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Spectatorship and Social Cognition

This paper places Per Persson's book *Understanding Cinema* in relation to cognitive film theory and the increasing necessity of it to further engage with the psychological and anthropological literature on social cognition. This paper focuses upon Persson's ability to integrate cognitive and cultural perspectives when explaining a spectator's comprehension of point-of-view editing, variable framing and character psychology. It is argued that Persson's theoretical framework would have been more explanatorily complete if it had adopted an analytical dualist stance as a means to theorise the ontologically mixed nature of the psychological processes in question.

Since its initial development in the 1980s, a central theme of cognitive film theory has been its rejection of a pervasive view within film studies that every aspect of the mental life of the spectator is to be understood as shaped or constituted by social factors, be such points of determination conceived as language, discourse or culture. In their attempt to emphasise innate and universal dimensions of spectatorial response, a number of cognitive film theorists have tended to focus upon lower order processes, such as perception and object recognition, and have expended less effort providing cognitive accounts of higher order processes such as judgement, inference and interpretation (Eitzen 1993; Prince 1993; Anderson 1996; Carroll 1996a; Grodal 1997). This has prompted critics of cognitive film theory to claim, as Robert Stam does, that the theory

allows little room for the politics of location, or for the socially shaped investments, ideologies, narcissisms, and desires of the spectator, all of which seem too irrational and messy for the theory to deal with.... A focus on cognitive commonalities across all cultures exists below the threshold of cultural and social difference, and therefore discourages analysis of tensions rooted in history or culture.

(2000, pp. 241–242)

As Stam's comments reveal, many film theorists find the cognitivist focus upon internal psychological processes problematic since it leads analysis away from the investigation of the social forces and contextual factors shaping spectatorial response.

Such criticisms are not wholly fair. No cognitive film theorist claims that spectatorial response is in no way influenced by a spectator's social context. Indeed, some cognitive film theorists have explicitly theorised the social dimensions of cognition and their role within spectatorship (Bordwell 1989a, pp. 28–32; 1996, pp. 94–95; Smith 1995, pp. 46–52; Carroll 1996b, pp. 268–272; Tan 1996, pp. 163–171). And if one recognises film criticism as a specialised form of spectatorial activity, then David Bordwell's *Making Meaning* should be understood as a cognitive account of the institutional conventions and imperatives informing the interpretive practices manifested within it (Bordwell 1989b).

However, these criticisms of cognitive film theory are not wholly misplaced. Most cognitive film theorists have not extensively engaged with the cognitive literature in social psychology and cognitive anthropology as a means to address questions pertaining to the relations between social identity and spectatorship, even though the relevance of such approaches to these fundamental questions is patent (Holland & Quinn 1987; D'Andrade & Strauss 1992; Strauss & Quinn 1997; McGarty *et al.* 2002; Brubaker *et al.* 2004). In addition, there are good reasons to be sceptical about extreme nativist claims. Not all cognitivists necessarily maintain a strong nativist stance in which our mental

'hardware' is viewed as being predominantly innately determined. As Bradd Shore observes, the concept of 'adaptive intelligence' within neurobiology assumes that neural connections are plastic over the course of mental development in ways that are responsive to the social environment (1996, pp. 16–18). From the perspective of adaptive intelligence, social construction and cognitive psychology are not inherently irreconcilable. This would suggest that a more productive avenue for cognitive film theory to take would be a middle path in which other cultural approaches can be potentially incorporated without necessarily involving the importation of dubious radical constructivist assertions, such as that biology and evolutionary psychology are irrelevant to the study of film spectator, or even worse, completely ideologically suspect.

Per Persson's recent book *Understanding Cinema* is a welcome contribution to cognitive film theory primarily because of his attempt to chart such a middle course between nativist assumptions on the one hand and broader cultural and historical considerations on the other. Unlike most other cognitive film theorists, Persson invokes a wide range of approaches derived from the social psychological and cognitive anthropological literature to aid his explanations of how spectators construct filmic meaning. However, in this paper I do not want to limit myself to merely providing an overview of Persson's cultural–cognitive approach, original as it is. I also want to question his methodological decision to remain agnostic with respect to specifying the ontological nature of the psychological processes he describes. I will show that an increase in explanatory purchase is to be had when the relations between the psychological and the cultural domains are actively theorised as opposed to just assuming that both are in play in shaping spectatorial response.

The central concepts Persson deploys in his study of cinematic spectatorship are 'understanding' and 'dispositions' (pp. 7–13). Understanding is construed broadly to cover the psychological activities by which a person imposes order and makes sense of the phenomenal world, with the film text perceived as just one manifestation of the phenomenal. Dispositions refer to the set of mental structures that guide this sense-making activity. Persson sees the parameters of these dispositions set neither wholly by innately specified mental modules nor by socially shared schemas but by a spectrum of factors running between the two (pp. 13–19). According to Persson, his integrative stance 'does not give answers to the origin of individual dispositions; it only acknowledges that causes of dispositions must be sought on many levels in an ecumenical spirit' (p. 19). This integrative stance is best revealed by Persson positing a continuum between six levels of filmic meaning and the dispositions that underlie these sense-making activities (pp. 26–34). At the most basic level are those meanings that derive from the spectator's basic perceptual abilities, such as object recognition and depth perception. Amongst the highest and most abstract level of meanings are those associated with establishing the communicative intentions of filmmaker or the application of interpretive grids as a means to make sense of a film. In between these levels Persson posits a number of intermediary ones which manifest increasing orders of complexity and which are connected with a spectator's abilities to categorise and attribute the mental states of characters. Persson is not the first to put forward the notion that the best way to capture spectatorial comprehension is through presenting it as a continuum. Both David Bordwell and Umberto Eco have done so earlier, although Eco, in notable contrast to Bordwell and Persson, viewed the continuum semiotically, as the operation of socially learnt codes, even with respect to basic object recognition abilities (Eco 1976; Bordwell 1996, pp. 93–96). Although few would contest the claim that both Bordwell's and Persson's cognitive accounts are clearly superior than Eco's semiotic construal of the continuum, what is notable is that Persson's account is more exhaustive than Bordwell's, despite their similar cognitive underpinnings.

The rest of Persson's book constitutes an application of his understanding and dispositions model to three key areas of spectatorial comprehension: point-of-view (POV) editing; variable framing understood in relation to conceptions of personal space; and character psychology and mental attribution. In all instances, Persson invokes dispositions which are innately prefigured and those which are more culturally based to delineate the relevant factors involved. An illustrative instance of this is Persson's psychological revision of Noël Carroll's more philosophically oriented account of a spectator's comprehension of POV editing (Carroll 1996b). While both claim that deictic gaze behaviour (the ability of a person to infer the object of another person's gaze) forms the basis by which a spectator is able to comprehend POV editing, Persson is reluctant to explain its ontogenetic manifestation wholly by reference to evolutionary psychology, as Carroll does. Persson suggests a more dialectical interaction between nature and culture, one in which basic untutored psychological skills possess a 'genetic basis that provides us with some *predisposition* to develop patterns such as deictic gaze but whose actual development probably demands a rich physical and social environment' (p. 73).

As indicated earlier, since Persson's integrative approach takes an agnostic stance on the question of the origin of dispositions, he prefers to stress the universality of the deictic gaze as a contingent universal rather than enter into a discussion upon its precise ontological nature. This is a significant point I will return to later. For the moment, it is important to recognise that Persson adds a historical dimension to his account, one which is notably absent in Carroll's explanation. The spectatorial application of deictic gaze skills to a film sequence is also contingent upon the cinematic regime of spatiality dominant within the historical period (pp. 48–66). Persson argues that during the cinema's first 10 years the dominant regime of spatiality employed was that of the model provided by the theatre and vaudeville in which the spectator was not immersed in the film's fictional space. From 1906 onward, however, a narrative system developed that stressed the spatial articulation of shots and the relations of characters within these fictional spaces. According to Persson, it is within this latter context that POV editing developed by fulfilling specific narrative functions such as facilitating a spectator's comprehension of narrative space and by providing greater psychological depth to characters (pp. 64–65). One of the strengths of Persson's integrative stance is its ability to be additionally sensitive to the historically contingent.

This pattern of explaining aspects of spectatorial comprehension by an appeal to the dual registers of the innately specified and the cultural is manifested in the book's other case studies. Whereas the comprehension of POV editing rested upon the psychological disposition to understand the deictic gaze behaviour of others, the comprehension of the narrative significance of variable framing instead relies upon the psychological disposition to understand personal space. Persson defines personal space as just 'one specific level of proxemics' that relates to conceptions of personal territory as opposed to all forms of social surroundings (p. 103). From a cinematic standpoint, the most significant aspect of personal space is what Edward Hall calls the 'intimate' zone, a region of space that defines not only intimate relations between people but also threatening invasions of that space that are interpreted as potential threats to one's body (pp. 104–108). As Persson points out, closer framings often exploit the spectator's sense of personal space as either markers of intimacy between two characters or as invasive threats against a character through an extreme close-up of a fist or a weapon. Again, Persson does not specify the ontological nature of the disposition, arguing that 'it is impossible to say whether the development of personal-space is driven by genetics or social learning' and provides empirical evidence for both positions (p. 108).

The chapter on character psychology and mental attribution is Persson's most important contribution to the theorisation of spectatorship. Cognitive film theorists have long recognised the centrality of character with respect to a spectator's comprehension and emotional responses to narrative film (Bordwell *et al.* 1985, pp. 12–18; Smith 1995, pp. 17–35; Livingston 1996, pp. 149–171). What Persson's understanding and dispositions model adds to these discussions is a greater psychological specification of the processes underlying character comprehension (p. 150). Persson applies the continuum of six levels of comprehension to describe the psychological processes involved in character comprehension and, although it is the most systematic application of the continuum in the book, he adds a seventh level pertaining to the categorisation of character with respect to their perceived social role(s) (pp. 154–156).¹ While one would readily admit that the categorisation of character with respect to their depicted social role is a significant element of character comprehension, it is unclear why Persson places this at the highest level of mental abstraction. Ascertaining the occupancy role of a police officer in uniform in a film does not appear to be more computationally difficult than inferring his or her occurrent mental states or their personality traits, competencies Persson places at level 4 and 5, respectively. The danger here is that certain elements of the comprehension continuum appear to be distinguished in an ad hoc fashion rather than reflecting a principled gradient registering higher orders of cognitive complexity or abstractedness.

Persson proposes that the ability to attribute mental states to a character is only partly explained through a spectator's attention to their speech, facial expressions and bodily gestures as clues to their inner life. Subtending this ability are broader inter-related assumptions on the nature of mental life that the spectator possesses, a position that Murray Smith had partially staked out through the deployment of the concept of a 'person schema' (1995, pp. 20–24). To describe these assumptions, Persson borrows from the cognitive psychological literature the concept of 'folk psychology', an internal model of the mind which consists of 'a naive, common-sense "theory" about the constituents and common processes of the psyche and how these are related to actions and behaviour' (p. 163). Included in the Western model of the mind are assumptions such as: actions are caused by desires and beliefs; beliefs and thoughts are reciprocally informed by one's perceptions; and emotions and physiological states motivate desire (pp. 164–170). In a move that should dispel the erroneous belief that cognitive film theory is not sensitive to the shaping influences of culture on mental processes, Persson is emphatic that folk psychology is a cultural model that varies with respect to cultural context, historical period, age and cognitive abilities (here Persson invokes the classic example of autistic children and their difficulties inferring the mental states of others) (pp. 176–177). However, this does not lead Persson to assume a relativist stance which denies the universality of certain core assumptions of folk psychology, although he once again sidesteps the issue whether such universality can be explained partially by an appeal to an innate mental module devoted to the task of mental attribution. Through a series of case studies, the remainder of the chapter consists of compelling demonstrations of how a spectator's comprehension of a character's goals, perceptions and emotions can be exhaustively explained by recourse to folk psychological assumptions.

As an advancement upon existing cognitive film theory, *Understanding Cinema* offers a helpful negotiation between the cognitive and cultural perspectives that are currently separated by unproductive theoretical divisions. Its exploration of various social cognition dimensions shaping spectatorial response provides a needed counterbalance to cognitive work primarily weighted toward the study of the lower order and more biologically based cognitive processes. And Persson's increased psychological specification of the cognitive processes involved in the comprehension of POV editing, variable framing and character psychology provides ample proof of how a cognitive

approach can supply fine-grained explanations to complex questions involving a range of diverse factors.

In the face of such accomplishments, it may seem churlish to then find fault with Persson's methodological decision to refrain from adjudicating upon the ontological nature of the psychological dispositions he describes. However, there are opportunities to further refine Persson's explanatory framework in ways which do not depart from his central premises. To do so involves assuming a moderate social constructivist stance which recognises the mixed ontological nature of the psychological domain while theorising the interplay between the innate and cultural dimensions of cognition instead of leaving such questions to one side.

Elsewhere I have argued that film historians would benefit by adopting the analytical dualist approach that the sociologist Margaret Archer has advocated when theorists are faced with domains that are ontologically mixed (Romao 2003, pp. 32–39). Analytical dualism consequently represents a position that maintains ontological distinctions rather than effecting their theoretical erasure. In so doing, one can identify the emergent properties of different ontological factors and explain a developmental process through their interplay over time. As Archer's own work within sociology shows, there are inherent limitations with the work of social theorists who conflate structure and agency, be they 'downward conflationists' who envisage agents as the embodiments of social structures, or 'upward conflationists' who argue that social structures are epiphenomenal and ultimately reducible to the activities of agents (Archer 1995, 1996). More recently, Archer has extended this line of analysis to current debates on the nature of the human subject as a means to critique postmodernists who routinely conflate its natural and social dimensions (Archer 2000).

It does not take much effort to see that there is a similar necessity of maintaining ontological distinctions within the theorisation of film spectatorship. A downward conflationist approach to the psychological that treated spectatorial response as nothing more than the manifestation of culture would envisage a spectator without mental or biological endowment. Equally, an upward conflationist approach that treated spectatorial response solely in terms of innately specified mental processes would conceive of a spectator stripped of his or her social identity and untouched by their social environment. Since both approaches have obvious limitations, it would be wiser to adopt an analytical dualist stance that respected both the innately specified and the culturally shaped aspects of cognition. Notably, this stance is becoming increasingly advocated in cultural anthropology in ways which mirror Archer's analytical dualist approach. In their book, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn draw conclusions that are equally applicable to debates on film spectatorship. In their view:

[T]he inner world or psyche and the world outside of persons are not isolated realms and that too large a gulf has been posited between them in current theorising. It is central to our view, however, that these realms are *different*, with distinctive characteristics not found in the other. In our view the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal realms are distinct but closely interconnected; they are separated by a boundary, but one that is permeable.

(1997, p. 8)

While Strauss and Quinn do not invoke the concept of analytical dualism, its methodological principles are clearly in tune with their recommendations. Just as the separation of structure from agency facilitated explaining social stasis or change, so too does the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal distinction enable explaining the stability, or the possibilities of variation, in cultural meanings.

If one were to place Persson's work in relation to the principles of analytical dualism, it would be inaccurate to call him either a downward or upward conflationist. If anything, his refusal to pass judgement on the ontological status of psychological processes prevents him from going down either of those paths. Despite this, it would seem that his integrative stance is intended to signal that both biologically innate and cultural factors are to be considered in tandem when analysing the multiple factors shaping a psychological disposition. The problem is that once one accepts that most psychological questions require both biological and cultural answers, then it is incumbent upon the theorist to reflect upon their interrelations. To recall, when Persson proposed his compromise approach to explaining deictic gaze behaviour, one of his suggestions was that innate factors are to be understood as predispositions whose development is influenced by the socio-cultural environment. This is an interrelationship that needs to be theorised and preferably in a non-conflationary manner. Are all innate predispositions equally culturally malleable? What properties determine the extent of their malleability? Precisely which socio-cultural conditions enable the development of a predisposition and which conditions act as a break on their development? To be sure, these are broader theoretical questions that go beyond the traditional remit of film theory, ones which a developmental psychologist or a cognitive anthropologist would be in a far better position to answer. While Persson's theoretical framework unfortunately does not provide answers to such issues, it would be all the more powerful if it did.

Notes

1. To avoid confusion, while Persson refers to the comprehension of a character's social role at 'level 6', it is technically the seventh since he starts his discussion at 'level 0'.

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