Bringing Bodies Back In: For a Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Film Criticism of Embodied Cultural Identity

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Embodied Cultural Identity

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As Richard Rushton and Gary Bettinson comment early in their new introduction to film

theory since 1960, film theories 'do not spring from nothingness. They are agitated into

being by pre-existing, inferior propositions; they hark back to archaic, forgotten

hypotheses; they open dialogue with cognate theories which they serve to complement,

finesse, or qualify' (Rushton and Bettinson 2010, 11-12). In just the way Rushton and

Bettinson describe, the film-critical proposal I shall put forward here is not an entire new

theory, but a revised approach to a concept – identification – which most definitely harks

back to more secure, less multiplicitous days in film-philosophy and originates

predominantly in pre-existing propositions, and qualifies cognate theories. By

'identification', I am indeed referring to the manner in which film spectators engage with

film characters, but also to another kind of identification that has come centre stage in

film theory and criticism through the important influence existential phenomenology has

had on film theory since the publication of Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A*

Phenomenology of Film Experience (1992). Sobchack's development of a Merleau-

Pontyan model of the experience of film viewing requires us to consider, rather than

identification with characters, our identification with 'the sense and sensibility of

materiality itself' (Sobchack 2004, 65) – the materiality of the film, celluloid or digital.

In psychoanalytic terms, such an identification with filmic materiality is called 'primary' identification, to distinguish it from the 'secondary' identifications that occur once the infant's subjectivity gains sufficient definition and stability to form affinities with characters, real or fictional. The most frequently-cited context for primary identification is the Lacanian mirror stage, when the infant first perceives its bodily identity as a totality, either by seeing its image in a mirror or feeling it 'reflected' in the literal or metaphorical look of a parent. Lacan's primary identification describes the child feeling the limits of its body for the first time, gaining motor control of its limbs, and leaving behind – or at least learning how to overcome – the *corps morcelé* or 'body-in-bits-and-pieces' he suggests is characteristic of very early infancy. The relationship implied by this type of identification is the one between the nascent ego and the infant-subject rather than that between an infant-subject and its other, and the feeling of coherence or totality involved is more dependent on other modes of perception than the look. Since Lacanian theory tends to associate primary identification with the mirror stage, it may encourage the view that primary identification precedes secondary identification chronologically, or developmentally, in the life of a subject, when in fact, although secondary identifications cannot by definition be accomplished until the identifying subjectivity has undergone the necessary formative repressions and splits, primary identifications continue to alternate with secondary ones thereafter. As will become clear in my second section, this co-extensive functioning of the two modes of identification closely resembles the equiprimordiality of body and vision theorized by Merleau-Ponty, who sets out his concept of the chiasm of the visible and the invisible (according to which visibility and

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invisibility are inextricably intertwined with one another) in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964/1968).

In an essay published twelve years after *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack summarises her thinking on identification as follows:

> we might wish to think again about processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not to our secondary engagement with and recognition of either 'subject positions' or characters but rather to our primary engagement (and the film's) with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself (Sobchack 2004, 65).

In inviting film critics to reconsider primary identification in 2004, Sobchack's was a relatively lonely voice in the film-philosophical community: a keyword search for 'identification' in the MLA Bibliography turns up thirty-four items from the 2000s in whose title it appears, but the majority of these address the concept in relation to particular films or types of film, with only about nine undertaking to consider it across film as a medium. (Authors of these include Kimberley Chabot Davis, on whose work I shall draw in what follows.) The principal film-theoretical publication to discuss identification in the 1990s, albeit to seek to replace it with a new model of spectatorship, was probably Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (1995). Smith confirmed in response to Lynne Pearce's rather confused review of his book, in which she claimed that 'it is Smith's objective to produce a more sophisticated model of what we mean by "identification"' (Pearce 1996, 417), that 'If *E[ngaging] C[haracters]* is anything.[…].it is a detailed argument regarding the *inadequacies* of the notion of "identification"' (Smith 1999, 360), and went on to distinguish critically

between what he called its 'everyday sense' and its 'more technical, psychoanalytic guises' (ibid). Bizarrely, although apparently willing to concede in his reply to Pearce that more than one version of identification can indeed be found in over a century of psychoanalytic literature, Smith had claimed in *Engaging Characters* that identification is a 'uniform' concept, and insufficiently 'subtle and discriminating' to 'describe and explain our variegated responses to character' (Smith 1995, 106). He had also undermined his own claim about this, however, by acknowledging that a Lacanian version of psychoanalysis dominates studies of cinematic identification (Smith 1995, 236): to acknowledge that the concept *has* non-Lacanian versions is to acknowledge that it is not uniform.

Whatever the inconsistencies in his argumentation, however, the elision of 'the' (sic) psychoanalytic concept of identification Smith makes with the Lacanian version of the concept at the start of *Engaging Characters*, ignoring Freud and other theorists who have approached the concept differently, is in fact typical. To redress the balance in favour of Freud *et al*., I shall now outline some other psychoanalytic and phenomenological versions of the concept, on the basis of which it may be possible to rethink how we use it in film analysis.

(Re)thinking Identification, Through the Body

What is different about identification in non-Lacanian accounts? For Lacan, identification always involves an image: 'We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image' (Easthope 1993, 34). For Freud

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it does not: the three modes of identification Freud 'eventually' distinguishes between in

Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921) are: (1) the primal form of the

emotional tie with the object, (2) the regressive replacement for an abandoned object-

choice (3) a tie that takes place in the absence of any sexual cathexis, 'to the extent that

[the subject and the other person] have some trait in common' (Laplanche and Pontalis

1974, 207). Identification involves the ego and is 'the operation…whereby the human

subject is constituted' (ibid. p.206): this is also the account used by Judith Butler in

Chapter 2 of *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Chapter 3 of *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

Identification with the lost object, for Freud as for Butler, is

> not simply momentary or occasional, but becomes a new structure of identity; in
> effect, the other becomes part of the ego through the permanent internalization of
> the other's attributes (Butler 1990, 58).

What is interesting about the different, image-governed construction of identity set out by

Lacan in his essay on the mirror stage is that in arguing this he did not acknowledge that

he was privileging Freud's Platonic, mimetic account of identification which worked in

terms of a *Vor-bild* (an 'image-before'), and suppressing the one also in *Group*

Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego that spoke of the emotional tie with the object

(the *Gefühlsbindung*). Identification is not necessarily optical or spatial. As Mikkel

Borch-Jacobsen states in *Lacan: the Absolute Master*, 'Identification, if we take Freud

seriously, escapes from the mirror stage at the very moment when it makes this stage

possible' (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 66). Specular identification can only be produced 'on

the (abyssal, non-'subjectal') ground of a preliminary *affection*, by the 'other' that 'I' *am*

'myself' prior to any perception, any representation, any 'posing-before'. This is what Borch-Jacobsen calls Freud's unconscious and 'profoundly blind' *Cogito*, if there is such a thing. As well as constituting a kind of *Cogito* within the Freudian system, the *Gefühlsbindung* or 'preliminary affection' Borch-Jakobsen refers to closely resembles Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of intersubjectivity as anonymous and prepersonal. Initially set out in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), this understanding of intersubjectivity follows neither a rationalist, Enlightenment model of a community of autonomous subjects nor traditional epistemology's posing of the 'problem' of other minds. Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, does not consider the question of the existence of other minds to be a valid 'problem', since for him, our subjective experience of others is of other *selves* – embodied, flesh-and-blood beings with whom our meaningful encounters are social and precognitive. In emphasising the prepersonal, anonymous and prereflective character of intersubjective relations, Merleau-Ponty is very close to Lacan's emphasis on the Symbolic order as one manifestation of the Other with a capital 'O', or to Freud's conviction that the unconscious dominates social experience. It must be emphasised, however, that the *Gefühlsbindung* or 'preliminary *affection*' that binds us to one another remains just that, a bond or 'identification' that is irreducible to identity. For psychoanalysis as for Merleau Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity, identifications *never* achieve or seal an identity between the identifying parties, but remain permanently open, mutable and incomplete.

Lacan's 1938 article on the family complexes (Lacan 1984) shows that he was not unaware of the dimension of Freud's thinking he was suppressing by privileging a specular, mimetic notion of identification and by constructing his theory of the *stade du miroir*, formulated in 1936 but not delivered in its definitive form until 1949. 'Identification…is not specular at first, but "affective"' (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 67). Lacan freely admits in the 1938 text that the mirror stage is a second stage in terms of genesis: the first *imago* is not that of the child itself, but is the maternal archi-*imago*, which *is not an image*. 'The content of this image is given by the sensations proper to earliest childhood, but it has *form* only insofar as the sensations are mentally organised' (ibid.; my emphasis). It couldn't be more clearly stated, as Borch-Jacobsen says: 'The maternal *imago* is not an image or an object or a form or a representation'. The earliest tie with an object is, as Freud said, an 'emotional tie' that precedes the distinction between 'subject', 'object', 'self' and 'other', which is a profoundly identificatory tie. What is important about this passage in the 1938 article is that Lacan recognises a pre-specular relationship to the *imago* before the mirror stage *and* 'that he plants – something he will never do again – the subsequent dialectic of specular identifications in that initial affective ambivalence, seeing in this ambivalence the "undialecticizable matrix" of that dialectic' (ibid: 68). (This 'initial affective ambivalence' or 'preliminary *affection*' is, as pointed out above, hard to distinguish from Merleau-Ponty's 'invisibility', and the manner in which it grounds Lacan's subsequent dialectic of egoic specular identifications resembles Merleau-Ponty's 'chiasm' of the visible and the invisible, despite Lacan's dialectic remaining decidedly more Hegelian than Merleau-Ponty's.)

This pre-history of identity construction found in the writings of both Freud and Lacan, though suppressed by the latter after 1938, bears striking resemblances to the work of other psychological theorists on early child development, and to the phenomenology Merleau-Ponty began to formulate during the 1930s. One does not have to dig far into the historical context of Lacan's formulation of the *stade du miroir* (the mid 1930s), to find other accounts of early child development that differ markedly from the dialectic of specular identification Lacan describes as being set in train at the mirror stage. In contemporary film theory Kaja Silverman, despite standing out among her peers for her continuing loyalty to Lacan, draws extensively on the Austrian neurologist and analyst Paul Schilder and on the French child analyst Henri Wallon, both of whom give highly un-Lacanian accounts of the bodily ego and of the child's interaction with its image. The summary Silverman gives in *Threshold of the Visible World* (1996) of Schilder's arguments about the 'postural model of the body', or the 'image of the body', as he calls it, runs as follows:

> Therefore, it would seem that one's apprehension of self is keyed both to a visual image or constellation of visual images, and to certain bodily feelings, whose determinant is less physiological than social. […] Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the ego as a product of specular relations, has made it extremely difficult to theorize the role played there [i.e. in ego formation] by bodily sensation (Silverman 1996, 14).[1]

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[1] Gail Weiss says of Merleau-Ponty's account of early child development that 'the body image first appear[s] during the "mirror stage" (from 6-18 months of age) as a corporeal schema which requires, *but cannot be reduced to* [my emphasis] the infant's awareness of her/his specular image as an image of her/his own body' (Weiss 1999, 11).

According to Wallon, 'the visual imago, or "exteroceptive ego" is initially disjunctive from what he calls the "proprioceptive ego," and […] the unity which they subsequently form is at best tenuous' (Silverman 1996, 14-15). Whereas Lacan 'describes the infant's encounter with its specular reflection as more of a punctual event than an ongoing process […] [a]ccording to Wallon, on the other hand, a lengthy period intervenes between the child's first exposure to a mirror and the moment at which the reflected image is psychically incorporated. During this period, the mirror image remains stubbornly exterior' (Silverman 1996, 15). In *Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman coins the term 'identity-at-a-distance' to describe this gap between the child and its reflected body image, providing the necessary explanation as she does so that such 'an identity is, of course, inimical to the very concept implied by that word, which literally means "the condition or quality of being the same" (OED, 881). Identity-at-a-distance entails precisely the opposite state of affairs – the condition or quality of being "other"' (Silverman 1996, 15). She terms the infant psychic agency involved (which cannot be the ego, by definition in formation during this very process) the 'sensational body', though goes on to use Wallon's term 'proprioceptive body' and Schilder's 'postural model of the body' interchangeably with 'sensational body'. In her reading of a experimental Austrian film called *Syntagma* (Valie Export, 1983), Silverman explains that the sensational body

> is responsible for the experience which each of us has of occupying a point in space…It is produced through tactile, cutaneous and kinaesthetic sensations. Although this body is primarily responsible for our experience of corporeal reality, it is no less a representation than the body produced through the clicking of the camera/gaze. It is created initially through the parental touch, and later through contact with the outer world (Silverman 2000, 5-6).

Most importantly for my argument here, this body is not a visual body: Silverman states that both Schilder and Wallon 'agree that this sensational body can never really be "one" with the image that we are for ourselves and others' (Silverman 2000, 6). 'For neither of these writers is this a lamentable circumstance. For Schilder, the separation of the sensational imago from the visual imago is the condition for change and growth. And for Wallon, this disjunctive relation is the norm at the beginning of life. The children he describes 'remain for an extended period at a psychic distance from their mirror reflections' (ibid). Tantalizingly, Silverman then says that 'in certain situations, the adult subject can also become aware once again of the gap separating his or her sensational body from the corporeal image', and names cinematic spectatorship as one of these situations: a gap that separates the sensational body from the corporeal image is 'a normal feature' of cinematic viewing that is 'in no way pathological' (ibid.). Gail Weiss, another feminist theorist of body images, backs this up when she says that 'what is distinctive about Merleau-Ponty's and Schilder's accounts is that they extend our understanding of the centrality of the body image in all aspects of experience for "normal" as well as physiologically impaired subjects' (Weiss 1999, 7).

What might the implications of this disjunctive relation between sensational body and visual imago be for cinematic viewing? As Weiss's 1999 study of embodiment *as intercorporeality* underlines, a kind of traffic in body images goes on continuously at a pre-or sub-egoic level between viewers and the images of bodies they perceive. This applies to 'normal' subjects, not just to 'physiologically impaired' people, and may not be limited to the unspecified 'certain situations' mentioned by Silverman. (In this

connection, why should it be necessary for an adult viewer to be consciously aware of 'the gap separating his or her sensational body from the corporeal image' [Silverman 2000, 6] at all?.) Schilder's, Wallon's and Merleau-Ponty's psychologies of perception do not employ categories of the conscious and unconscious mind anything like as rigorously as Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. When it is child development that is under consideration, the body images perceived are reflections of children's own bodies, but for film viewers, they are the panoply of differently sized, coloured and focused human forms seen on the cinema screen. If the identifications viewers make while watching a film are as much 'primary', bodily, affective ties with the materiality of the film and its images as they are 'secondary' identifications with characters influenced by those characters' actions, narrative function and psychology, then cinematic spectatorship begins to look like an activity in which viewers' identities are exposed and liable to re-formation. Bodily sensation and perception may also play a far larger part in cinematic viewing than film theory and criticism have tended to assume.

The implications of the concept of the sensational body (Silverman), proprioceptive body (Wallon) or postural model of the body (Schilder) for film criticism might be considerable, I would suggest. Silverman's affirmation that it is 'produced through tactile...and kinaesthetic sensations' and continues to be created in adult life 'through contact with the outer world' (Silverman 2000, 6) resonates strongly with the sensate and sensuous character of film viewing emphasized by commentators such as Laura Marks in *The Skin of the Film* (Marks 2000) and *Touch* (Marks 2002). Recent phenomenological approaches to film spectatorship such as the work of Sobchack, Marks, and Jennifer M.

Barker (2009) are entirely in harmony with the sensate character of what Silverman terms 'identity-at-a-distance', a condition arguably described and explored throughout the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, the common feature of all the psychological and philosophical sources I have drawn on thus far – Freud on non-visual identification, and Schilder, Wallon, and Merleau-Ponty on the gap between the sensational and visual bodies – is the distance, blindness and bodiliness characteristic of a certain type of identification. By reviving and drawing on this important theoretical work from the first half of the twentieth century in *Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman brought insights to 1990s film theory that have not yet been given their due, or put into meaningful dialogue with other, contemporary developments in film-philosophy.

Cultural Bodily Identity

An important reason why Kaja Silverman's work on the sensational body can contribute to the trajectory of psychoanalytically- and phenomenologically-informed film criticism I am formulating and arguing for here, despite her continuing loyalty to Lacan,[2] is the strongly cultural direction her thinking takes in *Threshold of the Visible World*. Specifying in her introduction that 'the larger project of this book is to offer an ethics of the field of vision, and a psychoanalytic politics of visual representation' (Silverman

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[2] Silverman is the only one of the theorists to have contributed to what she calls 'identity-at-a-distance' to develop the notion in relation to film, which makes it all the more disappointing that in 'Speak, body', her article from 2000 on *Syntagma*, she re-encloses identity-at-a-distance within a Lacanian framework by insisting that it is 'later….traded in for one predicated upon a fictive unity' (Silverman 2000, 6).

1996, 2), Silverman goes on to argue that it is because 'the look is under cultural pressure to apprehend the world from a preassigned viewing position' (ibid., 3) that visual texts have a *particular* 'power to re-educate the look' (ibid., 5). Cinema and other visual cultural forms, in other words, maintain the 'power' to teach us otherness, to test, enhance and continually (re-)educate our repertoire of cultural images, with the heavily formulaic codes of entertainment cinema much less likely to do this than the more exploratory images usually associated with independent and gallery-exhibited film. This 'power to re-educate the look' is both ethical and political, and stems in part from the visible cultural specificities – size, skin colour, age, sex – of the images of bodies seen in visual texts. (In Silverman's view the identifications we may make with these bodies are always preceded by an idealization, 'that psychic activity at the heart of love' (ibid., 2)). Similarly cultural thinking about embodiment is to be found in critiques of the neutral, unmarked status the body has in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offered by feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler.[3] In the words of Gail Weiss, 'by developing the lacunae and critically extending the implications of these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's and Schilder's accounts of the body image, a richer feminist understanding of how racial, gender, class, age and cultural differences are *corporeally* registered and reproduced can

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[3] See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Judith Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*' (in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds., *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

be achieved' (Weiss 1999, 10). Among cultural critics of film, meanwhile, Kimberley Chabot Davis stands out for insisting that dialogue and cross-fertilization between psychoanalytic and ethnographic approaches to film spectatorship are possible, and for starting to forge just such links: in 'An Ethnography of Political Identification: The Birmingham School Meets Psychoanalytic Theory', Chabot Davis combines an understanding of subjectivity influenced by post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis and queer theory with data from interviews she conducts with readers and viewers of a cultural style she calls 'sentimental postmodernism', and summarises her approach by saying that in her 'work, audience ethnography and theories of subjectivity are dialectically engaged with one another rather than at odds' (Chabot Davis 2003, 3). Although her work stands out for its deliberate harnessing-together of theoretical currents usually considered incompatible, however, it is just one example of a remarkable quantity of high-quality writing on cultural identification published by feminist and queer critics since the early 1990s.[4]

To return to the politico-cultural aspects of the film viewer's bodily identity – his/her race, gender, body shape, age – it is noteworthy that ethnographic audience research often reveals instances of identifications that could not have been predicted on the basis of the most obvious aspects of a viewer's identity. For example, in Chabot Davis's study of audience responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (novel, film and musical versions), 'only half of the gay men that I interviewed identified with the effeminate gay character

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[4] Diana Fuss's work in *Identification Papers* (1995) is perhaps the best-known reference in this field.

Molina, and many in fact identified with Valentin, the macho political prisoner who could be read as either straight or bisexual' (Chabot Davis 2003, 5). Further evidence Chabot Davis finds of white viewers identifying with Jews and Native Americans indicates the prevalence of such 'cross-group identifications', which 'highlight the fact that a singular identity category cannot wholly define people or their ability to relate to others' (ibid.). Subjectivity is not only multilayered but subject to change: it divides between the multiple emotional axes offered by film narratives, and shifts over time (in Chabot Davis's words, it 'can be experienced as a palimpsest, in which previous identities are never completely erased' [Chabot Davis 2003, 6]). However, as should be evident by now, it is not just the multi-layeredness and modifiability of spectatorial subjectivity I want to insist on here, but the spectator's culturally complex relationships with on-screen bodies *as body images* – visual imagos, to use Schilder's psychological term. In order to rethink the fixity and inflexibility that tend to result from understanding our identifications with film characters as *secondary* identifications, while continuing to make film-critical use of the concept of identification, our densely layered bodily bonds with on-screen body images need to be broken down and considered in all their complexity. In my view, this can best be achieved by using a non-Lacanian psychoanalytic and phenomenological concept of bodily, sensate identification, one which allows consideration of the multiple cultural marks of our embodied identities as viewers without interpreting those marks deterministically, or in an essentialist manner.

Conclusion

My aim in this essay, then, in addressing spectatorial engagement with film and film images via a less familiar approach to the concept of identification, has been to move towards a methodology for analysing the cultural identifications made in spectators' responses to films that constitutes a new alternative to (for example) the model proposed by Murray Smith in *Engaging Characters*. The fusing of the disciplinary areas of critical theory and cultural studies over the 1990s and 2000s means that the openness of any theory to cultural politics such as queer and race-related politics has become a key criterion in its appeal and success. The model of spectator-character relations formulated by Smith in *Engaging Characters* is variegated and subtle, but is a model that effectively re-neutralises the vital gains made by identity politics of the 1980s and 1990s, and the fusion of identity politics with cultural theory during the 1990s and 2000s. If, rather than turning our backs on the admittedly burdensome complexity of a film criticism that tries to keep pace with the increasingly antagonistic claims of global identity politics, a reading of identification is pursued that follows Freud, Schilder, Wallon, Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack, rather than Lacan, in which the identifying spectatorial body is un-sutured from its visual image, then a path is opened up to a new mode of queer, black, feminist and other politico-theoretical readings, in which new kinds of transactions between spectators and films become possible. These new transactions may in turn keep alive at least some of the unfulfilled aspirations of political film criticism of the past.

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