer directly—as in frequent asides to the camera and the predominantly frontal organization of space—rather than indirectly—as classical films do through perceptual absorption into a closed diegetic space.<sup>10</sup>

True to their variety lineage, early films lured patrons with a diversity, if not an excess of appeals, as opposed to the later subordination and integration of polymorphous spectatorial pleasures under the regime of classical narrative. Such appeals included physical jolts, shocks, and sensations—whether of a kinetic, pornographic, or abject sort—from the many films shot from moving vehicles (e.g., *Interior N. Y. Subway*, *14th Street to 42nd Street*) to actualities or reenactments of disasters and executions (e.g., *The Electrocuting of an Elephant*). Even though such physiological responses were soon denigrated or marginalized in favor of the classical ideal of disembodied, specularized spectatorship, they have resurfaced in various guises, from such interludes as Cinerama and 3-D to the latest versions (influenced by MTV) of cult, horror, and action films.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, early films relied more overtly on cultural intertexts, such as the popular stories, songs, or political cartoons on which many of them were based, whether illustrating or spoofing them. Indeed, as Charles Musser has shown, the major distinction between early narrative films and proto-classical ones was the extent to which narrative comprehension of the former depended on the audience's familiarity with the story or event depicted.<sup>12</sup> Porter's film *Waiting at the Church* (1906), for instance, makes little sense if we don't know the popular hit by the same title sung by Vesta Victoria, and *The "Teddy" Bears* (1907) requires foreknowledge not only of the Goldilocks story but also of political satire surrounding Theodore Roosevelt's hunting exploits. Such overt forms of intertextuality placed a much greater emphasis on the enactment of the film by the audience and on the audience's interaction with the film, but it also meant that reception was at the mercy of factors that could be neither controlled nor standardized by means of strategies of production. Key to the shift toward classical cinema was, consequently, the more systematic effort, from about 1907 on, to develop a mode of narration that made films self-explanatory and self-contained and that allowed films to be understood by a mass audience regardless of individual cultural and ethnic background and of site and mode of exhibition.

It is a mark of early cinema's specificity that its effects on the viewer were determined less by the film as complete product and inter/nationally circulated commodity than by the particular context of exhibition—the particular show. The format of presentation typical of early cinema was shaped by the commercial entertainments in whose context films were first shown, in particular vaudeville and traveling shows. From those entertainment forms, the cinema borrowed two major prin-

ciples: (1) a disjunctive style of programming—the variety format—by which short films alternated with live performances (vaudeville turns, animal, acrobat, and magic acts; song slides) and (2) the mediation of the individual film by personnel present in the theater, such as lecturers, sound effects specialists, and, invariably, musicians. Both principles preserved a perceptual continuum between the space/time of the theater and the illusionist world on screen, as opposed to the classical segregation of screen and theater space with its regime of absence and presence and its discipline of silence, spellbound passivity, and perceptual isolation. What is more, early cinema's dispersal of meaning across filmic and nonfilmic sources, such as the alternation of films and numbers, lent the exhibition the character of a live event, that is, a performance that varied from place to place and time to time depending on theater type and location, audience composition, and musical accompaniment. Some of these practices, such as the variety format and the priority of the theater experience over the film experience—persisted well into the nickelodeon period and throughout the silent period, even as the films themselves were increasingly patterned on classical principles.<sup>13</sup>

Yet this attempt to delineate early cinema's paradigmatic difference by pinpointing consistent traits and traditions may be essentializing and misleading. The diversity that characterizes early cinema's offerings and appeals was far from institutionalized: it was more likely an effect of experimental instability. As Gunning suggests, "It is perhaps early cinema's very mutability and fragmented nature (into many practices with unstable hierarchies of importance) that contrasts most sharply with what has become the model of classical Hollywood cinema."<sup>14</sup> However stable and functional classical cinema may have appeared by contrast (and that stability is as much the product of a particular historiographic optics as of the dominant industrial mode), contemporary film and media culture seems to be reverting to a state in which transitory, ephemeral practices are mushrooming, the institution of cinema is increasingly fragmented and dispersed, and long-standing hierarchies of production, distribution, and exhibition have lost their force.

The comparison between preclassical and contemporary modes of film consumption has occasionally been floated in recent years, charged with more or less polemical valences. In an essay published in 1982, Noël Burch observes that "United States network television constitutes a return to the days of the nickelodeon" and argues, with considerable alarm, that the disengaged, disjunctive format of U.S. television might represent "a veritable turning back of the clock," a regres-

sion that is nothing less than "innocent." That observation leads him to defend, as essential to a politically progressive form of media practice, the otherwise much maligned "strong diegetic effect" of classical cinema, the "Institutional Mode of Representation."<sup>15</sup> A decade later, parallels between preclassical and postmodern forms of spectatorship, between early modern and postmodern forms of distraction and diversity, are even more pronounced, though no less in need of discussion. What is the point of such a comparison? How can we make it productive beyond formalist analogy, beyond nostalgia or cultural pessimism? How can we align those two moments without obliterating their historical difference?

I suggest that drawing a trajectory from postclassical to preclassical cinema makes sense not only because of formal similarities in the relations of representation and reception. More important, these formal similarities warrant closer scrutiny because both moments mark a major transition in the development of the public sphere. I am using the term *public* here in the most general sense, denoting a discursive matrix or process through which social experience is articulated, interpreted, negotiated, and contested in an intersubjective, potentially collective, and oppositional form. My understanding of the term is indebted to debates in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, and Alexander Kluge. Indeed, I would argue that the question of the public is probably the Frankfurt School's most fruitful legacy for film and mass culture theory today.

I see the debates on the public in the tradition of the Frankfurt School as the continuation of a critical project that registered, early on, the key role of cinema and mass culture in the profound restructuration of subjectivity. At the same time it saw the modern media's liberatory, democratic potential evaporate in media's alienating, conformist, and manipulative use in Fordist-liberal capitalism, to say nothing of fascism. Kluge may well have shared Adorno's analysis of the culture industry (and its administrative, postwar West German counterpart). But he drew different aesthetic and political conclusions from that analysis: he became a filmmaker and activist promoting an alternative film and media culture. Drawing on Adorno's own philosophy, in particular *Negative Dialectics* and the concept of nonidentity, Kluge set out to mobilize the aporias of the culture industry thesis—by switching the frame from the logics of commodity and identity to the dynamics of the public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

In English-language contexts, the category of the public has become increasingly important to a wide variety of fields and debates: philosophy; anthropology; history; South Asian, East Asian, and African

studies; postcolonial and subaltern studies; the postmodern art scene; and feminist, gay/lesbian, and queer politics. If public sphere theory has so far had little impact on cinema and media studies, it has been for a good or, rather, not so good reason. Many of these debates take as their point of departure the framework developed by Habermas in his 1962 study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which only recently appeared in English translation.<sup>17</sup> The advantage of Habermas's approach, that he historicizes the concept of the public sphere by tracing its emergence in the eighteenth century, turns into a disadvantage when it comes to the mass-mediated publics of later centuries. Positing the Enlightenment idea of the public sphere as a critical norm (even as historically it has degenerated into an ideology), Habermas can view subsequent formations of public life only in terms of disintegration and decline. With the shift from cultural *räsonnement* to cultural consumption, says Habermas, the dialectics of public and private unravels into individuated acts of reception, even in the context of mass events. The problem with this approach is not only that it remains squarely within the paradigm of the culture industry but that the underlying notion of the public is predicated on face-to-face communication, hence insufficient for conceptualizing mass-mediated forms of public life.<sup>18</sup>

It is in view of this paradox—the problem of how to conceptualize the dimension of the public in a technologically and industrially mediated public sphere that has eroded the very conditions of discursive interaction, participation, and self-representation—that Negt's and Kluge's study *The Public Sphere and Experience* (1972) offers a useful intervention.<sup>19</sup> Like a number of Habermas's recent American critics, Negt and Kluge argue that the ideal of the eighteenth-century public sphere was ideological in its very conception, masking the de facto exclusion of substantial social groups (workers, women, servants) and of vital social issues such as the material conditions of production and reproduction (sexuality, child rearing). Negt and Kluge insist on the need to understand postliberal and postliterary formations of the public sphere—crucially defined by the photographic and electronic media—in terms other than those of disintegration and decline.

Negt's and Kluge's argument rests on two major moves. One is to call into question the very concept of the public as it is traditionally understood. The authors survey the various institutions and activities that *claim* the term *public* (public opinion, public force, public relations), and they then contrast these rather limited and ossified, professionalized practices with another sense of the term, that of a "general horizon of

experience in which what is really or supposedly relevant for all members of society is summarized."<sup>20</sup> This expansion of the category of the public involves a shift from the formal conditions of communication (free association, free speech, equal participation, polite argument) to the more comprehensive notion of a "social horizon of experience," grounded in what Negt and Kluge call "the context of living" (*Lebenszusammenhang*), in material, psychic and social re/production.<sup>21</sup> This horizon includes, emphatically, what the dominant public sphere either leaves out, privatizes, or acknowledges only in an abstract and fragmented form. Predicated on inclusion and interconnection (*Zusammenhang*), the horizon involves the dialectical imbrication of three distinct layers: (1) the experience of re/production under capitalist, alienated conditions; (2) the systematic blockage of that experience as a horizon in its own right, that is, the separation of the experiencing subjects from the networks of public expression and representation; and (3) as a response to that blockage—imaginative and resistant modes of realigning the sundered chunks of experience and of reality and fantasy, time, and history and memory.<sup>22</sup>

Negt's and Kluge's second move is that they do not construct this horizon in analogy to the bourgeois-liberal model—as a presumably autonomous sphere above the marketplace and particular interests—but rather trace its contours in the new industrial-commercial publics that no longer pretend to such a separate, independent status. These "public spheres of production" include a variety of contexts, such as factory communities, spaces of commerce and consumption (restaurants, shopping malls), and, of course, the cinema and other privately owned media of the "consciousness industry."<sup>23</sup> Lacking legitimation of their own, the industrial-commercial publics enter into alliances with the disintegrating, bourgeois public sphere, from opera and masterpiece theater to political parties and institutions of parliamentary democracy; the latter in turn increasingly depends on industrial-commercial publicity for its continued operation and power. (The idea of an "electronic townhall," whose populist veneer is part and parcel of its syncretistic and contradictory public character, marks a further step in that direction.) But even as the public spheres of production reproduce the ideological, exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois prototype, they also aim, for economic reasons, at a maximum of inclusion. Lacking substance of their own, they voraciously absorb, as their fodder, or raw material, contexts of living that are hitherto bracketed from representation—if only to appropriate, assimilate, abstract, and commodify vital areas of social experience and if only to render them obsolete once exhausted and thus again insignifi-

cant. It is in their potentially indiscriminating, inclusive grasp, Negt and Kluge argue, that the public spheres of production make visible, at certain junctures, a different function of the public, namely that of a social horizon of experience.

In *The Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge refer to this emphatically inclusive horizon by the self-consciously anachronistic term *proletarian public sphere*, which they see prefigured in alternative and oppositional publics or counterpublics. True to the Marxian sense of the term, the *proletarian public sphere* is not an empirical category (and certainly has little to do with traditional labor organizations) but a category of negation in both a critical and a utopian sense, referring to the fragmentation of human labor, existence and experience, and its dialectical opposite: the practical negation of existing conditions in their totality. In their subsequent collaboration, *History and Obstinacy* (1981), Negt and Kluge locate that utopian possibility in the very process of (alienated) production, in the "historical organization of labor power."<sup>24</sup> For, while constituted in the process of separation (e.g., primitive accumulation and division of labor), labor power contains and reproduces capacities and energies that exceed its realization in/as a commodity: resistance to separation, *Eigensinn* (stubbornness, self-will), self-regulation, fantasy, memory, curiosity, cooperation, feelings, and skills in excess of capitalist valorization. Whether and how those energies can become effective depends on the organization of the public sphere.

Methodologically, this translates into a principled oscillation between an empirical approach—analyzing the organization of public life in a given situation—and an emphatic sense of publicness that traces the dynamics of that situation in terms of its forgotten or unrealized possibilities. The critical measure in each case will be the extent to which experience is dis/organized from above—by the exclusionary standards of high culture or in the interest of profit—or from below—by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living. The political task is to create "relationality" (Jameson's translation of *Zusammenhang*); to make connections between isolated chunks of experience across segregated domains of work and leisure, fiction and fact, and past and present; and to identify points of contiguity among diverse and/or competing partial publics and counterpublics. This politics of relationality is up against the hegemonic form of *Zusammenhang*—the violent pseudosynthesis of the dominant public sphere, which is maintained by the alliance of industrial-commercial and bourgeois publicity and which masquerades as *the* public sphere (the subject of the evening news, the "nation").

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+ Habermas, p. 9



But this is not an either/or argument. Negt and Kluge insist that it is impossible to define or describe *Offentlichkeit*, or *publicness*, in the singular, as if it had any homogeneous substance. Rather, it can be understood always and only as an aggregation or mixture of different types of public life, corresponding to uneven stages of economic, technical, and social organization ranging from local to global parameters. If Negt and Kluge, for heuristic purposes, distinguish among bourgeois, industrial-commercial, and proletarian prototypes, they argue that none of these can be grasped in purity or isolation from each other but only in their mutual imbrication and in specific overlaps, parasitic cohabitations, and structural contradictions.

Conceptualizing the public as a mixture of competing forms of organizing social experience means thinking of it as a potentially volatile process, defined by different speeds and temporal markers. Such synchronistic dynamics harbors a potential for instability, for accidental collisions and opportunities, and for unpredictable conjunctures and aleatory developments. It is in the seams and fissures between uneven formations of public life that alternative alignments and alliances can emerge.<sup>25</sup> And it is in the degree to which a public sphere affords these windows of improvisation and reconfiguration that, I think, Gunning's observation about early cinema's relative instability has its larger reference point. And this particular dynamic of the public is also what realigns early cinema, not with its classical successor but with the current phase of film and media culture.

What is the point of thinking about cinema in terms of the public? Kluge himself, in his writings, films, and video practice, has been putting the politics of the public sphere into practice on several levels. Central to his film aesthetics is a concept of montage predicated on relationality—he refers to montage as the morphology of relations [*Formenwelt des Zusammenhangs*]<sup>26</sup>—a textual climbing wall designed to encourage viewers to draw their own connections across generic divisions of fiction and documentary and of disparate realms and registers of experience. A film is successful in that regard if it manages to activate (rather than merely usurp) what Kluge calls “the film in the spectator's head”—the horizon of experience as instantiated in the subject. The specific connections encouraged by the film respond to the structural blockages of experience perpetuated by the dominant public sphere, in particular, in the case of (West) Germany, the divisions imposed by the ossified programming structures of state-sponsored television.<sup>27</sup> But since the monopoly of the latter has been breaking up over the past

decade, with a proliferation of private channels (close to forty) approximating the diversification level of television in the United States, Kluge has reoriented his project in view of the complex and dramatic changes in the German—and European—media landscape. Producing a weekly program for commercial television, he has been trying to reinvent alternative forms of cinema—a contemporary cinema of attractions—in the politically compromising, potentially neutralizing environment of advanced electronic publicity.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond Kluge's own, still to some extent modernist, film aesthetics, the concept of the public can be mobilized to address a number of key concerns of film and media studies in recent years and to take them a step further. In particular, thinking of the cinema in terms of the public involves an approach that cuts across theoretical and historical as well as textual and contextual modes of inquiry, for the cinema functions both as a public sphere of its own—defined by specific relations of representation and reception—and as part of a larger social horizon—defined by other media and by the overlapping local, national and global, face-to-face and deterritorialized structures of public life. This dual focus allows us to salvage some of the insights of formalist and psychoanalytic film theory—insights into the workings of cinematic texts and the psychic mechanisms of reception—while changing their paradigmatic status. For even if we situate reception within a specific historical and social framework, and even as the category of *the* spectator has become problematic, we still need a theoretical understanding of the possible relations between films and viewers, between representation and subjectivity. The questions raised in the name of alternative appropriations of late-capitalist mass culture cannot be answered by empirical reception studies. These questions need to be discussed in terms of experience (in the emphatic Frankfurt School sense, which includes memory and the unconscious) and the conditions of its possibility—the structures that simultaneously restrict and enable agency, interpretation, and self-organization.

The turn to (or, to some extent, revival of) more empirically oriented reception studies—and with it the methodological conflation of the actual social viewer and the spectator-subject—has been flanked, especially in Europe, by a nostalgic revival of the cinema as a good object. In a recently published anthology of cinephile reminiscences, *Seeing in the Dark*, the editors complain that methods of empirical audience research fail to

fully capture the individual, subjective experience of filmgoing, since they miss out idiosyncratic detail and the personal dreamworld. Mea-

suring applause does not reveal that the movie was memorable for the woman in the third row because the building on screen reminded her of where she went to school and all those childhood memories came flooding back intercut with the film while the auditorium gently shook as an underground train passed beneath and a cigarette ash fluttered down from the balcony in the projector beam.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, empirical audience research misses all these marvelous, and essential, dimensions of moviegoing (as would, for that matter, a Lacanian-Althusserian analysis of spectatorial positioning). But to reduce these dimensions, in a subjectivist vein, to the merely personal and idiosyncratic will mean missing out on the more systematic parameters of subjectivity that structure, enable, and refract our personal engagement with the film. These include, for instance, the particular cinematic style that set off the viewer's memory; the contrast between the nostalgically evoked local theater setting (e.g., cigarette smoke, high-modern urban technology) and the context of electronic and global postmodernity (e.g., the likelihood that the viewer in the third row, like the one behind her, may usually watch soap operas); and the fact that the viewer belongs to the social group of women—differentiated according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and generation—which renders her relation to the film shown, probably one version or another of classical cinema, problematic in particular ways. These and other factors structure the horizon of experience that we carry around with us, whether we watch a film alone or collectively. At the same time, that horizon enables and allows us to reflect upon individual experience; indeed, the ability of a film and a viewing situation to trigger personal and collective memory is a measure of its quality as a public sphere.

Thinking of the cinema in terms of the public means reconstructing a horizon of reception not only in terms of sociological determinants, whether pertaining to statistically definable demographic groups or traditional communities, but also in terms of multiple and conflicting identities and constituencies. Indeed, the cinema can, at certain junctures, function as a matrix for challenging social positions of identity and otherness and as a catalyst for new forms of community and solidarity. That this may happen on the terrain of late-capitalist consumption, however, does not mean that we should resign ourselves to the range of existing products and modes of production. On the contrary, the category of the public retains a critical, utopian edge, predicated on the ideal of collective self-determination. (This perspective mandates not only main-

taining critical distinctions with regard to the commercially disseminated fare but also envisioning alternative media products and the alternative organization of the relations of representation and reception. In that sense, the concept of the public forestalls the idealization of consumption that has become habitual in some quarters of cultural studies.)

To conclude, I return to the significance of early cinema, in particular for assessing contemporary developments. I have argued elsewhere that early cinema, and the persistence of early exhibition practices through and even beyond the nickelodeon period, provided the conditions for an alternative public sphere.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, it did so as an industrial-commercial public sphere that during a crucial phase depended on peripheral social groups (immigrants, members of the recently urbanized working class, women) and thus, willingly or not, catered to people with specific needs, anxieties, and fantasies—people whose experience was shaped by more or less traumatic forms of territorial and cultural displacement. The problems posed by the cinema's availability to ethnically diverse, socially unruly, and sexually mixed audiences in turn prompted the elaboration of classical modes of narration and spectator positioning. Rather than taking the industrial promotion of classical cinema (and with it the gentrification of theaters and the streamlining of exhibition practices) as the prime determining factor, however, I see silent cinema as the site of overlapping, uneven, and competing types of publicity. These include the more local spheres of late-nineteenth-century popular amusements, new commercial entertainments such as vaudeville and amusement parks, and the emerging sphere of mass-cultural production and distribution. As a composite public sphere, the nickelodeon combined traditions of live performance with an industrially produced commodity circulated on both national and international scales; that is, technologically mediated forms of publicity coexisted with forms of public life predicated on face-to-face relations.

Above all, the conception of film exhibition as a live performance (the incompleteness of the film as circulated commodity) created a margin of improvisation, interpretation, and unpredictability that made it a public event in the emphatic sense and a collective horizon in which industrially processed experience could be reappropriated by the experiencing subjects. This means that films were viewed differently and were likely to have a wide range of meanings depending on the neighborhood and status of the theater, on the ethnic and racial background of the habitual audience, on the mixture of gender and generation, and on the ambition and skills of the exhibitor and the performing personnel. In



Chicago movie theaters catering to African-Americans during the 1910s and 1920s, for instance, the nonfilmic program drew heavily on Southern black performance traditions, and live musical accompaniment was more likely inspired by jazz and blues than by Wagner and Waldteufel.<sup>31</sup> Although the films shown in such theaters were largely white mainstream productions, their meaning was bound to be fractured and ironized in the context of black performance and audience response. I am not saying that such reappropriation actually happened in every single screening or every theater, nor do I think that empirical methods of research could determine whether it did or not. But the syncretistic makeup of cinematic publicity furnished the structural conditions under which that margin could be actualized, under which alternative forms of reception and meaning could gain a momentum of their own.

This dynamic was not limited to the local level, but could, because of its mass-cultural distribution, spread across traditional cultural and territorial boundaries. A case in point is the star system, in particular the rise of stars whose marketable persona conflicted with Hollywood's traditional racial and sexual orientations. As studies on individual stars such as Greta Garbo, Rudolph Valentino, Paul Robeson, and Mae West suggest, there is never a seamless among between studio publicity, fan magazines, and actual audiences, and the push and pull among these forces have again and again given rise to subcultural formations of reception.<sup>32</sup>

Today, the lines of the frontiers of transgression are drawn differently, and transgressiveness itself has become infinitely more part of the game than it was during the 1920s. Valentino has been vindicated by a long line of androgynous performers, from Elvis through Mick Jagger to Prince and Michael Jackson, and Madonna makes us nostalgic for the aesthetic implantation of perversions afforded by the Production Code. But racism and homophobia persist, and the gains made by the women's movement are inseparable from masculinist backlash, the antiabortion campaign, and heterosexual violence. Now as then, these issues are negotiated through the most advanced forms of industrial-commercial publicity—then a cinema and fan culture increasingly submerged into the hegemonic homogeneity of classical mass culture, today a global electronic media culture that reproduces itself through ceaseless diversification.

To return to my earlier question: how can we compare post-classical and preclassical modes of spectatorship or early modern and postmodern forms of mass and consumer culture? Obviously, we are

dealing with substantially different stages of historical development, not only on the social and cultural level but, fundamentally, in terms of the organization of capital and the media industries. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the public sphere, a number of affinities suggest themselves. Both periods are characterized by a profound transformation of the relations of cultural representation and reception and by a measure of instability that makes the intervening decades look relatively stable by contrast, for they are anchored in and centered by the classical system. Both stages of media culture vary from the classical norm of controlling reception through a strong diegetic effect, ensured by particular textual strategies and a suppression of the exhibition context. By contrast, preclassical and postclassical forms of spectatorship give the viewer a greater leeway, for better or for worse, in interacting with the film—a greater awareness of exhibition and cultural intertexts. Both early modern and postmodern media publics draw on the *periphery*—then, on socially marginalized and diverse constituencies within American national culture, and today, on massive movements of migration on a global scale that, along with the globalization of media consumption, have irrevocably changed the terms of local and national identity.

Early cinema could have developed in a number of ways, inasmuch as it contained "a number of roads not taken."<sup>33</sup> Postmodern media culture seems to be characterized by a similar opening up of new directions and possibilities combined, however, with vastly enhanced powers of seduction, manipulation, and destruction. Putting early modern and postmodern forms of media consumption in a constellation may take away some of the inevitability the classical paradigm has acquired both in Hollywood self-promotion and in functionalist film histories.<sup>34</sup> Drawing a trajectory between these two moments in the history of public life may make classical cinema and the classical mass culture of the New Deal and Cold War eras look more like a historical interlude, a deep-freeze perhaps, than the teleological norm that it has become and that has shaped our approaches to reception. And once we have shifted the frame, classical cinema itself may no longer look quite as classical as study of its dominant mode suggests.

#### NOTES

1. Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity," *Cine-Traces* 3:3 (Fall 1980), 29.
2. See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 24, 50, 128, 137ff.; also see Charles Eidsvik, "Machines of the Invisible: Changes in Film Technology in the Age of Video," *Film Quarterly* 42:2 (Winter 1988-89), 21.

3. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 23.
4. Ironically, the European art film has become one of the more likely places for contemporary viewers to expect a relatively high degree of classical absorption. This may partially explain the U.S. success of *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), a film that, despite its self-conscious politics of reading, still very much depends on a classical diegetic effect [without which its trick would not work].
5. Among the growing literature on these developments see, for instance, Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2 (Spring 1990), 1-24; Mike Featherstone, ed., *Theory, Culture & Society* (SAGE) 7: 1-2 (Beverly Hills, London: 1990) (special issue on global culture); Kevin Robbins, "Tradition and Translation: National Culture in Its Global Context," in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, eds., *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 21-44; Armand Mattelart, *La Communication-monde: histoire des idées et des stratégies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992). See also Cynthia Schneider and Brian Wallis, eds., *Global Television* (New York: Wedge Press; Cambridge, Mass., Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988).
6. See, for instance, Hamid Naficy, "Autobiography, Film Spectatorship, and Cultural Negotiation," *Emergences* 1 (Fall 1989), 29-54, and "The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile," *Diaspora* 1:3 (1991), 285-302; Kobena Mercer, "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain," in Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson, eds., *The Media Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 24-35.
7. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass., and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990), p. 29.
8. Examples in the United States include Guerrilla TV, Edge, Paper Tiger, and Deep Dish Television. On some of the theoretical issues involved in such efforts, see Patricia Mellencamp, "Prologue," *Logics of Television* (London: British Film Institute; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 1-13. Also pertinent in this regard is the ongoing debate over indigenous uses of film and video in ethnography; see, for instance, Terence Turner, "Defiant Images: The Kayapo Appropriation of Video," *Anthropology Today* 8:6 (December 1992), 5-16.
9. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]," *Wide Angle* 8:3-4 (1986), 63-70; rpt. in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, eds., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56-62.
10. See essays in pt. I of Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, *Early Cinema*; Noël Burch, "Porter, or Ambivalence," *Screen* 19:4 (Winter 1978/79), 91-105, and *Life to Those Shadows*, ed. and tr. Ben Brewster (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Kristin Thompson, pt. 3 of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner's, 1990); *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). The question of early film-viewer relations is elaborated in greater detail in my book *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), chs. 1-3.
11. Cf. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991), 2-13, and *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); also see Tom Gunning,

- "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* 34 (Fall 1989), 31-45.
12. Charles Musser, "The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood's Mode of Representation" (1983), rpt. in Elsaesser and Barker, *Early Cinema*, 256-73.
13. See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), ch. 3.
14. Tom Gunning, "Enigmas, Understanding, and Further Questions: Early Cinema Research in Its Second Decade since Brighton," *Persistence of Vision* 9 (1991), 6.
15. Noël Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23:3 (July-August 1982), 33 [rev. in *Life to Those Shadows* 263]. Also see Thomas Elsaesser, "TV through the Looking Glass," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 14:1-2 (1992), 5.
16. On Kluge's relationship to Adorno, see Stuart Liebman's interview "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment," *October* 46 (Fall 1988), 23-59, especially pp. 36ff. For Kluge's influence in turn on Adorno, see the latter's 1966 essay "Transparencies on Film," tr. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24-25 (1981-82), 199-205, as well as my "Introduction," *Ibid.* 186-98.
17. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, West Germany: Luchterhand, 1962), tr. Thomas Burger, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989). See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992); also see Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
18. See Nicholas Garnham, "The Media and the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 359-76; also see Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," *ibid.*, pp. 377-401, and Benjamin Lee, "Textuality, Mediation, and Public Discourse," *ibid.*, pp. 402-18.
19. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972); *The Public Sphere and Experience*, tr. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For a more detailed discussion of that book, see my Foreword to the American edition, also published in *Public Culture* 5:2 (Winter 1993), 179-212.
20. Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, pp. 17-18.
21. There are interesting contingencies between Negt's and Kluge's notion of the context of living and Michel de Certeau's reflections on *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Randall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
22. The concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) assumed here is a highly specific one, elaborated—in different ways—by Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer, and Adorno. See Hansen, "Foreword," *Public Sphere and Experience*, pp. xvi-xix; Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), 179-224; "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92:1 (Winter 1993), 40-41.
23. Negt and Kluge adopt this term from Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" (1970), tr. Stuart Hood, in Reinhold Grimm and Bruce Armstrong, eds., *Critical Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 46-76.
24. "We are interested in what, in a world where it is so obvious that catastrophes occur, performs the labor that brings about material change." Preface, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1981), p. 5. Also see Fredric Jameson, "On Negt and Kluge," *October* 46 (1988), 151-77, and Christopher Pavsek, "Alexander Kluge and Postmodernism or Realism and the Public Sphere," unpublished manuscript.

25. See Meaghan Morris's "television anecdote" (about the 1988 Sydney birthday cake scandal), which offers a graphic example of the conjunctural quality of public life involving a fleeting appropriation or tactical intervention on the part of Australian Aborigines, in "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 28f. Morris emphasizes the aspect of "timing," a seizing of propitious moments, "which tallies with Kluge's concept of public intervention; see in particular his 1974 film on the Frankfurt housing struggle, *In Danger and Dire Distress the Middle of the Road Leads to Death*. The name of his film production company is *kairos*, Greek for propitious moment.

26. Alexander Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere," tr. Thomas Y. Levin and Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-82), 206.

27. See Negt and Kluge, *Offentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, chs 3-5.

28. On Kluge's television work, see Margaret Morse, "Ten to Eleven: Television by Alexander Kluge," *1989 American Film Institute Video Festival* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1989), pp. 50-53; Miriam Hansen, "Reinventing the Nickelodeon: Notes on Kluge and Early Cinema," *October* 46 (Fall 1988), 178-98; Stuart Liebman, "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *ibid.*, 23-59, especially pp. 30ff.; Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen, "We Are Demolition Artists: An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *The Independent* (June 1989), Vol. 12, 5:18-25; Gertrud Koch, "Alexander Kluge's Phantom of the Opera," *New German Critique* 49 (Winter 1990), 79-88.

29. Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond, eds., *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinematography* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990), p. 8.

30. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, ch. 3.

31. See Mary Carbine, "The Finest Outside the Loop: Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928," *Camera Obscura* 23 (May 1990), 9-41, Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, ch. 8.

32. See, for instance, Jane Gaines, "The Queen Christina Tie-Ups: The Convergence of Show Window and Screen," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11:1 (1989), 35-60; Gaylyn Studlar, "The Perils of Pleasure? Fan Magazine Discourse as Women's Commodified Culture in the 1920s," *Wide Angle* 13:1 (1991), 6-33; Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, chs. 11 and 12; Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), ch. 2; and Pamela Robertson, "The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me': Mae West's Identification with the Feminist Camp," *Cinema Journal* 32:2 (Winter 1993), 57-72.

33. Tom Gunning, "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relation to American Avant-Garde Film," in John L. Fell, ed., *Film before Griffith* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p. 366.

34. See, for instance, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (n. 10, above).

## Viewing Antitheses