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Subjects in Search for the (Con)text — Inter-textuality and Spectator Subject

One of the main concerns of the film theory in the 70's and 80's has been the relation between film texts and their spectators. Usually approaches to this question can be divided into two fairly large and general categories: 1) The constitution of spectator position is reduced to the formal mechanisms by which a text produces the position for the spectator. This means that texts themselves are seen to organize their own reading through constituting a position from which this reading happens. One of best known examples of this approach was *Colin MacCabe*'s theory of the classic realist text in which discourses are hiearchically organized. 2) The second approach includes those theories that pay attention to extratextual determinations of the text. In particular importance has been attached on the cultural and ideological factors setting limits to the ways different groups of spectators receive a specific film text.

Both these approaches bring some difficulties with them. As *Tony Bennett* and *Jane Woollacott* state in their book called *Bond and Beyond. The Political Career of a Popular Hero*[1] the first approach assumes that the text's "intra-textual processes" through which spectator is constituted "can be specified independently of the extra-textual determinations" which confirm the receiving of the text by diverse groups of spectators.[2] Similarly, while the second approach, one stressing extra- textual factors and forgetting the text itself, "allows for a variability of reader response", it retains intact the gap between the text and its receiver. Variations in the process of spectating the text "are

conceived as merely different responses to 'the same text'. The text that different spectators decode variously remains, in the end, inaffected by these different decoding practices".[3]

This approach, typical of the dominant film theory, is often almost paradoxic. While many scholars argue on behalf of open texts and reader's activity, they at the same time emphasize that texts bind and position their spectators during the process of reception. For example the so called Screen theorists proposed the origin of the relation between a text and its reader in the following way: the spectator is inscribed in the text, constituted by it once and for all in each reception, that is a single text constitutes a single subject position. This process is psychic and not, say, cultural or social. Thus the outcome is a transhistorical and universal subject which, in this postlacanian model, reacts to every interpellation in all (bourgeois) societies each time the same way.

Nevertheless, what is positive in these approaches is, among others, the fact that texts are not seen only as representative but also as constitutive. However, though we would like to endorse the hypothesis that cinematic signification is controlled and regular, I find important that it should also include the possibility of contradiction and heterogeneity – especially now, at the time of postmodernism and poststructuralism, when the unity of text is so often called in question.

The problem is how we can approach the relation between the text and its reader, simultaneously both keeping crucial achievements of psychosemiotics and getting rid of its occasional rigid formalism. One pos-

sible answer might be to treat the whole question as an inter-textual and inter-discursive process, for in that way we might come to terms also with the history of texts and their spectators. What I mean is that we should simply remember that once entering a cinema a spectator has already seen a number of other films and spectator is therefore preconstituted by many different discourses, not only visual ones.

The film text in the history

Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality as the transposition of one or more signsystems into another. She continues as follows:

> If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that 'its' place of enunciation and its denoted object are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, cabable of being tabulated. In this way polysemy can also be seen as the result of semiotic polyvalence – an adherence to different signsystems."[4]

This concept presupposes that in texts we can segregate signifying units and clusters connected to other texts. (Of course these connections need not have anything to do with the writer or writers. But they are dependent on the reader.) Julia Kristeva's way to define intertextuality is closely related to my understanding of the influence of other texts on the reception of a given (film) text. But there are also some differences that derive from the fact that in my opinion the very idea of inter-textuality is very much connected to extra-textual determinants. That is why I prefer Bennett's and Woollacott's definition of inter-textuality.

In brief, whereas Kristeva's concept of intertextuality refers to the net of references between texts modifying the internal composition of a specific individual text, to me, following Bennett and Woollacott, the concept of inter-textuality refers to the social organisation of this net, of relations between texts within specific conditions of reading. (These conditions can be for instance cultural, ideological, racial or gender-specific.) However this does not mean that we should simply reduce text to context. Rather inter-textuality includes the idea that ultimately "neither text nor context are conceivable as entities separable from one another".[5]

Thus the intra-textual is also a product of inter-textual and inter-discursive net in which the text is in motion. Consequently, we can problematize the traditional notion that text, context and subject can be separated. We can now "underline that texts, contexts and subjects are not separable and fixed elements but, on the contrary, they are variable functions within discursively ordered set of relations".[6] This means that different receptions of a text are encounters of different inter-textual and inter-discursive contexts forming, through these different contexts, different texts.

As I wrote above, if inter-textuality is conceived the way I have tried to propose, Kristeva's concept forms only a part of it. Both textual and non-textual determinants should be included. I find it rather improbable that inter-textuality can – or should – be separated from a larger net of interdiscursive relations. In other words inter-textuality includes also different social and cultural discourses, because both our social and cultural position affects the way we receive a text. (These cultural and social discources might be for instance different positions imposed by the society for males and females.)

What I have tried to indicate is that the subject receiving a text is already – before encountering that text – under the influence of many other social discources that participate in preconstituting a subject. (Of course these discourses can be contradictory.) The text, on the other hand, is also received inter-textually, which has an advance effect on the reception of the individual text. Together with the inter-textual and inter-discursive net of relations the received text inscribes the subject a position or actually many positions to choose from. (In practice this process of a single text cannot be separated from other processes). Through cooperation of these different practices the subject is then inscribed in the historically specific and changing process of signification and reception.

Crucial points, I stress, are the following: 1) Spectator subject encounters a filmic text after having seen a number of different films, which effect the receiving of this particular text. (Most concretely this can be seen in genrefilms.) 2) Subject is always already (before encountering a filmic text) preconstituted in other discourses and besides the subject is all the time (when receiving a filmic text) influenced by larger and often more fundamental discursive prosesses.

Both these points emphasize my hypothesis that the process of receiving a text is utterly heterogenous and that a single text alone does not constitute the subject. position as, for instance, many Screen theorists have claimed. Rather I think that the process should be considered reciprocal: texts constitute their spectators but also receivers, spectators, constitute texts.

The star and the constitution of spectator subject

The star phenomenon is an interesting text case when we are considering and discussing the role of inter-textuality and its influence on the process of receiving a filmic text. This is due to fact that because star images are always inter-textual. When we receive the film star's image in the cinema we do not receive only the image constructed in that particular film but instead we also receive his/her image constructed in other media: pin-ups, interviews, articles, newsreels etc. As an illuminating example consider how Ronald Reagan's star image of his old films is actually changed after his becoming the president of the USA. Another ecample is the constructing of Timothy Dalton's (latest "James Bond") star image in publicity.

In his book *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society*[7] Richard Dyer gives an excellent example concerning the question of inter-textuality and spectator. Dyer writes about homosexual male spectators' way of consuming images of *Judy Garland*. These gay men actually identified themselves with Garland and her position. This is interesting because in the most obvious sense Judy Garland's was the image of heterosexual normality and standards. Then how, Dyer asks, were these gay males, a group excluded from and oppressed by society's "normality", able to turn Garland into such a figure of identification.[8] Here the starting point seems to be spectators's inter-textual and inter-discursive relation to the star image of Judy Garland. As Dyer writes:

> ...gay men are brought up to be ordinary. One is not brought up gay; on the contrary, everything in the culture seems to work against it. Had Garland remained an image of ordinary normality, like June Allyson or Deanna Durbin, she would not have been available as a gay icon. But it was the fact, as became clear after 1950 (f.ex. her suicide attempt), that she was not after all the ordinary girl she appeared to be that suggested a relationship to ordinariness homologous with that of gay identity.[9]

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The crucial point is that just like "Judy Garland" – if seen only through her image in her films – also gay men are brought up into ordinariness, to deny their not-ordinariness, and thus conceal the otherness avoided by society.

This example is most interesting in relation to my sketching in this paper. It appears that the text is not the constant and fixed entity constituting a single subject position. On the contrary, intra-textual determinations intermix with extra-textual resulting to several spectator positions. If gay spectators take advantage of and utilize specific features typical of Hollywood film and give them new meaning, does this fact not make us conclude that these gay spectators have assumed a position very much contradictory to the one dominant discourse should constitute.

This example provided us by Dyer (in a slightly different context) gives me reason to suggest that gay spectators are not constituted or positioned by Garland films (that is, classic realist texts). On the contrary these gay spectators construct a different Judy Garland film through inter-textual information (e.g. information on Judy Garland's otherness when compared to the image offered by her films). Thus it seems very unlikely that the classic realist text would constitute such a position for a gay spectator or that the classic realist text would constitute the gay spectator as its model, ideal or preferred reader. It may be better to see the relation between text and spectator subject as an inter-textual process in which different determinants (texts and other contexts) work together. (This means also that the study of text should not be separated from the study of text's reception.)

Information and spectator subject

Richard Dyer gives us another illuminating example, which is also very much connected to inter-textual consciousness and spectator subject: One of Judy Garland's most popular songs was called "In-between", whose most attractive lines are the following:

My dad says I should bother more
About my lack of grammar
The only thing that bothers me
Is my lack of glamour

Fifteen thousand times a day
I hear a voice within me say
Hide yourself behind a screen
You shouldn't be heard
You shouldn't be seen
You're just an awful in-between

That's what I am
An in-between
It's just like small pox guarantine
I can't do this

I can't go there
I'm jus circle in a square
I don't fit in anywhere

These lines take us inside teenagers' problematic world and the song seems to construct that kind of preferred reader. But the meaning of the text changes a great deal if the text is sung by, say, a star of a drag show. In that case the song is addressed to a homosexual spectator, whose marginality in the society the song underlines.[10] From that perspective the text is much more critical, ironical and politically interesting. Thus it is also highly unlikely that the text would offer one single position for spectator of constitute its

spectator subject and the mode of receiving the text.

These examples indicate that the question of subject position should not be reduced merely to formal operations. Instead, receiving a text seems to be very strongly connected to and dependent on our inter-textual knowledge (that is connected for example to the kind of sub-culture we live in). In addition to signifier also signified seems to affect the spectator position. It is important that this very signified material ('content') is just the one differing according to the context and spectator. It is possible that also *enonciated* together with enonciation influences the constitution of spectator subject. An excellent example is irony which is based on the gap, difference, between enonciated and enonciation.

So the signification and reception processes of a text result also from information we have before encountering the text. On the other hand many theorists propose that a text constitutes a single position for its spectator by positioning the spectator in fixed relation with the information given in the text. For example, Colin MacCabe suggested that the classic realist text works like this. In his opinion different discourses in the classic realist text cannot be in contradiction, because their meaning and position is determined by the dominant discourse in the hierarchy, i.e. narration. It determines the truth and positions the spectator by regulating his amount of information.

But if we suppose that the spectator position is determined by the relation to the information, does this not actually also imply that the position is not single and fixed. It seems peculiar and even misleading to presume information being in the objects as such – in texts as such – from which every spectator decodes it the same way regardless of context (or spectator). Rather I see different spectators decode different aspects of the text depending on the kind of sign system they take part in or the kind of inter-textual net of relations they connect the signs of a given film text.

With this I mean that perception and thus also the receiving of information is dependent on the signsystem we use. (This sign system varies according to social and cultural relations.) Consequently it is too simple to assume the text to constitute its subject every time the same way (by positioning the spectator in the regulated relation with the information), because it would mean that the text in question would be perceived by every spectator almost exactly the same way.

This concerns the question of inter-textuality and spectatorship closely. The text-spectator relationship is organised the same way: our earlier inter-textual and inter-discursive information direct and regulate in advance the reception of the text. It also makes possible that this relationship can vary considerably according the situation and the context the text is received in. Therefore we may conclude that the text does not constitute the subject, but the subject constitutes the text by using her/his inter-textual and inter-discursive information.

Notes

1. Macmillan Education Ltd 1987.
2. Bennet and Woollacott 1987, 61-62.
3. ibid., 62.
4. Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language", in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader,* Basil Blackwell 1986, 111.
5. Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 44-45.
6. ibid., 262.
7. Macmillan Education Ltd 1987, British Film Institute Series.
8. Dyer 1987, 159.
9. ibid., 159.
10. ibid., 171.