



Film Spectatorship

by Brett Farmer

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Film spectatorship is an integral part of queer culture, affording a process of self-invention and making possible the coded articulation of queer desires and identities.

The British historian A.J.P. Taylor dubbed film spectatorship, "the essential social habit of the age," and there can certainly be little doubt that, for much of the past century, cinema and its various audiovisual offspring have been dominant entertainment forms for audiences around the globe. Glbtq people have been a significant, if not always readily identifiable, segment of those audiences and have made spectatorship an integral part of queer culture.

The image of the movie-obsessed queer has become a veritable staple of homosexual representation, evident in any number of popular cultural texts from *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1984) to *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998). While it is an image often skewed to the point of grotesque stereotype, it highlights the significance that spectatorship has come to assume for many glbtq people.

Historical Overview

With its unique combination of voyeuristic fantasies on the screen and bodies thrown into close proximity in a darkened auditorium, film spectatorship is a profoundly erotic experience, which is no doubt one of the reasons it has long drawn the anxious gaze of censors and other moral guardians. Historically, glbtq people have been quick to respond to the erotic capacities of spectatorship, deploying it for distinctively queer ends. As early as the 1910s, for example, gay men in the large urban metropolises of Europe and North America routinely used storefront theaters, nickelodeons, and other such places of film viewing for making sexual contacts and socializing with what one disapproving magistrate of the time termed "congenial spirits."

Movies themselves also emerged quite early as important sites of queer engagement, furnishing opportunities for identity building and subcultural exchange. Unlike many other social groups whose sense of identity is openly recognized from birth and cultivated through public systems of kinship, education, and government, queers have largely grown up isolated from each other and have had to invent their own modes of cultural identification. For much of the twentieth century and beyond, the fantasy world of cinema has been a privileged and particularly fertile forum for this process of queer self-invention.

Not only have movies offered glbtq people an avenue of escape and a chance to imagine utopian possibilities "over the rainbow," they also furnished them with a proto-common culture through which to communicate and bond. According to Andrea Weiss, American lesbians of the 1930s would routinely use popular films and stars of the time as a "shared language" with which to "define and empower themselves."

Gay men developed similarly intense investments in and uses of film. Indeed, throughout the mid-century, gay male subcultures developed a finely nuanced taste culture based on Hollywood film. Certain genres such as the musical and the melodrama, or stars such as Judy Garland, Bette Davis, and Joan Crawford

emerged as firm favorites of gay men and were consequently charged with particular queer affect.

In an era when gay men and lesbians were rendered all but invisible, film spectatorship became a symbolic sphere for the coded articulation of queer desires and identities.

In line with broader sociohistorical changes, cinema arguably lost its position of unrivalled primacy in queer subcultures during the latter part of the twentieth century, ceding to newer media forms such as television and popular music, and a host of self-authored subcultural practices from the popular gay press to dance parties. However, film spectatorship continues to function as a significant component of contemporary queer cultural life.

The older traditions of gay and lesbian cinematic taste are kept alive through screenings of "gay cult classics" at repertory theaters or through gay video stores, while new modes of queer spectatorship have developed around recent film forms like documentary, new queer cinema, and pornography, or exhibition forums such as film festivals. In addition, new digital media such as computers and the internet have enabled the emergence of various modes of spectatorship from netsurfing to cyberporn, which, though seemingly far removed from classic models of cinematic viewing, still serve vital functions of self-definition and empowerment for many queer spectators.

The Queer Gaze

While it may have been a cultural lifeline for many glbtq people over the years, cinema has not exactly been a trove of positive queer imagery. For much of its history, mainstream film categorically refused the explicit representation of queer lives and loves and, even today, queer presences on screen remain largely exceptional, relegated to the margins of popular cinema and frequently subjected to homophobic stereotyping. As a result, queer viewers have had to develop various modes of oppositional spectatorship through which to combat the heterosexist dynamics of mainstream film and open it up to queer investment and use.

This process of appropriating or "queering" film assumes various forms and uses multiple tactics. At a general level, glbtq spectators are acutely adept at appropriating film to their own frames of reference and imbuing it with specifically queer affect. A pertinent example here would be a film such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

With its status as a mainstay of wholesome "family" cinema, *The Wizard of Oz* seems an unlikely candidate for queer popularization, but generations of glbtq spectators have responded to this film in ways that have rendered it patently queer. Out of the seemingly banal tale of a young girl's trip through a fantasyland, queer spectators have interpreted a mytho-epic journey from heteronormative mundanity into queer difference and have reconstructed the film as an empowering ur-text of queer survivalism and community.

Some critics suggest that glbtq spectators learn almost as habit to read film symptomatically, to scour texts for casual signs of queerness--a "colorful" supporting character; an ambiguous line of dialogue; a furtive glance between same-sex characters--that may seem insignificant to the film's immediate narrative function but that enable the production of coded queer subplots.

Others claim that queer spectators prize film not so much for its stories, which are invariably heteronormative, but for its moments of spectacular transcendence and bewitching glamour--Dietrich in top hat and tails stooping to kiss a woman in the audience; Norma Desmond's staircase descent into madness; Mrs. Danvers' frenzied torching of Mandelay--and that they value these moments as symbolic gestures of social and sexual defiance.

Other critics again highlight extra-textual elements such as star gossip and their use by queer spectators to subvert the heterosexual coding of a given star and his/her roles, thereby rendering the star available for

specifically queer identification. In this context, one could consider the films of a star such as Rock Hudson that are replete with all manner of queer double-meanings when read in light of knowledge of his homosexuality. Today that knowledge circulates more or less freely, but during the height of Hudson's stardom in the 1950s, it was available to queer spectators through discourses of subcultural gossip.

The common element across these diverse strategies of queer spectatorship is the desire to remake mainstream film in a way that better accommodates and supports queer interests and desires. Gbtq people have always shown great resourcefulness in making their own cultural meanings and spaces, often out of the very material of dominant culture that would seek to exclude them. Queer spectatorship is a potent example of this resistant creativity at work.

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