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INTRODUCTION: MAKING MOVIE MAGIC

Movies make magic. They change things. They take the real and make it into something else right before our very eyes. Usually when I critique a movie lots of folks like, they tell me, "It was just showing the way things are. It was real." And they do not want to hear it when I make the point that giving audiences what is real is precisely what movies do not do. They give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of the real. That's what makes movies so compelling. Talking about the need for an "aesthetic ecology" wherein the artistry of films is not submerged by any other agenda, visionary filmmaker Stan Brakhage shares this insight: "All this slavish mirroring of the human condition feels like a bird singing in front of mirrors. The less a work of art reflects the world the more is being in the world and having its natural being like anything else. Film must be free from all imitations, of which the most dangerous is the imitation of life."

Most of us go to movies to enter a world that is different from the one we know and are most comfortable with. And even though most folks will say that they go to movies to be entertained, if the truth be told lots of us, myself included, go to movies to learn stuff. Often what we learn is life-transforming in some way. I have never heard anyone say that they chose to go to a movie hoping it would change them utterly—that they would leave the theater and their lives would never be the same—and yet there are individuals who testify that after seeing a particular film they were not the same. Much of what Jeanette Winterson attributes to the power of the literary texts in her collection *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* is equally true of cinematic narratives. She contends: “Strong texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists.” As cultural critics proclaim this postmodern era the age of nomadism, the time when fixed identities and boundaries lose their meaning and everything is in flux, when border crossing is the order of the day, the real truth is that most people find it very difficult to journey away from familiar and fixed boundaries, particularly class locations. In this age of mixing and hybridity, popular culture, particularly the world of movies, constitutes a new frontier providing a sense of movement, of pulling away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other. This is especially true for those folks who really do not have much money or a lot of time as well as for the rest of us. Movies remain the perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage that come to stand for the quintessential experience of border crossing for everyone who wants to take a look at difference and the different without having to experientially engage “the other.”

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that

lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. Trying to teach complicated feminist theory to students who were hostile to the reading often led me to begin such discussions by talking about a particular film. Suddenly students would be engaged in an animated discussion deploying the very theoretical concepts that they had previously claimed they just did not understand.

It was this use of movies as a pedagogical tool that led me to begin writing about films as a cultural critic and feminist theorist. Centrally concerned with the way movies created popular public discourses of race, sex, and class, I wanted to talk about what these discourses were saying and to whom. Particularly, I wanted to interrogate specific films that were marketed and critically acclaimed as progressive texts of race, sex, and class to see if the messages embedded in these works really were encouraging and promoting a counterhegemonic narrative challenging the conventional structures of domination that uphold and maintain white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Even though many traditional academic film critics are convinced that popular art can never be subversive and revolutionary, the introduction of contemporary discourses of race, sex, and class into films has created a space for critical intervention in mainstream cinema. Often multiple standpoints are expressed in an existing film. A film may have incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones. This mingling of standpoints is often what makes it hard for audiences to critically “read” the overall filmic narrative. While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain “received” messages that are rarely mediated by the will of the

audience. Concurrently, if an individual watches a film with a profoundly politically reactionary message but is somehow able to impose on the visual narrative an interpretation that is progressive, this act of mediation does not change the terms of the film.

A distinction must be made between the power of viewers to interpret a film in ways that make it palatable for the everyday world they live in and the particular persuasive strategies films deploy to impress a particular vision on our psyches. The fact that some folks may attend films as "resisting spectators" does not really change the reality that most of us, no matter how sophisticated our strategies of critique and intervention, are usually seduced, at last for a time, by the images we see on the screen. They have power over us and we have no power over them.

Whether we call it "willing suspension of disbelief" or just plain submission, in the darkness of the theater most audiences choose to give themselves over, if only for a time, to the images depicted and the imaginations that have created those images. It is that moment of submission, of overt or covert seduction that fascinates me as a critic. I want to critically understand and "read" what is happening in that moment, what the film tries to do to us.