Is Cinema a Vessel for Empathy?: An Assessment of Audiences' Active Inaction

Aislinn Boyle

MOPA 409

Word Count: 2563

MOPA 409
Aislinn Boyle
Instructors: Michael Thoma, Jack Silberman
Date: December 14th, 2020

Is Cinema a Vessel for Empathy?: An Assessment of Audiences' Active Inaction

Since the dawn of film screenings, questions of film's legitimacy as an art and audiences' levels of participation with it have been on the forefront of numerous theories regarding film reception. Regardless of whether or not viewers are active or inactive, what remains is a two-part, deceptively convoluted question: Is it possible to garner new empathy by watching films, and can audiences be active and compassionate enough to enact their new wisdom onto the real world? Through comparing and contrasting the socio-political effects of film as well as the psychoanalytical theories of film itself, it is revealed that audiences not only identify with the screen because of its mirror-like qualities, but they also, through this association, have the potential to either absorb or neglect new ideological thought through film. This will be analyzed by synthesizing parts of Walter Benjamin's and Stuart Hall's theories on audience reception and apperception through a socio-political lens. Then, Christian Metz "The Imaginary Signifier" will pave the way for a psychoanalytical understanding of film reception and will, ideally, determine whether or not the act of viewing cinema reinforces spectators' own egos as if the screen is a mirror. Real-world benefits of identification with a film will then be discussed in comparison to the viewer with "agency" that reframes the narrative to their own ideology. The point, though, where cinema can possibly entertain both window and mirror-like qualities for all audiences may prove to be the point of true cinematic empathy. In a scientific context — specifically robotics — empathy in soft machines is theorized to be found first through instilling vulnerability into the machine. This connotes that the soul of the machine (empathy) is formed through vulnerability. If the cinema applies the same by taking its gaze and making it vulnerable by flipping it on its head (morally/existentially speaking), then plausibly those stuck in their echo-chambers will, in a Benjamin sense, escape and be mobilized.

Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Stuart Hall in "Encoding/Decoding," when synthesized, provide decent frameworks in which film and television are not only coded with meaning but also dictate certain responses to that meaning. Walter Benjamin states, in essence, that art which has been mechanically reproduced then redistributed to wider audiences loses its "aura" (which belongs to the physical art) and instead gains a political element. Benjamin surfaces an opposing point from Duhamel who states that film is "a pastime for helots, a diversion for the uneducated, wretched" (qtd. in Durham 32). Benjamin concludes Duhamel's assumption with the statement that "clearly this…[says] that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator" (32). Benjamin argues that this distraction may be more favourable for art via mechanical reproduction because if someone concentrates on a work of art, they are "absorbed" by it, whereas if the masses are distracted, it is a state of reception that allows for the absorption of the art into themselves (32). Distraction through art thus becomes apperception and can, according to Benjamin, mobilize the masses.

This, though, is operating under the assumption that the film's encoded messages are received, decoded, then followed through into reality. Enter Stuart Hall, who establishes how media is encoded and decoded and the ways in which the audience responds to said media. Hall seeks to prove a cyclical nature with which ideological meaning is communicated. He first states that in order for something to become a communicative event, it "must become a "story'" (qtd. in Durham 164). Within these stories are encoded messages which must carry "meaningful discourse" in order to be "meaningfully decoded" (165). He then later dives into the televisual sign, with visual and aural discourse, that represents what it captures but cannot "*be* the referent or concept it symbolizes" (166). This is important because in order for something to be communicated through something only half-real, it must be encoded, hence the significance of stories and signifiers. Hall lists three ways in which these codes are then decoded by audiences: 1) The dominant hegemonic position wherein the viewer is operating under the determined societal codes and interpreting meaning through them (169). Furthermore, producers in order to get this result assess what has been already encoded under the dominant hegemonic position and perpetuate that meaning; 2) the negotiated position. This position acknowledges dominant

hegemonic encoding in media but interprets and negotiates it under a more "corporate" position. Negotiated codes and the logic behind them are sustained by hegemonic encoding because of its particular and partial opposition (172); lastly is 3) the oppositional approach. This necessitates that the viewer decodes a message by denying and dismantling its framework, then re-framing it with entirely new foundations under their own ideologies (173). With these three positions in mind, and Benjamin's point on viewers' apperception of art, it is clear that through societal, hegemonic codes, viewers decode art in a way that corroborates with their own beliefs on a base level. While Hall's concepts can and do manifest in several ways, both positively and negatively, what may be most intriguing of our times are the following questions: How do audiences decode meaning, assimilating it into themselves, and act upon this new framework in the real world, if they act at all? Essentially, how do people watch films, and how do they see reality?

Before establishing the real-world context, it is imperative to explore film psychoanalytical theory via Christian Metz. Taking from Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, Metz in "The Imaginary Signifier" combines their approaches with the spectator's identification with the screen. Metz explains that the Lacanian formation of the ego through identification with the self in the mirror allows for the absence of ourselves physically in a film, yet still for our identification with it. In essence, "what makes possible the spectator's absence…is the fact that the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror [from childhood]…and is thus able to constitute a world of objects" without the spectator being present in the film (46). Metz then explores what a spectator specifically identifies with, and, more specifically, where the already existent ego of the spectator lies within a film. While an individual could identify with the experiences of a protagonist, or even their actor, this is not an umbrella means of identification for all. The ego, therefore, must be present somewhere else. Metz goes further, stating that the subject is all perceiving because there is no direct reflection of themselves with the objects on the screen. Therefore, "this mirror [the screen] returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside of it" while looking upon it (49). It is this looking, and the association with the camera lens, that creates the viewer as the signified in the cinematic experience. This voyeurism is also the placement of the ego, found in a series of mirrors from projector to screen to human eye. The position of being the "perceiver" rather than the "perceived" connotes a pleasure in seeing without being seen — in falling into the world of the imaginary without leaving the real

(54). This ‘seeing' is further fleshed out into discussions of filmic idealism, voyeurism, and scopophilia, among other themes. With the aforementioned context of Hall’s decoding positions and Benjamin’s point on the apperception of mechanically reproduced art, it becomes clear that while cinema may not be a direct mirror in terms of subject and object, it is a reflection of what audiences desire to see unfold on screen. This desire is to either reinforce their own egos or fuel idealism through viewing film.

In modern times, there have been several studies conducted on the effects of film wherein the process of identification and/or voyeurism was shown to have either established empathy or reinforced narcissism, respectively. In “Film Involvement and Narrative Persuasion: The Role of Identification with the Characters” Juan-José Igartua, conducts several studies wherein he assess the significance of audiences’ identification with characters. This is broken down into several processes:

> “a) Emotional empathy, the ability to feel what the characters feel and become affectively involved…; b) cognitive empathy, adopting the point of view of or putting oneself in the place of the characters; c) becoming absorbed in the story… a temporal loss of self-awareness and imagining the story as if one were one of the characters; and, d) personal attraction to the characters…” (1).

These four points were found to ring true in tests, and, most notably, these tests found that films with socially-determined “others” succeeded in creating empathy in the viewer. This is a result of audiences “[empathizing] with the characters” through the film’s storytelling, encoding and decoding, and persuasiveness (13). Empathy communicated through film, discussing stories otherwise untold, is where cinema becomes a window looking out onto new worlds. This is putting a compassion-fuelled twist to Metz’s position of the ego between spectator and screen, taking the audiences gaze and directing them to otherwise overshadowed stories and persuading them to walk in their shoes. This is the power of the cinema that Benjamin spoke of — the ability to mobilize; however, this is not true of all cinema, nor of all viewers.

John Keefe in “The Film Spectator as “Bricoleur”’ explores both phenomenological and psychological approaches to film spectatorship as well as cinematic devices within a film (the camera, colour, mise en scène etc.) which are encoded with meaning, then decoded. In a later

section, Keefe unveils the "obverse of empathy and altruism" wherein "the fact of agency gives us power to behave inhumanely" (qtd. in Miller 102). This is where the power of the cinema is lost at the "departure from moral behaviour under religious, political or other ideological imperatives, under proclamations of righteousness" (102). While this is mentioned within the context of cinema violence and our aestheticization of it, this "[displacement] of imagination or denial within awareness" can also be applied to altruistic stories or scenes (102). Taking the dark side of one of Stuart Hall's decoding positions, this individual agency can be applied to the oppositional approach which necessitates the viewer decode meaning then reform it according to their own ideology. In a world that has grown increasingly more hostile towards others, as well as more narcissistic, it would be ill-informed to not address the decrease in empathy on the whole — the denial within awareness— and the plausibility for its manifestation in the film spectator through the oppositional approach, but this has yet to be empirically assessed. Another dark side can also occur, with less hesitation, in the hegemonic and negotiated positions. For example, the article "A Dialogic Approach to Alien Movies" mentions the film *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and "criticisms of its depiction of the Na'vi (the alien race) as Native American…[and] the "white messiah complex"' (162). Yet, Benjamin Schrager, with a dialogical approach, emphasizes the benefits of this as an educational standpoint for students to understand the "political geography of imperialism" through aliens (163). When you cast the viewpoint on a story from a historically oppressive gaze, it is only educational if one were seeking reinforcement of the hegemonic position. Even though Schrager is aware of this issue, and takes time to point it out explicitly, using sources that paint the hegemonic position as beneficial are prime examples of active viewers that assimilate meaning into their preconceived ideologies, creating a "mirror," if you will. This also weaponizes empathy because it is James Cameron's choice to have the "white messiah" as the main character, with whom we are persuaded to empathize with and to not challenge beyond a negotiated approach.

Film has shown to succeed in garnering empathy in several instances, but how can empathy through cinematic exposure to new concepts, people, and ideas, win? Laura Mulvey states that it is man's "castration anxiety" that begets the fetishization of women in film by the male, hegemonic gaze (qtd. in Durham 348). There are, of course, other hegemonic codes/ways

of seeing in the cinema (as seen with *Avatar*), but what lacks in all is a subversion of the established way of gazing. In rare instances there are films that go against the norm, but they are easily avoidable if one were to choose. How can empathy be instilled with such resistance? In a deceptively sharp turn, the article "Homeostasis and Soft Robotics in the Design of Feeling Machines" inquires about the "conditions that would potentially allow machines to care about what they do or think" (Man et al. 446). The idea is to "begin the design of these robots by, paradoxically, introducing vulnerability" (446). Building off of living beings' state of homeostasis, imbuing a robot with vulnerability makes them not only aware of their own mortality and their need for survival, but also aware of others' need to survive, too. This creates the seeds of empathy. If, say, film were to take the male gaze (among other gazes), cradle it, then castrate it, the hegemonic position would be in a state of vulnerability. In this vulnerability, those who benefited from this gaze may begin to understand and empathize with the other side. It could lead, for a brief moment, to eliminating the ego in looking as well as decoding outside the hegemonic position, and to politically mobilizing those who otherwise would have stared and watched. In essence, it is proven time and time again that films can be a tool to understand others, or to see a reflection of ourselves and our desires; but, for some spectators that mirror must be broken to reveal the window looking out onto the "new" world behind.

Cinema bears a unique ability to change peoples' perceptions of the world in both an aural, visual, and (arguably) textual sense. By beginning with Walter Benjamin's assertion for the cinema to mobilize the masses and Stuart Hall's theories of the processes of encoding/decoding media, this established not only the power of a film to incite change as opposed to other art, but also the ways in which audiences respond to film and find meaning. This meaning can be assimilated into hegemonic codes or our own ideologies. Then, Christian Metz and psychoanalytical film theory cemented the importance of the gaze, the ego, and the screen working in conjunction to reveal a mirror of our own desires. Real-world studies were conducted regarding the degrees to which audiences empathized with characters in film, most notably films that portrayed minority groups, and these studies were successful and affective. This can reveal to audiences a "new" window on the world. That being said, empathy is never universal, and hostility or passivity breeds ignorance even when approaching new ideas in film and/or film

critique. Through taking Laura Mulvey's application of castration anxiety (adopted from Freud), and synthesizing the formation of vulnerable soft machines, empathy can be created by utilizing the hegemonic gaze in a film, favouring it, then exposing it. This would, ideally, make viewers who are normally comfortable vulnerable and create empathy for the other. It should be recognized that this solution will likely fail in a broad setting (in many cases it already has), but as the world is exposed to more and more stories from different viewpoints everyday, and an increasing number under the spotlight, the future of empathy in film is not as bleak as it may seem.

Works Cited:

1) Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 1935, quoted in Durham, Meenakshi Gigi., and Douglas Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

2) Cameron, James. *Avatar.* 20th Century Fox, 2009.

3) Igartua, Juan-José. “Film Involvement and Narrative Persuasion: The Role of Identification With the Characters.” *Conference Papers -- International Communication Association*, 2009 Annual Meeting 2009, 1–19. https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=45286641&site=eds-live&scope=site.

4) Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding,” 1973, quoted in Durham, Meenakshi Gigi., and Douglas Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

5) Keefe, John. “The Film Spectator as “Bricoleur,”’ 2012, quoted in Miller, Jacqui. *Film and Ethics : What Would You Have Done?* Liverpool Hope University Studies in Ethics Series. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=839512&site=eds-live&scope=site.

6) Man, Kingson, and Antonio Damasio. “Homeostasis and Soft Robotics in the Design of Feeling Machines.” Nature. Nat Mach Intell, October 9, 2019. https://www.nature.com/articles/s42256-019-0103-7.epdf.

7) Metz, Christian. “The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.” Translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982. https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Metz_Imaginary.pdf

8) Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 1975, quoted in Durham, Meenakshi Gigi., and Douglas Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

9) Schrager, Benjamin. 2017. “A Dialogic Approach to Alien Movies.” *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 79 (January): 153–67. doi:10.1353/pcg.2017.0008.