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**Chatroulette and Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier" and Representation
and Form in Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon**

PART 1

Where am I? (252)

Christian Metz spends a significant portion of his seminal essay placing the spectator within the cinematic apparatus. Asserting a revised version of the laconic mirror stage as a projected secondary mirror in cinema and historicizing the evolution of the spatial relationship between projector, projected, and spectator, Metz chronicles the cinematic relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. Metz identifies the spectator's role as the "all-perceiving" and this entitles the spectator to imbue the film with meaning proclaiming, "It is I who make the film" (252). Yet, in Chatroulette it is *we* who make the conversation. This is the fundamental and substantial difference that simultaneously pushes and pulls Chatroulette to Metz's ideas as I will demonstrate through the following theoretical and textual analysis.

Cinema exists completely in an imaginary space and engages our perception and sensuality. Metz tweaks the laconic mirror stage for cinema arguing that the spectator identifies with the camera via the projector. Through this identification, the spectator misrecognizes him/herself and is misrecognizing the framed world projected on the screen. Similarly, chatroulette exists in an imaginary space within a digital matrix. Two windows frame each player as the spectator/user becomes both perceived and perceiver simultaneously. The webcam projects the user's image as two windows provide multiple possibilities for identification. This problematizes Metz's argument that the spectator

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identifies with an imaginary signifier because both parties represented in the windows are quantifiably present unlike the missing actors projected in the cinema.

Metz argues perspective is ideologically constructed providing a history of the evolution of perception. Beginning with Plato's cave and solidifying modern cinematic perception through *quattrocenta* painting during the renaissance, Metz identifies the spectator's eye as the focal point of the world. The camera lens, therefore, is meant to mimic the perspective of the spectator. Chatroulette adheres to this theory, but the added representation of the user complicates this idea as the spectator also has a camera pointed at him/herself. Thus, the digital matrix becomes the focal point of the world as the spectator becomes the subject and object simultaneously creating both a mirror and window effect in the same instant. The close proximity between the chatroulette windows allows the user the possibility for dual identification.

Voyeurism and Exhibitionism

Metz argues that cinema functions through the perceptual passion. The perceptual passion consists of scopophilia and voyeurism. These drives, according to Metz via psychoanalysis, are more dependent on lack. These drives always pursue imaginary ("lost") objects. Chatroulette illustrates this through the "Next" feature which allows users to seek through a sea of strangers in search of someone new. The act of nexting personifies the desire's simultaneous insatiability and infinite search to fulfill itself. Desire sustains itself because desire is never fully satisfied. However, drives can be "satisfied up to a point outside their objects" (260) sublimating the desire through a form of masturbation. Chatroulette confuses the critical distance Metz argues is necessary for the sublimation of desire because the spectator is simultaneously subject to and object of

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desire. For example, a chatroulette user who masturbates while others watch him/her derives pleasure from the act of watching others perceive him/her and through the actual masturbation act which brings temporary relief from his/her desire through orgasm.

While the relationship between voyeur and object is considered sadistic because it functions through the separation of the object and the source of the drive, chatroulette is arguably masochistic because it collapses this distance creating a bridge from source of desire to object. Using the previously mentioned example, the user masturbating is confronted with his/her image in real time with his/her actual self as well as the image of the other user perceiving the act. The drive to look also becomes a drive to be looked at collapsing the voyeur/exhibitionist dichotomy.

Metz's argues that voyeurism requires a necessary empty space between the object and his/her own body. He warns, "to fill in this distance would threaten to overwhelm the subject, to lead him to consume the object, to bring him to orgasm and the pleasure of his own body, hence to the exercise of other drives, mobilizing the senses of contact and putting an end of the scopic arrangement" (261). The saturation of pornography and pornographic images on chatroulette is testament to Metz's warning. The website is prone to acts of self-pleasuring because exhibitionism and voyeurism are conflated which overwhelms the subject who is encouraged to consume him/herself through masturbation.

Metz continues illustrating the scopic regime through comparing cinema to theater arguing that the absence of the actors in cinema facilitates an Oedipal type simulation of the primal scene through unauthorized scopophilia. The spectator sees despite the actors'/objects' ignorance of being watched. The cinematic object/actor and spectator miss each other. Chatroulette users recognize pornography on the site as sexual

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acts, unlike the child in the primal scene, however, issues with the primal scene arise because the barrier of physical space in real time mimics the act of the child peering through the keyhole and witnessing his/her parents having sex. Metz argues that the spectator's solitude in the cinema contrasts the theatrical audience collective and allows a keyhole effect as the spectator is "pure onlooker" (264). However, chatroulette can be seen as an intermediary between theater and cinema because both users are simultaneously actor and spectator, and they are temporally but not physically present at the same time.

Metz also argues that going to the cinema is like a socially sanctioned form of escapism on par with dreaming. He argues that cinema facilitates a permissible form of voyeurism that would otherwise be frowned upon in society. This loophole alleviates our desire look and encourages reenactments of the primal scene. "The cinema retains something of the prohibited character peculiar to the vision of the primal scene, but also, in a kind of inverse movement which is simply the "reprise" of the imaginary by the symbolic, the cinema is based on the legalization and generalization of the prohibited practice" (265-266). Similarly, the addictive qualities I experiencing playing chatroulette are based in the same notion of 'the legalization and generalization of the prohibited practice.' Within the first few "next clicks," the chatroulette becomes aware of the sexual nature of the website. The act of watching and being watched during the performance of sexual acts is not typically socially acceptable, but on chatroulette it is (for the most part) welcomed and encouraged. The lax rules and restrictions of chatroulette coupled with its almost nonexistent regulation construct a virtual community in which societal taboos are deemed acceptable.

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Fetishism

For Metz, fetishism is linked to castration and the fear it inspires as the fetishized object always represents the penis (269). Chatroulette can be interpreted as a fetishistic prop because it establishes a potency and access to orgasm. However, because fetishism always represents the lack of a penis, and since chatroulette does not exhibit any lack of penises, this interpretation is problematic. Yet, many users employ chatroulette as a means to reach an orgasmic end. Fetishizing the technology which allows chatroulette to link random users via the act of nexting is similar to Metz's description of the cinema fetishist. "The cinema fetishist is the person who is enchanted at what the machine can do..." the chatroulette fetishist shares this aspect with his cinematic cousin as the binary between subject and object is conflated. Also, the invention of this loophole in socially sanctioned propriety encourages users to adopt personas/characters.

An example from my personal experience with the site illustrates the construction of characters through the framing of the camera. Through a nexting action, I was paired with a man who focused his webcam on his crotch. Overall his conversation was jovial and charming, but it was evident that many of his responses were contrived pieces of rehearsed dialogue. Never repositioning the camera, the frame displayed a male's midsection, unzipped jeans revealed white briefs exposing a large bulge as the man's hands ran over (and sometimes inside) the white briefs. He asked me questions like, "Guess what's for breakfast?" to which his response was -- "sausage." The rehearsed dialogue coupled with the framing of the camera established the man and as a chatroulette fetishist. Metz illustrates the camera's use of framing as always uncovering new space and compares the wanderings of cinematic framing to a kind of permanent

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striptease, "a less direct but more perfected striptease, since it also makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has preciously shown, to *take back* as well as to retain" (274). Chatroulette exhibits the fetish of framing because it mimics the camera's wanderings through the employment of nexting. Though Metz argues that cinema does not show everything because it plays on excitation of desire and nonfulfillment, the use of nexting coupled with the users' personal positioning of his/her webcam administers agency to the user and not the apparatus. The transference of agency from apparatus to user is the defining difference between the cinema fetishist and the chatroulette fetishist.

PART 2

Representation and Form & Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon

Focusing on images as good or bad entities reduces cinema to a good vs. bad binary and empowers dominant culture with the executive power of meaning making. The good/bad dichotomy is an instrument within hegemonic ideology and resounds fervently in images from popular media. Counter cinema and feminist film theory attempts to build a feminist film language beyond the confines of dominant ideology. The good/bad binary model of seeing is instead replaced by multiplicity. My essay highlights several forms of feminist filmmaking which seek to represent the world beyond the dominant ideologies first implemented by classical Hollywood cinema.

Spectatorship

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Mulvey distinguishes between two modes of looking for the film spectator: voyeuristic and fetishistic, which she presents in Freudian terms as responses to male castration anxiety. Voyeuristic looking involves a controlling gaze and Mulvey argues that this has associations with sadism (punishment and/or demystification). Fetishistic looking, in contrast, involves the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone. Fetishistic looking, she suggests, leads to overvaluations of the female image and to the cult of the female movie star. Mulvey argues that the film spectator oscillates between these two forms of looking: sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia.

Doane expands on Mulvey's argument asserting that the idea of distancing is prevalent in deconstructive cinema. Separation from the image is needed to combat masochistic over-identification and narcissistic objectification. This excess of femininity highlights how femininity is but a hyperbolic gendered performance, not an innate structure. Masquerade thereby allows the female spectator some distance from the image, since she realizes that the image of femininity is a mask/performance. As Doane summarizes: "Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign [transvestitism], the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of overidentification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire. ... The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman."

Counter cinema

Feminist film theory champions new forms of filmmaking and new forms of spectatorship. Counter cinema is a way to combat the established hegemonic, patriarchal language prevalent in Hollywood cinema. Though we read Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasures..." essay and Mary Anne Doanne's "Masquerade" article, several feminist film theorists argue for the adoption of counter cinematic practices to establish a new form of cinema representative of women beyond the limits of patriarchal and dominant ideologies. Counter cinema works against and interrogates dominant cinema challenging illusionism, narcissistic objectifications, and the binding-in process of classical Hollywood filmmaking. In her 1973 essay, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," Claire Johnston initially suggests counter cinema as a means to explore the difference between text and ideology. Johnston argues female discourse is impossible to establish in patriarchal language. Thus counter cinema is formed through a deconstruction of dominant cinema to establish a feminine film language.

Meshes in the Afternoon anticipates several modes of feminist film language through the circular narrative which presents five variations of the protagonist coming home. As an avant garde film, *Meshes* employs unique film forms that place it outside dominant filmmaking styles. Mulvey suggests a turn to avant garde style of filmmaking as a means of establishing a counter cinema in the "Visual Pleasures..." essay.

Annette Kuhn's article, "Textual Politics" explains counter cinema through deconstructive cinema and feminine cinematic writing. Deconstructive cinema works through the employment of oppositional forms and oppositional content, distanciations,

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upsetting expectations, combining elements of documentary and narrative filmmaking thus breaking the illusion of dominant cinema. In *Meshes* the use of a Japanese inspired soundtrack (added in 1959 the original film was silent) jars the relationship between sound and image. The distance created by the contrasting mostly fluid camera work and the staccato beats and high-pitched flute of the soundtrack distances the spectator from the film. Feminine cinematic writing utilizes the feminine voice working through relations of looking, narrative discourse, subjective and autobiographical, and fiction against non-fictions. Maya Deren employs all of these forms in her film. Deren's role as protagonist as well as writer gives *Meshes* an autobiographical and subjective tone as the protagonist plays out the variations of coming home. Deren's interrogation of the protagonist's everyday role as a woman highlights women's roles in art. The protagonist of the film appears to be enjoying her day - dancing and admiring the flowers until (after seeing a mysterious figure) she goes home... which begins her downward spiral.

The site for *Meshes'* protagonist's troubles lies within the domestic sphere. Repeating the variations of the same scene, Deren's protagonist interrogates her multiplicity before succumbing to the tragic end as she realizes she cannot escape dominant ideology. I argue that the phone off the hook motif symbolizes the miscommunication between woman as subject and woman as object within cinema. The reoccurring knife represents the phallus that the protagonist longs to incorporate into her being. By the end of the film, however, the protagonist achieves this incorporation, but it costs her, her life. Reading films against the grain, as I've just demonstrated, allows multiple textual meanings. If I had performed a queer reading or a third cinema reading of this film, the outcome would have been completely different. Multiple layers of

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meanings are created by analyzing films based on representations of difference. These meanings can vary widely and offer alternatives to hegemonic interpretations.

Limitations

An unfortunate side effect of establishing a feminine film language is that it becomes a specialized form of filmmaking which can potentially exclude others. Closing others off from the specialized forms of filmmaking lessens the revolutionary potentialities of the form as it essentially reproduces the same problems as dominant cinema. Implicitly, if representations and forms are not illustrated within the feminine film language, then feminist film is inadvertently creating the same good/bad dichotomy of dominant cinema.

Another limitation of feminist filmmaking is that, because it strives to build a language beyond dominant ideology, its practices exist outside the popular norm. This characteristic can make many feminist films seemingly difficult to watch. Although, many would argue that, that's what makes counter cinema so important. The fact that it counters popular modes of filmmaking makes feminist counter cinema limiting by definition. In fact, feminist counter cinema never really caught on precisely because there was not an audience to sustain it. Revolutionizing the patriarchal, dominant modes of Hollywood cinema is a tremendous feat. Though European Art Cinema was somewhat successful, nothing has been able to overpower the dominant modes and practices of Hollywood style filmmaking - which is why it is still the dominant mode of production in America (and much of the world) today. Thankfully, the turn to the 'analysis of form' within film theory establishes a practice which encourages the creation of meaning outside dominant ideology and the good vs. bad image dichotomy.

