

## CINEMATIC GRAND NARRATIVES: SPECTATORSHIP AND IDENTITY POLITICS

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Towards the end of Richard Dyer's "Introduction to Film Studies," in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson's edited text *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (1998), Dyer observes:

The aesthetic dimension of film never exists apart from how it is conceptualized, how it is socially practiced, how it is received; it never exists floating free of historical and cultural particularity. Equally, the cultural study of film must always understand that it is studying film, which has its own specificity, its own pleasures, its own way of doing things that cannot be reduced to ideological formulations or what people (producers, audiences) think and feel about it. The first cultural fact about film is that it is film. (9-10)

This claim serves as an important foundation of "grand narratives" and the variables these narratives address: conceptualization, social practice, reception, history, and culture to name a few. In addition, critical studies of commercial cinema have quite often isolated film texts from both production and reception contexts, and some studies of film have not dealt well with film's material and formal specificities. Using Dyer's claim as a launching point, this article discusses the ways in which overarching "grand narratives" of film theory have dealt with identity politics generally, and how scholars have worked to integrate the work of the spectator into the historical and cultural particularity of the meanings and effects of film texts.

This article will show how recent film theory challenges grand narratives by integrating historical and cultural specificity, using Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993) as an example. Its aim is to summarize current theoretical perspectives in order to open dialogue among film scholars to challenge a particular theoretical approach to cinematic narrative. Using *Fresa y Chocolate* as the subject for analyzing such cinematic approaches, this dialogue will serve to show how the importance of addressing issues of cultural, political, and gender specificity. First addressing Richard Dyer's introduction

and how critical studies of commercial cinema have often isolated film texts, the article explores the meaning of “grand narrative,” addressing some of the foundational texts within the canon of film theory by exploring essays from *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (1990), edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. It then explores feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, and Judith Mayne who discuss psychoanalytical and cognitive forms of spectatorship and identity politics. After these foundational feminist forms of identity are discussed, the article examines Robyn Weigman, Patricia White, and Jacquiline Bobo’s contribution to film theories of ethnicity, spectatorship, and identity politics. This study of ethnicity in film studies will lead to a reading of one of the most important texts on narrative film by David Bordwell and the problems addressed when applying Bordwell’s grand narrative to *Fresa y Chocolate*, which constitutes very different forms of spectatorship and identity politics.

It is important to note that this study is an examination of various important approaches presented from theoretical texts. For example, Richard Dyer introduces film studies in his essay “Introduction to Film Studies” by explaining that all factors are taken into consideration when determining why a movement is worthy of study and what form it takes. However, the importance of this study is that “it matters” (3). Dyer then explores formal-aesthetic and social-ideological forms as an affirmation of “mattering.” He explains that in formal and aesthetic discourse, film matters for its artistic merits and its “intrinsic worth” (4) and social and ideological discourse focuses on “film’s position as symptom or influence in the social processes” (4). Both forms are included in overarching “grand narratives.” The analysis is within the articles themselves. However, in order to discuss this form of narrative, it is important to define narrative and the difference from a more broadly focused grand narrative.

As “narrative” is defined as a story with a unified plot development and identity of the main character, with a linear structure containing a beginning and end, “grand narrative” holds a broader, more complex meaning. It refers to texts that define the world, civilization, culture, and individual. It is a master story that has a sense of authority on the topic it addresses. The “grand narratives” of film theory encompass foundational works within the canon of film theory, addressing general topics as commercial/mainstream/Hollywood cinema, film style, narrative, and spectatorship, and have developed into addressing more specific topics. This article will first focus on distinct topics such as feminist, queer, and Latin American film theory, contemporary forms that have revised traditional forms such as exploring the cultural rather than the historical elements of film analyses.

One of the most important books covering “grand narratives” is *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. This text focuses on film language, reality, medium, narrative, artist, genres, psychology, society, and ideology. However it may be argued that although the essays in *Film Theory and Criticism* address historical particularity, they do not always focus on that of the cultural. For example, in the section covering film language, André Bazin’s *What is Cinema?* covers the transition from silent film to film with spoken dialogue. Bazin argues against Sergei Eisenstein’s discussion of being uncomfortable with synchronized dialogue calling for synchronized speech to be necessary towards the development of film. Eisenstein and Bazin’s articles address the historical specificity of film theory. In contrast, Kaja Silverman’s article *The Subject of Semiotics*, which was added to *Film Theory and Criticism*’s fifth edition, analyses “suture,” a term developed by Lacan meaning “lack” or “absence” in relation to shot/reverse shot formation that focuses on the fictional character. Silverman uses Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) as her example of suture as the cinematic model. While Silverman explains that *Psycho* does not go to great lengths of covering “cuts” in its montage, she focuses on the cultural variables of “voyeuristic dimensions of the cinematic experience” (141). The first few shots that the spectator views at the beginning of the film follow Hitchcock’s signature of focusing in on one’s private space. The film’s opening scene is of the protagonist (Marion) in bed with her married lover in her hotel room.<sup>1</sup> In addition, identity politics are evident with the gender subversion of Marion’s murderer Norman, who is identified as his mother. Silverman observes that “*Psycho* not only ruptures the Oedipal formation which provides the basis of the present symbolic order, but declines to put it back at the end” (141). She continues by making it clear that the coherence of order “proceeds from the institution of sexual difference, and the denial of bisexuality” (141). Voyeurism and spectatorship are also a key element of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

The article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” also a chapter of Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), is a groundbreaking article for feminist film theory. Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to analyze Hollywood cinema. She bases her analysis on Freud’s term scopophilia, a desire to see. Mulvey explains that classical cinema presents a form of voyeuristic and narcissistic experience in its visual and narrative elements. The male and female characters follow active/passive gender norms. As the man is powerful and the woman powerless, the

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<sup>1</sup> We also see overt voyeuristic qualities in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*.

woman becomes the object of desire for the male character. Through this voyeuristic experience of women by men, cinema has offered a visual element suitable for male desire structured and canonized in the tradition of Western society. Furthermore, this objectification of women as the gaze of desire is transferred to the male spectator and arguably, the female spectator as well.

Both Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* and Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) elaborate on Lacanian psychoanalysis and identity politics, focusing on the ego and the mirror image. Silverman explores the notion of libidinal politics through two psychic categories: the ego—also known as *moi*—and the fantasmatic. The first “provides the support for ‘identity’ or the ‘self’” (3) and second “organizes and regulates unconscious desire” (3), both from Lacan's definition of ego. She notes that Lacan “purges that category of many of the meanings which it has accredited since the beginning of psychoanalysis, and ... locates it emphatically at the level of the imaginary” (4). Silverman continues by arguing that Lacan's analysis of the *moi* “is the psychic ‘precipitate’ of external images, ranging from the subject's mirror image and the parental images to the whole plethora of textuality based representations which each of us imbibes daily” (4). The mirror represents the ego's image on the basis of the idealized image on the screen. However, this is not an overt action but a form of Lacan's analysis of mis-recognition, a narcissistic impetus. Thus, the voyeuristic/scopophilic gaze as well as narcissistic identification assess visual pleasure. However, Mayne in *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993) takes a different approach, focusing specifically on theories of spectatorship that relies on 1970s film theory.

*Cinema and Spectatorship* is divided into two sections. The first section, “Theories of Spectatorship,” explores paradigms that studied and critiqued examinations of spectatorship in the 1970s. In this section Mayne attempts to overview this comprehensive and critical field of spectatorship, stating that some approaches are more useful than others: “One of the controversies in film studies today concerns the value of cognitivism, the study of knowledge and perception, in relation to spectatorship” (7). She believes that film studies, apart from psychoanalysis and interpretation, needs to be redefined towards psychology and schemata. She also asserts that “While some of the criticisms made of film theory in the name of cognitivism are accurate, others seem to me to involve a classic example of apples and oranges, in that the “spectator” envisaged by cognitivism is entirely different than the one conceptualized by 1970s film theory” (7-8). Mayne suggests that areas of 1970's film theory and spectatorship need to be revised, not completely re-analyzed.

These are specific to the areas that are inaccurate and/or contradict each other or, as Mayne explains, those that are a classic case of “apples and oranges” (8). However, through these analyses, ethnicity is not observed within feminist analysis. This analysis is among a discourse of feminist theory. Robin Wiegman’s essay “Race, Ethnicity, and Film” addresses these elements of feminist theory, along with questions of representation of ethnicity, cultural specificity, and white male spectatorship in film by analyzing one of a variety of analyses undertaken, specifically race and ethnicity, white, heterosexual male spectatorship and identity politics.

Weigman presents common images, harboring stereotypes, such as the “good white man” in contrast to the Native American savage, Latino greaser, and African American rapist. Misrepresentations of women are also common, objectifying women of color as either de-sexualized or as exotic and loose objects. However, Wiegman argues that feminist scholarship has “altered the way film is studied and, arguably, produced (158).” “Race, Ethnicity, and Film” is divided into four sections: Defining terms (159), The stereotype (161), Textuality, spectatorship, and the ‘real (164) and the present tense (166).

“Defining terms” offers the explanation to questions concerning the meaning of race and ethnicity. Coming from the Greek word, “ethnos,” ethnicity has varied in meaning. Wiegman explains that contemporary definitions have differed from the original meaning, with ‘pagans’ defining race but ethnicity determined by “social constructions linked to the specific discursive spheres within which they are used (159).” Race transforms from a national to a biological identity. From the turn of the twentieth century to the 1960’s, race and ethnicity have taken radical shifts in meaning. This separates race into African, Native, Asian, Latin American and other non-white groups while placing Jewish, Italian, and Irish Americans in the larger context of “whiteness” and defining these groups by ethnicity. She notes, “where ethnicity provides the means for differentiation based on culture, language, and national origins, race renders the reduction of human differences to innate, biological phenomena (161).” This phenomenon is a factor that distinguishes dominant and inferior representations of white and non-white groups. Wiegman explains that the division of race and ethnicity is problematic in terms of “expanding whiteness,” and by film images representing racial groups as “homogenized figure(s) whose cultural and highly racialized physical differences serve as a background for the ideological production of the ‘American’ as of white European descent” (160). Portraying false images of regional non-white groups singularly stereotypes such groups.

Stereotyping of non-white groups has recently been the subject of analyses in the discourse of film theory. As Wiegman observes, "It is by virtue of this condensation that an image becomes a stereotype; its racialization is achieved by an implicit or explicit moral assessment concerning the group's inherent 'essence'" (161). Thus the stereotype of black as rapist becomes justified due to these representations in film, namely D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). This stereotype of an African American male, played by a white actor in blackface, is a portrayal that threatens white viewers with the "horror" of miscegenation while comforting them with the results of such action. Wiegman explains that this role played by white actors as non-white actors "skirted" the Hays Code, which did not allow images of miscegenation. Also, concerning the white actor playing an African American role, Wiegman refers to Eugene Franklin Wong's definition, "role segregation." Wong's definition of role segregation or stratification is that "which non-white actors are, by virtue of their race, ineligible for certain kinds of roles, while white actors are able to move 'horizontally' into even those roles defined as black, Asian, Native American or Chicano" (163).

Wiegman is most effective in discussing the historical praxis of the stereotype when she begins discussing identity through two important Post-Colonial theorists, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. These theorists show that stereotype's inaccuracy does not make the stereotype any less effective. Bhabha notes that "the stereotype is on a colonized subject precisely through its distortion" (165). What Wiegman does not discuss is the idea that identity politics argues that images are defined by the white center, making the spectator view the "non-white" image in relation to dominant, white, heterosexual, male values.

Even though Wiegman presents an extremely important analysis of race and ethnicity, she poses a problem when she compares the study of race and ethnicity to Patricia White's feminist discourse in "Feminism and Film" (117-134). Although she asserts that "it is difficult to speak of the study of race and ethnicity as constituting a fully formed field within film studies" (158) she does not explain the idea of race and ethnicity being an inherent part of feminism and sexual orientation, especially when considering the white, heterosexual male spectator. While she is often bogged down by constructions of race and ethnicity through historical films and post-structural theory, she fails to discuss the films directed by African American directors like Spike Lee and the response towards the problem of the misrepresentations of African American women by African American women. There is a feminist discourse that argues that race and ethnicity and

feminist films are intrinsically tied to race and ethnicity. For example, the screenplay from the African American novel and novelist Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) became a film adaptation by director Steven Spielberg. Although the film continues to address identity politics, along with socio-political, historical, and cultural particularity that Alice Walker depicted, the spectatorship of the film shifted from the African American woman and academic arena to the white, heterosexual male (and female) spectator. The film also ignored the socio-political and historical, avoiding cultural particularity to be palatable to a mainstream audience. However, Jacquile Bobo's "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers" in E. Deidre Pribram's anthology, *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (1988), examines the various reactions the film provoked within African American women, suggesting that many African American women as spectators "both identify with and defend Spielberg's version of the Alice Walker novel" (8). The notion of identity politics in the film becomes problematized by the textual analysis of the film "which reveals racist stereotyping and negative portrayals of Black people" (8).

Within the discussions of race and identity Wiegman does not mention the many films that portray gay and lesbian characters whose race and identity are inherent within their sexual orientation. As Wiegman discusses the problems of presenting interracial sexual interaction, she fails to discuss how not only feminist, but also contemporary and independent queer films pose these problems as inversions of the blurred stereotypes. These blurred stereotypes are evident in films like Channel 4's production of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), where a white English male Daniel Day Lewis takes on a Pakistani lover, thus presenting cultural ramifications from both cultures. An international academic gay community embraced the socio-political, historical and cultural elements of the film, thus facilitating positive queer spectatorship and identity politics.

Wiegman, in the analysis of race and identity, offers a strong foundation to make race and identity, spectatorship, and identity politics an integral part contributing to the fully formed field within film theory. However, as discussed by Spielberg's film adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1985), which presents problems raised in spectatorship and identity politics, similar concerns can be raised by David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). Bordwell's text becomes even more problematic in comparison to spectatorship and identity politics in Latin American cinema presented in Latin American Queer films.

Bordwell presents an analysis of cognitive theory in more

traditional films referring to a term he coined as *fabula*, the “imaginary construct” progressively and retroactively viewed by the spectator. Pragmatically, the spectator is contributing to an active engagement and construction of a narrative through applying schemata, testing hypotheses, and making inferences while *syuzhet* refers to what is “phenomenally present,” the “actual arrangement and presentation of fabula in the film,” the “delivery of events, movements/actions, referred to as the plot” (50). So the fabula, although not present in the film, is built out of the syuzhet, that which is “present.” Within the study of cognitive theory, such analyses deny the cultural, political, and gender specificity in queer films that discuss how traditional grand narratives are in contrast to identity politics. Relating such denial to Latin American queer cinema such as *Fresa y Chocolate*, the fabula would represent the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the effects that have taken place by American cultural imperialism and the syuzhet would represent the lives of the protagonists (Diego and David) within the post-1959 regime.

Originally supported by the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC), *Fresa y Chocolate* follows similar themes of Alea’s concern with social, political, and historical dimensions of the revolutionary process in Cuba. Set in 1979, *Fresa y Chocolate*, an adaptation of Senal Paz’s short story *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (1991), takes place one year before the Marial Exodus. From 1960 through 1979 Cuban homosexuals experienced immense discrimination and censorship. In regard to working conditions for Cuban homosexuals prior to 1979, Alea explains that homosexuals were barred from certain types of employment. For example, Diego was barred from teaching since he would be in contact with young students who might be influenced by his sexual orientation. The film focuses on the two men: David, the naïve member of the Communist Youth League who secretly aspires to be a writer, and Diego, a gay intellectual who is not able to fulfill his dream of being a teacher because of his sexual orientation. Diego and David’s first encounter was at the Coppelia ice cream parlor, an area notorious for gay cruising. Diego pursues David by making a bet with his friends to succeed in luring David to his apartment. Diego tells David that he has pictures of him walking out of Ibsen’s *A Doll House*, which succeeds in convincing David to go to his apartment, thus marking the beginning of their shaky friendship.

Not unusually stylistic in form, but rather following the conventions of mainstream realist cinema, Gutiérrez Alea’s film uses representations of music, political ideology concerning the Revolution, and the black market as major themes of *Cubanidad* that direct



the friendship between Diego and David. As Diego is attempting to show an exhibition of his friend's religious sculptures, David tells his militant roommate about the *maricon's* suspicious anti-revolutionary conduct. David is convinced to investigate Diego in order to frame him for his attempts to exhibit the sculptures. The tension between Diego's sexual orientation and David's homophobic indoctrination adopted by the Communist Youth League is presented throughout their contact. However, David begins to realize that Diego is a refined and cultivated man who is mature and conducts himself differently from David's perception of a gay man. There is also tension due to Diego's use of materials purchased on the black market.

David turns down Diego's imported whisky, tea, and china at first. However, he eventually accepts them. He is also curious about Diego's imported music and realizes Diego also reads Cuban literature (represented by his homage to Jose Lezama Lima), listens to Cuban music—namely Ignacio Cervantes—and prays, albeit humorously, to a Cuban altar. Their friendship strengthens when Diego offers to critique David's literature, and David later realizes that Diego and he have the same dreams and desires for Cuba. However, with Diego's activism against Cuban officials concerning the exhibit, he is stripped of all rights to fulfill his intellectual capacity and is therefore forced to leave Cuba.

Gutiérrez Alea uses Cervantes's music to foreshadow Diego's future. *Lost Illusions* refers to Diego's loss of illusions concerning his rights within the revolution. Diego lost his illusions of being able to convince the government to allow the exhibit to take place and his future as a professor and writer while in Cuba. He had participated in the literacy campaign and had been abundantly enthusiastic about the Revolution. Then the Revolution marginalized him. *Goodbye to Cuba* refers to Diego's eventual exile.

With reference to an analysis of *Fresa y Chocolate* by Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction of Film*, even though the syuzhet/plot takes place post-Revolution, the Revolution and its effects have an impact on Cuban and Cubans and are the fabula of the film, instituting the encouragement of Alea's characters within the Cuban Revolution and the substance and awareness of the film. The Revolution would be universal for spectators in their construction of narrations of identity politics in their fabula.

The question of how narratives are able to be seen in films lies within Bordwell's assertions that the spectator constructs the story by way of perception-based inferential judgements according to *schemata* formed from the spectator's empirical and intellectual expe-

riences. Bordwell presents various forms of parametric, palimpsest, historical-materialist and classical narrations in his text. The theoretical gaps apparent in Bordwell's analysis is that his cognitive theory, although a useful tool for analytical examinations in films, poses two problematic assumptions between the spectator of the film and the lack of the spectator's identity. Bordwell also does not identify categories of gender, class, or race, or the largely Marxist audience for whom Gutiérrez Alea made films, iterating the importance of such comparative distinctions. The exploration and study of important "grand narratives" and the variables these narratives address is an ongoing process open to further investigation and analysis. Although grand narratives have often succeeded in isolating film texts from production and reception contexts, later theoretical works attempt and often succeed in resolving such isolation. These theoretical works exemplify spectatorship and identity politics in Latin American cinema comprised of constructs that are both complex and unique.

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