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Undergraduate Seminar

Child's Play: Regression Through Media and Movement

There is a humorous scene near the end of Stephan Chow's 2004 action film *Kung Fu Hustle* (Chow), in which the main protagonist, in order to ward off his various adversaries, stomps on their feet in a manner not unlike a cartoon, effectively stopping them in their tracks. The main antagonist (known only as The Beast) watches this battle from afar as a detached spectator, not engaging in the action whatsoever. When the foot stomping commences, he scoffs in disgust calling the act "child's play." The irony of this sequence is that the "child-like" fighting moves from the hero are met with an equally silly fighting style from the Beast, which is arguably more more childish than the hero's. This conflict of the older opponent against the younger has value in that it reflects a similar belief seen outside the diegetic narrative of the film. The belief that cinema on a hierarchical level is "higher" than the medium of video games as an art form.¹ This hierarchical display, much like the scene, showcases its own similar irony within the perception of these two forms of media. It is that both cinema and video games utilize different methods of what theorist Vivian Shobchack calls "embodiment" in order to achieve the same exact type of sensory regression for the spectator or participant to a state synonymous with childhood.

In her article *What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Visions in the Flesh* film theorist Vivian Shobchack explains to the reader the concept of embodiment within the

¹ Critically, academically, socially, etc...

cinematic spectator as one that is tied strictly to the sensate body and the way that it functions over the course of a film. Shobchack writes that the body itself is prone to an arranged sensorial hierarchy which is “achieved through cultural immersion and practice (Shobchack 69).” While the hierarchy still allows for each of the senses to function, it manages to privilege sight and sound above touch, taste, and feeling, while simultaneously distinguishing and separating them into their own tasks without much conscious thought of translation between them. Because this hierarchy is achieved and not psychologically innate to the sensate body it therefore is dynamic, having the ability to change or be changed through different stimuli. Shobchack argues that this hierarchical dynamism is easily tested in humans through the act of watching movies.

“When we watch a film, all of our sense are mobilized, and often, depending on the particular solicitations of a given film or filmic moment, our naturalized sensory hierarchy and habitual sensual economy are altered and rearranged (80).”

What this passage describes is the abstract idea of equalizing the senses in order to keep the body, specifically the body of a spectator, from privileging one sense over the other. This concept is referred to as the “horizontalization of the senses” and it is important to understand in relation to the context of child-like regression as it deals heavily in the realm of the underdeveloped psyche and its overall lack of sensorial hierarchy (69).

Shobchack states within her writing that “it has been demonstrated that young children – not yet fully acculturated to a particularly disciplined organization of the sensorium – experience a greater horizontalization of the senses and consequently a greater capacity for cross-modal sensorial exchange than adults do (69).” While a self explanatory notion, the idea that the younger mind of a child experiences sensory equality is connected to film spectatorship in that according to Shobchack, when one watches a film they embody a mental state like a child, similar not in age or knowledge, but in the fact that they don’t benefit a single sense,

hierarchically speaking. Shobchack address this regression through what she describes as the “cinesthetic subject,” a concept based in the subversive nature of the “body” both on screen and off, along with how the body invokes a reversal of “human and technological sensorium” amongst other things (67). One aspect of the cinesthetic subject known as “coenaesthesia” is applicable to the regression based nature of spectatorship in that it is described by Shobchack as “the general and open sensual condition of a child at birth (68 - 69).” This particular quote not only expresses the function of the cinesthetic subject and how it relates to the sensate body, but also reiterates that the supposed hierarchy of senses is dynamic and can be reverted back into a previous state, one that is equalized. Of course, this is only half of what Sobchack defines as the cinesthetic subject, the other half being the invocation of synesthesia within the body, and how the stimulation of outside sources, such as film, influences the perception of the senses as well as the interactions between them (67). This particular aspect of the cinesthetic subject brings up the experience of spectatorship and how it causes the body to physically respond to viewing a film, especially something like an action film.

In his article *Action!* author Richard Dyer distills the cinesthetic subject into a being that abandons their bodies reality, allowing for the senses to reorganize and take over the spectator unconsciously.

“To go to an action movie” he states “is to sink back in the seat and say, “show me a good time.” Maybe we also cringe, shied our eyes, convulse our bodies – maybe we are often not so much more sophisticated than those putative Lumière audiences – but mentally we abandon ourselves to the illusion (Dyer 8).”

This particular invoking of the sensate body benefits the synesthesia definition of the cinesthetic subject in that it speaks upon a more physical reaction to cinematic stimuli and how the body is influenced by said stimuli. What he explains through this passage is that the body watching a film is urged to act and react to what is being shown on screen. Another thing that

this quote brings up is a noticeable progression of the voluntary body to an involuntary one. A progression within the spectator involving their relationship to their own senses during a time of film spectatorship. The idea of voluntarily “abandoning” one’s self to a movie comes up on a sensorial level in Shobchack’s article when she states that “as I (voluntarily) engaged these films, I did not think a translation of my sense of sight into smell or taste; rather I experiences it without a thought (Shobchack 65).”² As one watches an action film they do not consciously think about their bodies response, whether it be convulsing in their chairs or translating their sight to touch. The distinction between the two articles is that Shobchack is speaking mainly on the representations of the inanimate such as the salt air in Jane Campions *The Piano*, while Dyer speaks mainly on the representation of movement, both of which are distinct presentations of what a spectator sees on screen (65). Yet, they seem to accomplish the same goal of horizontalizing the senses in the body through one’s reaction in order to create a cinesthetic subject. Though the specific reactions of the individuals watching that lead to this horizontalization may be different. This goal can be seen within a film like *Kung Fu Hustle*.

Kung Fu Hustle is partial to the previously mentioned invoking of synesthesia as this invocation is, according to Dyer, “the essence of nearly all film experience, no matter what genre (Dyer 8).” Therefore, as a film it inherently subscribes to the synesthetic appeal to the viewer on all senses. Nevertheless, the coenaesthesia aspect, that being the invocation of childhood (or the sensate body of a child), happens to be a major point within both the diegetic narrative along with various non diegetic elements of the film. Narrative wise, the movie sets up the idea that the childhood of the main protagonist, a lock picker by the name of Sing, causes his motivations in

² Abandoning as in not consciously thinking about ones body during film spectatorship.

the film.³ He feels that if he can join the “Axe Gang,” a ruthless mob, that he will prove that he is “somebody,” through the traditional lens of achieving wealth, women, and power. When he finally gives into his kindness and selflessness near the end of the film by saving a landlord and landlady from their adversaries, he suddenly reverts back into the “child-like” or coenaesthetic state, through the metaphor of him being “reborn” from a cocoon of bandages before the final fight. However, it is a synesthetic response that starts this regression because the change in Sing’s character comes from watching the physical fight between The Beast and the landowners. It is his own spectatorship of the fight that causes a reaction within Sing.⁴ What this shows is that both aspects of the cinesthetic subject are needed in order to cause this regression. In *Kung Fu Hustle* specifically, the noticeable regression prompts a sort of cinematic play on the both the synesthetic and coenaesthetic subject through the protagonist by using both of them in tandem to revert him back to a child-like status. This exhibition of childhood regression is only represented through the main character in a physical manner on screen through the narrative. But with the audience watching him and the fight, it is embodied in their own senses through their bodily reactions to the action that they are viewing as seen in Dyer’s article. In essence, it is the film commenting the similarities between the reactions of Sing and of the audience. This is something that can be viewed in the lens of a meta joke, being a subtler addition to the various cultural and media references within the story that make the film self reflexive. Or it can be viewed as valuable, adding the importance of narrative to the action/object invocation of the senses presented by Shobchack and Dyer. Both of these are correct in that it is technically a joke, but a joke that adds to the “essence of the film experience (8).” But *Kung Fu Hustle* goes a bit further

³ More precisely, a single moment in his childhood causes his motivation.

⁴ Though Sing is not separated by the likes of a screen.

than just narrative in this regard, for the sequences of action along with the non diegetic additions help to fully invoke the child-like cinesthetic subject.

The beginning of this paper mentioned a moment in the final fight as a topic of interest, but the entirety of the fight exhibits the main connection between the film and spectator regression, and that is through how the action is portrayed on screen. The fight itself is highly exaggerated and unrealistic for comedic effect. Feet are stomped into flat shapes, men are kicked up hundreds of feet into the air, and people move faster than physically possible. However, the motions being represented through the various kicks and punches are, as theorist David Bordwell puts, “highly legible” to the spectator (Jenkins 17). Regardless of how “unrealistic” the action seems to be to the audience, they can still discern exactly what is happening on screen as basic human movement. A punch no matter how ridiculous it looks is still a punch. This legible movement allows for the spectators “bodies to recall elemental and universal events,” according to Bordwell (17). While he is mainly talking about how something like a punch can make an audiences body respond kinesthetically to what a punch is, it is the act of recalling through representation that bears importance. To recall means to bring back into one’s memory from a previously experienced moment. In the action film the process of recalling a universal event is vague as the so called universality of an event isn’t necessarily tied in with a specific moment in the past for individual audience members, but rather the past itself as a whole. A punch in a standard action film could make a spectator recall when they were punched earlier that day, while for another it could be when they learned how to punch years prior. The way that the action is represented however, has the ability to steer where the memory is being recalled from, and that is where this films unrealistic fight sequences come into play. *Kung Fu Hustle* purposely represents its action in a style that mimics a slapstick cartoon, a style which is commonly

associated with childhood.⁵ Bordwell also includes “editing and sound” as major factors in allowing for audience recall (17). There is a moment in the final fight where the non-diegetic soundtrack plays pinball machine sounds while Sing kicks his opponents while the camera shoots him from above, resembling the same gaming machine. In this sense, the recalling process of the audience for these cartoon-like actions and arcade related sounds will be driven towards a very specific area in their lives, their childhood, a universal event for all spectators involved when watching the film. This not only allows for the audience to put themselves into the film through the kinesthetic response, but in the childlike mental state that gives them the ability to respond in such a bodily manner. This is the very essence of the cinesthetic subject in cinema according to Shobchack’s article. What this means is that the dismantling of the sensorial hierarchy through representation, while possible through many different methods, is most effective when brought about through any form of action invoking the audience to recall upon their past through their memory. So if cinematic representations of action allow for the audience to easily assume a child’s role on a sensorial level through an embodied experience, does actual physical interaction with a media form such as video games accomplish the same thing?

Perhaps the most effective way to compare a video game to a film would be to use one that from a spectatorship point of view follows a “cinematic” presentation. 2015’s *King’s Quest* (Sierra 2015) would be a good example as it is narrative focused game that doesn’t allow the player to control the camera. Additionally, the heads up display (HUD) is small and out of the way compared to the rest of the screen, only expanding when interaction is available. This aesthetic choice for the HUD indicates that the designers made it so that there is little

⁵ A common comparison for this particular film. The way it was marketed to audiences at the time was stating that it was similar to *Looney Tunes*.

interference with the games visuals. If the interactivity is completely separated from the individual playing and the game is viewed through a spectator, then like cinema, the game represents all of the objects and actions on screen that allow for the horizontalization of the senses with the spectator through the cinesthetic subject, which lead to regression. But the actual gameplay, the physical interaction between player and media, adds a new dimension to this reversion. It also changes the parameters for what action means in relation to two forms of media. Author Alexander Galloway in his essay *Gamic Action, Four Movements* reveals this difference through the phrase, “if films are moving images, then video games are actions (Galloway 2).” What he means by this is that unlike film, video games need active (physical) participation from the player or else they remain as static images on a screen. Action in movies is representation, while action in video games is representation plus player/game communication. So if the spectator of the video game follows the paradigm of horizontality associated with film spectatorship by just watching the game, what changes in relation to childhood regression when they are given control?

Kings Quest as an interactive experience, compared to other video games, is limited in player abilities. As a player the options given are that you can move around and interact with various objects, but only when the HUD indicates so. The goal of each level is to complete the story being told through a diegetic narrative. This spoken narrative adheres to the actions of the player, for instance if they do something incorrectly the narration will comment on it in “real time.” Because of the relative lack of player options, as well as the linear structure, *Kings Quest* utilizes what Torben Grodal called in his article *Stories for the Eye, Ear, and Muscle: Video Games, Media, and Embodied Experiences* the “aesthetics of repetition (Grodal 148).” What this entails, according to Grodal, is that *Kings Quest*, much like other video games, offers an

experience that uses the repetition of controller actions such as walking or interacting with objects, in order to craft an experience similar to that of real life, which is inherently repetitious. “In everyday life,” he explains, “we repeat the same actions over and over in order to gain mastery (148).” Grodal continues that “the video game experience consists of four phases” caused by this repetition: unfamiliarity, challenge, mastery, and automation in that order (148). The first of these phases, dealing with unfamiliarity, is what connects the actions/interactions of video games to child-like regression. The experience of the first phase is detailed by Grodal when he states that “the first time a game is played, it is experienced with a certain unfamiliarity; the world is new and salient and poses challenges and mystery (148).” This learning, or relearning, of the unfamiliar is almost identical to what Vivian Shobchack says about the sensate body, as it is “achieved through cultural immersion and practice (Shobchack 69).”⁶ To be unfamiliar with an entire world, to progress through learning about your environment, and to repeat actions over and over until mastery are all elements that make up the childhood experience. So when one plays a video game that they have never consumed before, they are not only experiencing the sensorial regression to childhood through their spectatorship invoking the cinesthetic subject, but they are also mentally reverting back to a state of metaphorical infancy with a goal of relearning until automation or “growing up.” The one issue with this is that it can only be achieved by either having never played the specific video game before, or through a loss of memory caused by the passage of time, prompting a user to experience the game “as if” it were their first time playing. Also the last three phases of the aesthetics of repetition don’t allow for the same freedoms of reversion as the first, which is a problem when tying in the full gaming experience to this backsliding. Nevertheless, when it does occur, the connection between gaming

⁶ In this case the world/culture of the game.

and childhood sensorial development can not be diminished. But what, psychologically speaking, is the catalyst of this regression? How do video games and film accomplish this similar end goal? This can be answered simply through the fact that both cinema spectatorship and video game playing fall under the definitions of play established by Roger Caillois and Sigmund Freud.

Cinema on an academic level tends to be viewed from an angle different to video games as one is looked at as a spectator event while the other is viewed as “play.” This is where the general hierarchy between the two forms that states that cinema is inherently “higher” than video games comes from.⁷ Yet, film manages to fit under all six of the formal qualities of play established by Roger Caillois in his book *Man, Play, and Games*. Watching a movie anywhere, whether it is a theater or on a tablet is “free” in that it is a voluntary activity. It is “separate” in that the time of a movie is fixed in advance. It is “unproductive” in that it creates neither good nor wealth. It is “governed by (the) rules” of spectatorship, whether they are created by the spectator or by the theater staff. It is also “make believe” in a sense that what an audience sees is not actually there in the theater with them, but rather a representation of human reality or in the case of some films a different form of reality. As for the sixth category, the “uncertain” element, it is possible to contest this by saying that since a film is already a crafted experience, then doubt can not exist as the film can not change (Caillois 9 – 10). While it is true that a film is static after the production is finished, the uncertainty doesn’t come from the filmmakers but rather from the spectator in that they know little of what will happen during the course of the film as they watch it for the first time. As a form of play the importance of uncertainty or doubt is what allows these movies or games to receive the investment from the spectator/player, to “literally grip us” as Bordwell would say (Jenkins 17). Caillois furthers this explaining that in a general play session

⁷ I.E. taken more seriously on an academic level.

“doubt must remain until the end, and hinges upon the denouement” and that a “game is no longer pleasing to one who wins effortlessly or infallibly,” which in the context of film spectatorship could mean that a film is no longer enjoyable to one who has already experienced it for their first time (Caillois 7). In this regard uncertainty in cinema is similar to the progression to automation in video games as it is only achieved upon first viewing/play through and can only be recreated after the initial memory fades over time. From this, it can be deduced that cinema spectatorship and video game playing are essentially very similar forms of play, given the definitions laid out, and that because of this the connection to childhood reversion can be easily made through the writings of Freud.

Freud within his essay, *The Creative Writer and Daydreaming* connects the aspects of play to the childhood experience as well as relating plays byproducts, such as fantasy/day dreaming to adulthood. He writes that the child at play is responsible for the creation of a new world and creatively imposes “a new and more pleasing order on things that make up his world (Freud 25).” The cinematic or gaming experience maintains a majority of this model. While someone going to see a movie or putting in a disk to play a video game can not (in general) create a new world from their own, they can allow themselves to unconsciously reorder their senses within, at least in accordance to Shohchack’s and Dyer’s notions of the cinesthetic subject.⁸ What’s more intriguing is that the concept of recall, postulated by Bordwell, is also commented upon within this article through the context of fantasizing.

“The subject’s mental activity attaches itself to a current impression, an occasion in the present that has succeeded in arousing one of his major desires. From here it harks back to the memory of an earlier experience, usually belonging to his childhood, in which this desire was fulfilled. It now invents a situation, lodged in the future, that represents the fulfilment of this desire.” (Freud 27 – 28).”

⁸ They must adhere to the world being shown to them as they generally can not create their own within a movie or video game.

This particular quote is what ties the rest of these theories together into one idea. What it states, in short, is that the product of cinematic spectatorship or video game playing is the mental invocation of a previous sensual and physical experience which relates itself back to the viewing body through the lens of fantasy and fulfilment. The embodied viewer detailed by Shobhchack and Dyer through the experience of watching film fulfils an audience fantasy by harkening back to the sensorial state reminiscent of their own childhood. The same embodied viewer, given control over their own form of play, does the same thing but adds a more physical aspect through relearning how to view and interact with the worlds of the video game that they are playing. Both forms are catalysts for mental regression into a state of childhood, allowing for embodied senses to create a fantasy through these forms of play, which is the opposite of “reality” according to Freud (26).

The regression into childhood through “play” is what affixes all of these theories into a singular argument. Whether it be Vivian Shobchak’s “cinesthetic subject,” Richard Dyer’s “physical reactions,” David Bordwell’s “viewing recall,” or Torben Grodal’s “repetition,” all of these concepts indicate the same thing. That the cinematic spectator is only slightly different than the video game player in relation to what the respective media outlets invoke on a sensorial level through various forms of embodiment. Therefore, both cinema and video games utilize these different methods of “embodiment” in order to achieve the same type of sensory regression for the spectator or participant to a state synonymous with childhood.

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