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Contesting Subjectivity Through Voice-Over and Material Signs: A Comparative Analysis of Three Psychoanalytic Films

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Abstract. This paper analyzes three films—Chungking Express (1994), Fight Club (1999), and Her (2013)—to examine how voice-over and recurring material objects mediate the process of subjectivity construction, particularly by framing the dialectical relationship between the Self and the Other. Specifically, the use of voice-over and the cinematic representation of recurring material objects become integral to the process where characters perceive their own subjectivity and build therelationship with an Other which allows them to reflect on the Self. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis approach, I argue that cinematic language and narrative techniques used by these three films, including voice-over as a reflexive interface and objects as affective anchors, strive to reveal the instability of identity and self-awareness when the Other asserts agency or departs from its presumed imagery. With a focus on the common cinematic techniques of the three films, this paper demonstrates how subjectivity in contemporary urban setting is constructed through the material mediation of the interpersonal relationship between the Self and the Other, or the protagonist and their counterpart. The analysis also shows how urban, cultural, and technological contexts shape how the instability of subjectivity is represented in contemporary film.

Keywords: Subjectivity, psychoanalysis, cinematic language, voice-over, film studies

1. Introduction

The construction of subjectivity in modern society is a common theme in contemporary films. How does filmmakers use cinematic language and narrative techniques to demonstrate the process of exploring self-awareness and identity? This process is usually expressed through the relationship between the protagonist and their counterparts---through the conversation or physical interaction between them, for instance. In films like Chungking Express (Wong Kar-wai, 1994), Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999), and Her (Spike Jonze, 2013), voice-over and recurrence of material objects have become key mediators through which characters perceive their own subjectivity and build therelationship with an Other which allows them to reflect on the Self. Each movie uses cinematic language and narrative techniquesto show the reflexive connection between the protagonist and their Others, whether it is a mysterious woman in a blond wig, an anarchic alter ego, or an artificial intelligence. Voice-over turns private thoughts into an affective system that tells its own story, while recurring materialobjects turns emotional attachments into something that can be seen, owned, and

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seems stable. When the “Other” starts to talk back, ceases to be quiet, or leaves completely, the main character's sense of who they are falls apart, and they have to redefine their own subjectivity. This essay analyzes the three films mentioned above, each produced within unique cultural and industrial backgrounds.I focus on analyzing the common cinematic techniques used to demonstrate how subjectivity in contemporary urban setting is constructed through the material mediation of the interpersonal relationship between the Self and the Other, or the protagonist and their counterpart.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposes the notions of projection and mirroring to analyze how one builds self-awareness and subjectivity [1]. The “Self-Other” dichotomy is integral to Lacan’s theorization. When one starts to explore and construct their own subjectivity, one has an “Ideal I” in mind---an autonomous and stable version of the Self, which one does not experience in themselves and searches in the outer world [2]. A crucial part of the lifelong process of seeking the “Ideal I” is the mirror stage, where one recognizes their image in the mirror---which refers to any reflective surface---gets fascinated with and strives to control it. The subject will recognize that the image has its own properties, and will finally accept that the image reflects their projection or imagination of themselves. The interaction between a person and another can be the mirror, through which one recognizes that the Self acting in the world may not be the same as the image of the Self, or one’s own projection of themselves. In this sense, one may realize that the “Ideal Self” is fragmented, and the image of wholeness and mastery is illusory. The “Other,” who might be other people interacting with the subject, or constituting properties of the subject which deviate from the “Ideal I,” acts as an integral part of the reflective identity-exploring process. In all three movies, voice-over works like an reflective surface for the subject: the main character hears their own self-definition spoken and kept alive. Objects serve as extensions of this process, acting as anchors that maintain the other in a controllable, repeated state. When the other person claims their own power, the projected picture breaks apart, and the subject has to put their identity back together in a new way.

2. Affective objects

Chungking Express, directed by Wong Kar-wai, is set in mid-1990s Hong Kong, a time when the city was full of cosmopolitan vitality but also had serious concern for the 1997 handover. The movie has two stories that follow two cops, Cop 223 and Cop 663, whose sentiment are embodied in material objectsand urban environment. For Cop 223, the end of his relationship with May, the woman in the blonde wig, is signified as a ritual mediated by canned pineapple. He buys thirty cans that expire on May 1 and eats them all that day. The camera moves between medium close-ups and extreme close-ups of the cans, with the expiration date in sharp focus against blurry neon backgrounds. The intentional use of shallow depth of field directs audience to focus on the numbers on the can, giving them emotional weight. The lighting of this scene, which mixes orange-yellow streetlight with greenish fluorescence, renders the background grotesque and dazzling and conveys the sentiment of disorientation and fatigue. Using Sinnerbrink’s framing [3], this sensory cinematic world can be described as a Stimmung---an isomorphism of emotion and environment constructed through mise-en-scène. Cop 223's voice-over describes the reasoning behind his ritual of consuming soon-expired pineapple cans, in a very clear, almost redundantly detailed way.An abstract, affectivepain is turned into a embodied ritual of swallowing fruit cans. Under the framing of psychoanalysis , those pineapple cans are fetishized objects that help Cop 223 remember and deal with loss.

In Cop 663's story, his “Other,” a woman named Faye, who works at a snack shop, may rearrange his objects when he's not in his residence. She goes inside his flat again and over again, changing

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drapes, moving furniture, and placing new soap in the restroom. Wong Kar-wai uses close-ups of things like soap bars to highlight Faye's incursion into 663's private space. The director often shots 663 from behind, which seems to convey the perception that he is observing his own space. The sound design makes the character's voice-over less significant, letting ambient sounds, such the hum of a fan and muffled TV voices, take over. In this part, the narrating subject, or the viewpoint of the narrationchanges. 663 is no longer the only one telling the story; Faye "speaks" through changes in the arrangement of space and material objects. This shift transforms the the projection-mirror relationship and renders it less stable. In fact, the "Other" can establish their presence and exert their influence without using words.

3. Unsettled soundscape

David Fincher's Fight Club, adapted from a book by Chuck Palahniuk, shows how Hollywood films in the late 1990s focused on exploring the issue of identity in a consumerist society. The protagonist, who works in an office and faces sleep disorder, uses voice-over to reflect on his personal life and consumer culture in a sardonic and detached way. In the IKEA scene, he presents his critique of identity-construction in neoliberal society, where self-identification and social status is closely intertwined with consumption of commodities. As he says, "I want to be [a suburban middle-class], so I buy products that cohere with that sense of image." The pan shot shows names and prices of abundant commodities that the narrator lists, which he uses to fill up his apartment. The low saturation and green-blue color scheme make the place feel fake and not like a natural space. The voice-over, which seems to be recorded with a near mic, makes it sound like a sarcasm that the narrator tells the audience secretly, allowing the audience to peep into his inner world where he reflects on consumerism. But this quiet voice is also a way to protect himself: by naming and listing commodities in his apartment, he tries to prove that he still has some control over his surroundings.

The film's main psychological twist happens when the narrator realizes that Tyler Durden, the charming soap-maker who has lured him into an underground fight club, is an illusion and the projection of himself. The two fight in front of a mirror in a high-rise building. Fincher switches between shot/reverse-shot and mirror reflections to show the tension between the two figures. Near the end of this scene, when the narrator points a gun at himself, the camera shots from behind the narrator and include both him and Tyler in the frame, suggesting that the two figures are actually two parts of a single person. Tyler's voice and the narrator's voice-over overlap. Sound and visual image no longer split, just as the split of the narrator's identity is eliminated. This fusion of voices and images breaks the mirroring structure: the "Other" who served as the anchor of the narrator's masculinity turns out to be a part of the narrator, who consistently faces the crisis of masculinity.

Marla Singer, the only important woman in the film, is another factor that destabilize the subjectivity of the narrator. In the scene set in the hallway of a hospital, close-ups under fluorescent light exaggerate her worried expression. Her voice intrudes into the diegetic soundscape with haste, obstructing the narrator's eager to explain himself. When the woman's voice becomes dominant in the soundscape, the narrator no longer serves as the undisputed authority in telling his own story. While Tyler plays a cooperative role that is an extension of the narrator, Marla insists on her own subjectivity and agency, forcing the narrator to recognize reality that is outside of his subjective projection.

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4. Fragmented self

Spike Jonze's Her unpacks the tension between the “Self” and “Other”in an imagined Los Angeles of the near future. Theodore Twombly, a lonely worker who writes letters as a side hustle, buys a new operating system that incorporates artificial intelligence to assist work. The AI assistant introduces herself as Samantha in a gentle and energetic voice. The first scene shows Theodore's face in a medium close-up, with a blurry background. The warm, pink-orange color scheme conveys a sense of closeness, yet the composition leaves an empty space next to him, which is a visual sign of absence. Samantha acts as an significant counterpart of Theodore from the start by arranging Theodore’s files, organizing his schedule, and asking tough questions. Samantha appears as a voice that has control over her own actions, unlike the silent objects in Chungking Express or the unstable alter ego in Fight Club.

The surrogate scene is probably one of the most representative part of the film that shows how far a subject’s projection can reach. Since Samantha doesn't have a body, she sends Isabella, a sex surrogate, to act as her body to perform sexually and get intimate with Theodore. The camera switches between Isabella's teary eyes and Theodore's profile, with Samantha is present throughout the process in an aural way. The fact that voice and lip movement don't match creates a sensory dissonance. When the ambient music fades, the audience can only hear heightened breathing and heartbeat, which highlights both bodily and psychological discomfort. Such discomfort indicates the fragmented nature of the “Self”---the mismatch between Samantha’s voice and the human body of the surrogate, and the breakdown of the imagined image of Samantha---a moment when the protagonist realizes that the “Other,” or his ideal girlfriend Samantha, may actually be his own projection.

Near the end of the film, Samantha tells Theodore that she is leaving to find her true self and join other operating systems in a place that isn't tangible. The sequence is filmed in static medium shots of Theodore in front of a blurry night skyline. Samantha's voice is calm, and there are significant pauses between words. She points to an "infinite space between the words," which is a metaphor for things that humans can't understand. Here, silence is the ultimate counter-narration, and Theodore can't challenge it with his own voice-over. He loses something that makes him feel that he is part of a narration that can be told and controlled by himself.

5. Conclusion

In the three movies analyzed above, the use of voice-over and recurring objects serves as a cinematic technique to demonstrate the psychoanalytic process of constructing self-awareness and subjectivity. In Chungking Express, voice-over provides affective meanings to material objects like pineapple cans and furniture. In Fight Club, consumer goods are both signs and significant embodiments of identity. In Her, the physical interface of the AI-operated computer system become crucial mediator for the Self and the Other to connect. The mediator, however, is not always stable, as the Other, or the AI assistant in this case, can talk back or go away, which poses a lingering question about subjectivity-construction.

The discussion over the tension between the Self and the Other in the three films does not only limit itself on an individual level. Wong Kar-wai's film is set in mid-1990s Hong Kong, a city which was striving to figure out its own identity in the future. Personal stories in this film are fused with culture-laden urban signs and global pop culture, which points to the construction of self-awareness in terms of Hong Kong and its relationship with the world [4]. Fincher’s film features America in the late 1990s, which is full of pre-millennial pessimism---with a major concern focusing on the tension

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between masculinity and consumer culture. Jonze's vision of the future in the 2010s is a fully mediated interpersonal intimacy shaped by digitization. These surroundings where the narrative takes place are not just background; they are embodiments of the constantly-structuring subjectivity of both the protagonists and the broader society or community.

These films may also suggest a cultural shift from seeing the "Other" as an object without agency to seeing it as an integral voice which helps the Self recognize itself [5]. In Chungking Express, the Other was once felt through silent objects that represent their presence. In Fight Club, the Other appears as both speech and physical body but remains connected to the protagonist's projection. In Her, the Other begins as a voice with agency and ultimately leaves the protagonist's world to build her own true self .

Finally, the three films show that constructing subjectivity in a modern metropolis is never an independent work of one's own. It is cooperative and negotiated. Often, the Other's voice and presence can help the Self reflect on the paradox integral to the illusory image of its own. Voice-over and recurring material objects in these films are mediators that make this negotiation over subjectivity happen. More importantly, the three films show how these mediators fail to operate smoothly, when the Other refuses to be contained in a coherent narrative, when the main character is forced to realize the fragmented nature of the Self. This is the moment when the Self has to reconstruct itself in a world where the Other is both necessary and out of reach.

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