

Narrative Theory

Dr. Theresa Thompson
English 4300: Violence in Film &
Literature
Maymester 2009

Real / Imaginary / Symbolic

The border between the internal world and the external is fluid, slippery.
Where do "I" end? Where does "not I" begin?

Mirror-Stage: Image of wholeness seen in "mirror," Lacan's Ideal-I.

Counter-acts infant's sense of fragmented body.

Provides image of coherence of what makes the world, and our place as complete subjects in it, make sense.

Becomes a process of identification of the internal self with the external Ideal-I.

Represents infant's first encounter with subjectivity, with spatial relations, with an external sense of coherence, and with a sense of "I" and "You."

Plays a key function in the interpellation of subjectivity through the various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's) which provide culturally specific images of coherence.

- **The Imaginary:** the internalized image of the Ideal-I.
 - Imaginary is situated around idea of coherence rather than fragmentation.
- **The Symbolic:** involves formation of signifiers and language.
 - The entire system of the unconscious-conscious manifests in an endless web of signifiers, signifieds and associations (chains of reference).
 - The symbolic is the "determining order of the subject" (J. Hillis Miller).
- **The Real:** that which resists representation, what is pre-mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic; what cannot be symbolized; what loses its "reality" once it is symbolized (made conscious) through language.
- We desire the real. We want to "enunciate" reality--can't ever happen.

Film Narrative

- Involves Interpellation
 - Saussure: "I" am "hailed" into subjectivity (existence) by Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)
 - You know who you are when the police call you by name.
 - No stable, unchanging "I" exists independent of ISA's.
- Heath: Suture is present in *all* texts (films).
 - Seamless suture (as conjunction between imaginary & symbolic) permits the ideological effect of a film to slip by unnoticed.
 - Idea that the projection of the film on screen (the image) is coherent, complete is always illusory.
 - Always requires the speaking subject to complete it.

Enunciation

- We speak (enunciate) from a subject position in the Symbolic Order.
 - You enter the symbolic order when you accept the rules.
- Émile Benveniste: two "registers" (voices) for narrative (story-telling)
 - *Histoire*: to tell a story; connotes both history and story-telling
 - *Discours*: "active ongoing social production of meaning"
- *Histoire*:
 - Impersonal register: "Actual process of story-telling is absent," seamless, invisible.
 - Author, subject of the "enunciation," is hidden.
 - Story presents itself as "reality": as "complete"
 - Situates spectator with no role to play other than "all-knowing subject."
 - Spectator has "complete" knowledge of the story.
 - Complete suture: spectator is interpellated by the filmic text.
- Mulvey: Spectator is never fully interpellated by the screen.
 - At some level, all film is *discours*, discourse of ISA's!

Enunciation in Flashbacks

- Jeffrey narrates (enunciates) his experiences as a "story" to Sandy.
 - First mirror: He is both constituted (enunciated) by the story AND constituting (as enunciator) the story.
- Flashback: he is, and is now "seen" as, the constituted subject: suture occurs.
 - Second mirror: "past-interior" positioned subject of story.
- Ask yourself: which one is "real" Jeffrey?
 - Both & neither.
- How is Sandy's "I" constituted by Jeffrey's enunciation?
- How am "I" constituted as spectator?



A (mis)representation of "self" as imaginary and real crystallizes paradox: fantasy involves both pleasure (possible satisfaction of desire) and as threat (possible castration).



Narrative Sequence in *Reservoir Dogs*

- J. Hillis Miller: "Within the concept of narration are obscurely inscribed the ideas of judging and interpretation, of temporality in its complexity, and of repetition... A narration is a gnosis [knowing], a retelling by one who knows. It is also a diagnosis, an act of identifying or interpreting..." (1998, my ellipses).
- Gérard Genette: "in classical narrative... narrative discourse never inverts the order of events without saying so" (1980).
- Julian Wolfreys: "Understanding temporal order also means gaining a comprehension of the relation between narrative events.... The structural relation between the various aspects of temporality and repetition suggests a constant negotiation between 'getting on' with the act of telling a story and holding up that story's progress so as to sustain interest, to create tension, or to frustrate [spectator's] expectations or desires.... Time and temporality are not the only aspects of narrative.... Identity is also a product of narration" (2004, my ellipses).
- Mark Currie: "Filmic narration tends to imply the complete reliability and authority of the camera on questions of identity, on the basis that seeing is believing" (1998).
