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Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema: Fathers, Sons and Other Ghosts

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conclusion

The New Hollywood Cinema
and the Re-Construction
of the Symbolic Universe

Several years ago, when I began considering the relation between narrative and cinematic representation in the new Hollywood cinema, particularly with regard to its most popular films, the status of these films as narratives was open for discussion. A number of critics argued that new Hollywood characters were one-dimensional and that the films themselves did not follow the classical three-act structure of exposition, complication, and resolution. Subsequently, the question of whether or not they qualified as narratives made way for more urgent issues regarding the economic, technological and industrial forces at work in the new Hollywood. It was clear that if we wanted to grasp why the old parameters could not be applied to the films in question, we had better take into account the new conditions under which the films were being produced, marketed, distributed and viewed. Blockbuster films soon became the driving force of Hollywood cinema, and an inquiry into the aspects and elements of narrative seemed superfluous. In addition, the increasing dominance of these films in the global market, as well as their box-office records were sure signs that in spite of their questionable status as narratives they were able to attract millions of viewers. Their capacity to reach out to audiences world-wide proved that they were in tune with global economic forces and with the present state of technology and communication.

While sufficient evidence was provided confirming that blockbuster films were not only economic but also cultural phenomena, the question of their status as narratives remained unresolved. Moreover, the fact that the films are predominantly action-driven and that the characters appear "flat" seemed to justify the impression that narratology was the last theory one needed to analyze the functioning and significance of these texts. Their status as narratives (albeit problematic) simply appeared to be too obvious. I did not accept this impression at face value, however. Instead, the thrust of my project has been to prove precisely the opposite: that one of the main reasons these films have become economic and cultural phenomena is because they have devised new complex, sophisticated and idiosyncratic strategies of storytelling. I have taken them seriously as narratives. This required a theory of narrative that did not preclude paying attention to the fact that blockbuster films are at the same time a mode of cultural expression and that their status as narratives is inextricably tied to this mode of expression.

Additionally, such a theory would have to concern itself with narrativity rather than with narrative, and elaborate narrativity as a specific mode of cultural expression, or of fixation for that matter, that determines what is told, how it is told, and who plays a role in the process of telling.

My choice of Mieke Bal's theory of narrative, as I indicated at the outset of this book, was both a theoretical and a practical choice. Bal's theory urges systematic analysis but it also stimulates critical awareness and theoretical reflection. Focusing on narrativity along these lines presupposes an involvement with the text that views narratological analysis as more than a one-way process. This is essential since blockbuster films do not immediately fit into a preexisting slot that can be labeled "narrative," making any attempt to simply apply a theory of narrative to new Hollywood films less than promising. Instead, engaging with these filmic texts is an interdisciplinary endeavor, in the sense that it puts both film and narratology at risk. At stake is the potential of narratology to engage with these cultural artifacts, as well as the potential of cinema to expand the conceptual frame of what narrative is and how it can be defined.

My general thesis about the blockbuster films was that they needed to be observed as cases of triple mobility, as a simultaneous articulation of and interaction between frames, shots and subjectivity. The focus on subjectivity called for a subject-oriented theory of narrative that could be brought to bear on disjunctions and conjunctions of subject positions, on conflicting or joint visions, and on contradictory modes of telling - all processes that are intrinsic to a large number of new Hollywood narratives. It was in relation to examining the structuring of subjectivity in these films that Bal's theory proved indispensable. To grasp how subjectivity is structured and restructured, composed or deconstructed in new Hollywood blockbusters was the first step in the analysis because this initial phase provided the basis for understanding where, and how, both meaning and ideology come into the text.

In new Hollywood blockbusters, a persistent preoccupation with the decomposition of subjectivity accompanies a general tendency to mend a "troubled subjectivity." In my analyses I have argued that the emerging structure in these narratives corresponds to that of Derridean *différance*, and that it is the differing and deferring of the subject that provides the basis for theorizing the

narrative modality predicated on this deconstructive logic. Setting right the fictional world is dependent on restructuring subjectivity. The setting in order of both a troubled subjectivity and the narrative world as a whole is closely tied to reshaping the fabula, and this process especially affects the function of the character-image. The reconstruction of subjectivity is manifested in the way the character-image is re/structured, implying that the character-image is composed through decomposition, through doubling, or through fusion with another character-image. As a result, the process of storytelling is geared toward producing a new fabula or a new (generally male) subject.

The third mobility of narrative, that is, the mobility of subjectivity, implicates the political, cultural and ideological determinations which promote a particular vision of the world. This vision determines the limits of what is conceivable, acceptable or desirable. Herein lies another advantage of the theory of narrative I have endorsed in my project. I am referring to Bal's concept of focalization and its ability to account for the vision produced both at the level of the story and at the level of the fabula. The emphasis on structuring vision across various levels presupposes a profound relation between focalization on the level of the fictional world and focalization which exceeds the fictional world. Structures of focalization marked on the level of the story are inextricable from the vision of the fabula, and this vision in turn is intricately intertwined with cultural fixations and determinations. It is in this sense that I elaborated the ways in which, in this body of films, story and the fabula interact. There are cases where the story interferes with the fabula, while in other instances the fabula intervenes into the story. In both cases the third mobility is at work, controlled by invisible agencies that exceed the fictional world.

In the case of new Hollywood blockbusters, vision that exceeds the fictional world can in the first instance be attributed to the filmmaker. As I mentioned above, however, his (and in some cases, her) role as a social agent is inevitably determined by the interplay of economic, institutional, or technological forces. More important for the aims of my project is another feature common to most films: the investment in re-instituting the dominant concerns of Western culture, exemplified particularly well in the fixation on father-son relations. The recurring concern with revising fabulas in

which the male subject must be reproduced, or where the father needs to be repaired, conveys new Hollywood's preoccupation with reasserting the patriarchal order, with revitalizing paternal power and with sustaining the dominance of the masculine position.

Paradoxically then, while the films in question are deeply embedded in the historical and social systems enacted by the capitalist world economy and the consolidation of conglomerates, they simultaneously point to a crisis of subjectivity precisely among those who play, and have played, a central role in these systems. Let me emphasize that the point of putting forward this observation is not to launch a master-narrative about new Hollywood cinema; rather, my goal is to draw attention to the ways universal worldviews become reinstated through the process of storytelling.

For the purpose of examining the structures of focalization on the level of the micro-units produced through the storytelling process, I considered the workings of specifically filmic signifiers. Here, I noted a difference between character-bound vision focalized internally, and character-bound vision focalized externally. This implies that vision which can be attributed to a character is bound to a higher or a lower degree of mediation. To put it in practical terms, I made a distinction between the instances in which character-bound vision is produced by a character who is him- or herself present in the shot, and those instances where character-bound vision is mediated by an external focalizer. I must add that even when there is no character to whom vision can be immediately attributed, this can be done retrospectively once the filmic signifiers are considered. There is, however, a temporary uncertainty when external focalization conflicts with internal focalization.

Each case of focalization that is marked on the level of the fictional world (character-bound vision focalized internally, character-bound vision focalized externally, or the implied clash between internal and external focalization) is enveloped into, and thus closely related to, vision which exceeds this level. As a result, a character in the story can emerge as the personification of a higher, external narrative authority. In such cases we can conclude that the higher authority which exceeds the fictional world is making itself present through that character. By the same token, overtly subjective vision produced by a focalizer who cannot be immediately identified, suggests that this vision is the product of a focalizer who is both inside

and outside the fictional world. This would be another occasion where a higher authority, in the guise of an outside force, is intervening into the story.

Making these distinctions between levels of focalization enables us in the first instance to gain insight into the degree to which a certain character is capable of asserting him- or herself as a subject. More importantly, this differentiation can function as the principle for structuring the relations between character-images. The structuring of the levels of focalization is thus closely related to the structuring of subjectivity and, accordingly, to the structuring of the narrative. Conversely then, the structuring of the narrative effectuates the dynamic between character-images - a character-image comes forth as decomposed, doubled, or collapsed into another character-image. This analysis yields insight into what is told, and specifically into how the framing of vision on the level of the story implicates the vision on the level of the fabula. By examining these relations I ultimately was able to uncover the ways in which the highest narratorial authority, the implied social agent, positioned himself in relation to the narrated content.

Through these concepts, I have theorized the emerging structures in the text as constituting a semiotic product of narration that "tells us something" - that the impossible is possible, that a particular subject is in crisis, that the father is stuck in time and therefore the son has to act from a double or even a triple position, or that it takes two men to produce one "perfect" male identity. Correspondingly, the contentions put forward above regarding the preoccupation of new Hollywood films with restoring order in a universe that no longer functions are based on a systematic, close textual analysis. But the purpose of engaging with a whole series of images reveals more than just "what is told." Equally important is the question of how it is told. This remarkable side of the process of telling is the way fabulas are ultimately remade, that is, the manner in which the subjectivities are eventually recuperated. The constitution of the father, the son and, generally, the male subject is attained precisely through a process of deconstruction that involves both the story and the fabula.

If we assume that deconstruction presupposes a critique of the sign as a unified investment, of logocentrism, of the metaphysics of presence, of positions grounded in positivist and essentializing

lines of thought, then we need to ask what it is that Hollywood films are telling us through their persistent deployment of methodologies associated with contemporary epistemology, feminism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. As I demonstrated in my analyses of the films, there is a constant play with cultural discourses, with strategies and techniques devised precisely for the purpose of critiquing those positions that embody privilege and power. By means of *différance*, the characters and the fictional worlds they inhabit are engaged in a process of renegotiation. In new Hollywood films, then, the process of de/reconstruction can be understood as a strategy of telling. This process of telling by means of which subjectivities and fabulas are remade I have called fabulation.

The subjects who need to be reconstructed through the process of deconstruction, through the clash of visions, through doubling, decomposing or collapsing character-images are not the subjects who are marginalized in terms of sex, sexual preference, and/or race, nor are they working through the oppressions of colonialism and imperialism. They are white, heterosexual, male subjects. They are the fathers. This type of fabulation, based on a preoccupation with repairing the father and the fictional world in which he occupies a central role, I have called "fathering." This process involves the remaking and reinventing of both the father and the fabula. While "fathering" may be interpreted as a profoundly regressive tendency, fabulation itself can be examined in terms of its potentially productive effect.

The productiveness of fabulation is particularly evident in those films where the disjointed father, the world, and hence the fabula, are connected with a preposterous history. I argued that it is through fabulation that people's origins and concerns can be recovered. Here, the structure of *différance* has an additional function. It is employed for the purpose of creating a hero who can rescue a threatened origin and thereby put a future history into place. *Différance* lends such a character the capacity to act from a double position - he is both the subject and the object of the rescue. He can restore a threatened origin because he is conceived as an oxymoron, implying that his subjectivity is confirmed through his ability to assume a contradictory position. The relations between the pertinent elements of the fabula reveal that this contradiction is based on a reversal of the chronological sequence. The effect precedes the

cause, and the process of telling governed by this inversion concurs with, and conditions, the character's capability for acting from a contradictory position.

As a result the past enters into a dynamic relation with the future, and the search for the remnants of the past shifts into the "now" of the narrative discourse. The reinvention of the father becomes a quest for one's genealogy. It is through the movement of *différance* that the father trades places with the son, that origin comes to stand for the trace, and that the fabula ultimately makes way for history. The restructuring of a preposterous family history where the procreation of the father is dependent on the son can also be seen as a form of facing history. I have described this process as a mode of storytelling where the father, the world and time acquire a new "face." In contrast to the Oedipal trajectory where the son takes the place of the father, the specificity of new Hollywood films is that here the son recreates the father and even literally supplies him with a face. The one who needs to be initiated into the father-universe is thus the father, not the son.

The process of "facing the father" confirms the recurring urgency of reinstating the father. This implies that the son cannot take the father's place, because the father is not available as a signifier. Putting the father into place is not simply a technicality, however. For the universe to be re-balanced the father has to regain his authority, subsequent to being provided with a face. It is especially through a temporal reversal governed by *différance* that subjectivity, identity and history can acquire new meaning as well as a "face."

The fact that "fathering" evolves on two levels - implying that the story works toward a new fabula as well as a new subjectivity - thematizes the conditions of restructuring the symbolic governed by the Law of the Father. Hence, through *différance*, the formerly invisible ordering principles are brought into the realm of the visible. This overlap between the fabula and the story calls for a reexamination of the "ideological effects" of the cinematographic apparatus. The new Hollywood's investment in restructuring ideological effects, however, definitively confirms that the cinematographic apparatus is not ideological in itself; instead, narrative plays a crucial role here. Through the process of fabulation a certain worldview is reproduced and remade.

My argument here was that narrative need not only be

deployed as a means of sustaining the ideology of the cinematographic apparatus (as defined by Baudry). Rather, narrative can also function as a means for reworking the ideological apparatus (as defined by Althusser). In fact, the vision of a particular identity or subjectivity is inextricably linked to the vision that informs the fabula. This is especially evident in those films where female characters are involved. I argued that fabricating the father, or the male subject in general, has negative effects on the female subject and foregrounded those cases where female characters emerge in an in-between space, as a foreclosed element in the process of restructuring male subjectivity. Women come forth as a negative emblem of *différance*.

One of the crucial concerns of my project was to explore the discursive potential of this space of extraterritoriality, and here the work of Judith Butler was most inspiring. At stake is the possibility Butler theorizes of reconceptualizing the law of signification and introducing alternative normative injunctions. As far as the new Hollywood cinema is concerned, this implies that the symbolic universe need not depend on the Name of the Father. In narratological terms, this shift involves conjuring up new "names," or rather, new fabulas. Breaking away from the temporary unity of the signifier is the condition for effectuating a trajectory whereby the same can return as different. The way to insert the marginal or the excluded into the realm of the universal requires that the excluded be theorized as a signifier. New universes can come into being to the extent that alternative signifiers are enabled to compete with the paternal signifier.

One possibility I put forward was the universe governed by the Law of the Alien. This law engages our capacity to envision a different kind of - male as well as female - existence, and it is an occasion for alternative subjectivities to come into being. My point here was that telling can become a way of inventing and reinventing alternative subjectivities and that this is possible insofar as the temporary stability of an alternative signifier is imaged. The move in question requires a readiness to extend the limits of what is thinkable, acceptable or possible. Even the operation of "fathering" can in itself acquire a productive function once "fathering" comes to signify the process of "facing" history. "Facing" is an important means of problematizing the in-between space, especially in a case where

extraterritoriality becomes associated with a concrete identity.

In the case of *Schindler's List*, for example, the story works in such a way as to turn both the fabula and history around. In this particular case, fabricating implies telling history against the grain, so to speak, and turning death into life. Thanks to the multiplication of discursive realities and real virtualities, the space where subjectivities, histories, and identities are renegotiated is in a process of continuous expansion. I am suggesting, then, that the effects of fabrication are ultimately contingent on the apparatus as ideology (Althusser), on the apparatus as the psyche (Freud), and on the cinematographic apparatus itself (Baudry). Conversely, the three apparatuses are contingent on fabrication.

While making *Schindler's List*, Spielberg put into circulation in the public sphere a discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) indicating that the film was personal to him. This was a means of obtaining the moral right to make a film that does not deal with a series of first-person accounts (as defined by Benveniste) with persons who do not seek identification, such as the characters in *Schindler's List* do. Even though the universalism inherent in fabrication risks compromising the horrors of history epistemologically, the other two aspects of discourse - its circulation in the public sphere and its influence on the contents of the mnemonic archive - also involve the potential productivity of fabrication. When it comes to the problem of remembering (and memorializing) the Holocaust, the process of "facing" can play an important function as a vehicle for public memory.

If a blockbuster film can indeed serve as a vehicle for public memory, this is due to its capacity to simultaneously exist in a broad range of discursive spaces. While *Shoah*, though screened in many countries, had to settle for marginal television channels or art cinema venues, *Schindler's List* was one of the major international Hollywood releases of the 1993-1994 season. This difference in accessing a public means that the two works cannot simply be compared as texts. Instead, they compete with each other in one of the discursive realities that Spielberg's film has opened up. A film such as *Schindler's List* clearly demonstrates that the strategies of narrative directed at the restructuring of the symbolic universe are closely connected to the current state of the technology of communication. They are also a function of cultural memory.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida examines the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction (Derrida, 1996). Taking into account the multiplicity of regions in the psychic apparatus, his model also integrates the necessity, inside the psyche itself, of a certain outside, of certain borders between insides and outsides. This outside can also be understood in Manuel Castells' terms as a culture of "real virtuality" (Castells, 1996). The culture of "real virtuality" presupposes the collapse of a symbolic environment onto our everyday reality. While the experience of reality has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols, the specificity of the system in question is that, here, reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting. In other words, a mechanism which operated implicitly, as the hidden foundation of our lives, now, with the new technology, becomes explicit. The emergence of the previously concealed "symbolic order" has crucial consequences for "reality" itself. As a result, I would add, social discourse becomes reflective in a triple sense: it can be traced on the level of films, of the public sphere, and of our memories as they are affected by both.

Fabulation affects the mnemonic archive, but the archivization process is affected by the combination of media - filmic images, electronic images, printing, writing, all this becomes a prosthesis to our mnemonic reserve, a hypomnemonic technique as Derrida calls it. According to Derrida, the archive is not only the place for storing and for conserving the archivable content of the past: "the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called new media" (Derrida, 1996: 17). As a result, the mnemonic scars can be both recircumscribed and recircumcised, whereby the limits of what lends itself as a storage place or "home" become extended and redefined. Thus, for example, it comes to signify the home in which ET was conceived, implying Elliot's mind, as well as the home out there in the vast universe to which ET needs to return.

The reason I focus on the theme of symbolic communication and the way it relates to narrative is in order to speculate on the possibility of inserting new concerns into the symbolic order. The symbolic network, based on technologies of representation and

communication, lends itself to a multiplicity of universes that could potentially compete with the father-universe. Blockbusters enable us to observe the processes of disintegration, and renegotiation, of the three apparatuses - the apparatus of ideology, of the psyche, and of the cinematographic process. By the same token, these films also confirm their capacity to play a role in the revisions of future memory and history. According to Derrida, the question of memory is not a question of the past: "It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow (36). There is no political power without control of the archive, Derrida adds, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the public's participation in and its access to the archive, to its constitution and to its interpretation. Due to their capacity to expand the techniques for storing and producing memories, popular films have an important role to play in the remaking of future histories.

Certainly, one way to play this role is to make use of the media which propel symbolic communication. Another way, I would suggest, is through the strategies of narrative. The new Hollywood's persistent investment in the reconstruction of the symbolic universe of the father confirms the importance and effectiveness of symbolization. Even more importantly, it alludes to the urgency of inventing new myths, new histories, new fabulas. Productive looking is crucial, as Silverman argues, in achieving these aims. But here I would add, narrative representation can be a very a powerful strategy for introducing alternative and productive visions. Moreover, because the recourse to symbols that is so pronounced in new Hollywood cinema is a strategy for telling, symbolic representation inevitably affects interpretation.

These analyses of new Hollywood films demonstrate the power of myths and symbols to shape and promote a vision of the world. The extent to which the symbolic universe governed by the Law of the Father has affected my own life has provided me with ample evidence that these myths are working. Herein lies my motivation and determination to question this process of symbolization. Therefore, part of my own responsibility as a cultural analyst is to believe that the impossible is possible, that the ideas which may seem absurd today will come to symbolize visions of universes to come.