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Film Screen as a Mirror: Metz, Altman, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Identification with characters on the film screen is common among film spectators, even if they have not experienced the same events or emotions happening on the film screen. Christian Metz and Charles F. Altman explain this phenomenon by presenting the film screen as a mirror. In other words, audiences identify with film characters because they see their reflections depicted on the screen in a figurative sense. However, though both Metz and Altman see the film screen as a mirror where identification takes place, but there is a contrast in the application. On one hand, Metz argues that the film spectator is fully aware of their filmic identification because the spectator is all perceiving, and film is created to create filmic pleasure, whereas Altman expands this idea and discusses the danger in the spectator being unable to distinguish the real and the imaginary. Both of these arguments can be proven true in the case of the film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* where the audience identifies with Charlie, the main protagonist.

In his article, "The Imaginary Signifier," Metz claims film is like a mirror, though it is a mirror that differs from the primordial mirror of Lacan's mirror stage primarily in the sense that though everything may be projected on the film screen, the spectator's own reflection is never reflected back. In other words, unlike Lacan's primordial mirror where the child must see its own reflection for the formation of the ego during primary identification, the spectator does not expect or need to see his or her actual body depicted on the screen for filmic identification. He points out that according Lacan's mirror stage, the child looking into the mirror sees his or

herself and mistakenly believes he or she is this unified and perfect image and identifies with the reflection: “The child sees itself as an other...the child’s ego is formed by identification with its like” (Metz 48). He argues the spectator has already experienced the true mirror stage and can identify with the screen without his or her reflection. Though the spectator’s reflection is not necessary, because it is still missing, the spectator consequently begins to identify with the characters or actors in the film, and like the mirror stage, these characters are ideal and coherent whereas the spectator, like the child, is not: “The spectator know[s] that objects exist, that he himself exists as a subject, that he becomes an object for others...it is no longer necessary that this similarity be literally depicted for him on the screen, as it was in the mirror of his childhood” (Metz 49).

His article also discusses how the cinema institution makes films hoping to give its viewers filmic pleasure in the hopes that viewers will return to the cinema in order to keep the institution in business. For the cinema institution, the film screen is a Lacanian mirror where the ego pursues its identity, thus the need for filmic identification. However, audiences can only gain knowledge they have already been exposed to: “For the problem of the cinema is always reduplicated as a problem of the theory of the cinema and we can only extract knowledge from what we are” (Metz 16). This makes spectators of film what Metz describes as “all-perceiving” and aware that they are absent from the film screen, but present in the auditorium (Metz 51). Film viewers are fundamentally caught in a place where they suspend their disbelief even though they know what they are viewing is simply a screen, but because they know what they are seeing is only a movie, this gives the ability and right to suspend their disbelief since they feel as if they were all-perceiving of the film’s world: “I know I am perceiving something imaginary (and that is why its absurdities, even though they are extreme, do not seriously disturb me), and I know

that it is I who am perceiving it...I know that I am really perceiving, that my sense organs are physically affected” (Metz 51). The film spectator willingly buys into the world of the film, knowing that what they are seeing is not real. This all-perceiving identification is principal in the spectator’s identification with the film’s characters, the events characters go through, and their consequent emotions. Essentially, Metz views the film screen is a mirror stage constructed by the film industry that is meant to create filmic pleasure, and it does so by first creating filmic identification with characters present in the film since the spectator’s reflection is missing.

Conversely, in his article, “Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Discourse,” Altman ultimately uses Metz’s article to further the mirror metaphor and add clarity that the metaphor previously lacked when examined by other theorists such as André Bazin or Jean Mitry and the film screen was a window instead of a mirror. Altman acknowledges that Lacan’s term “mirror” suggests literal reflection, thus the film screen as a mirror might not seem possible, so he clarifies by describing film as a mirror in the sense that any confusion for the imaginary as real can be considered a mirror or a mirror stage: “Any ‘transitive’ situation, in which the individual confuses the Imaginary with the Real, constitutes a ‘mirror’ experience” (Altman 522). He also points out how Metz uses a comparison between theatre and cinema to explain how the mirror metaphor is applicable to the film screen. Altman uses Metz’s example of a chair on stage versus a chair projected on the film screen; a chair on stage is a chair before, during, and after a performance, but in film, the chair on screen is merely a reflection of the real object.

Additionally, like Metz, Altman explains why film as a mirror is significant; if the film viewer does not identify with the film and perceives film as reality, then the film is of no importance. He claims that according to Metz’s mirror analogy, when a spectator of film identifies with a character, it is his or her reflection’s absence being perceived as presence inside

the film; when the spectator experiences a return to reality, it is the realization of absence as absence and not presence. In other words, identification with a film character is the imaginary, the distinguishing between film and the self is the real, and when these two factors are realized, they become symbolic for fiction: “The Symbolic is constituted by neither one of these two tendencies, but by their simultaneous presence in a tension in which we call fiction” (Altman 524). However, unlike Metz, Altman does not assume the spectator is all perceiving. He claims that if the spectator is unable to separate the imaginary from the real, then the film is unable to successfully convey its message to the audience. In this sense, after the film is over, it is necessary for the film spectator to be able to differentiate between the world of the film and reality. The realization of the symbolic is necessary for the film’s fiction to be effective: “[Films] cannot achieve their true status as fiction if we hold permanently to that illusion” (Altman 523). With regards to Metz, this separation between the real and imaginary at the conclusion of a film is what causes filmic pleasure; because the film screen has successfully forced its viewers to forgo a mirror experience, the audience comes out of the cinema feeling more fulfilled and whole because of the filmic identification they have just experienced.

When applied to *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, this idea of film as a mirror can explain why the audience identifies with Charlie throughout the entirety of the movie, excluding the scene where his repressed memories are returning to his conscious. Because most of the film is shown through Charlie’s perspective, the film is set up in a way where the audience easily identifies with him both emotionally and psychologically; the audience lacks the same perception that Charlie lacks and wants to see and know more about his interactions with Sam and Aunt Helen since these are the people Charlie seems to love most. In essence, the audience of the movie wants the same things Charlie wants: the audience wants Sam to become romantically

involved with Charlie and for Aunt Helen to come back to life since Charlie loves her so much. The audience is even lead to believe that Charlie's being a wallflower was caused by his best friend's suicide; since he is unaware his aunt molested him as a child, the audience is unaware as well. To further this filmic identification with Charlie, the screen blacks out during the same moments Charlie experiences his blackouts. When Charlie's repressed memories are realized, the audience feels the same sense of clarity Charlie feels. Since Charlie knows it will take time to make sense of what his aunt did to him, but knows he will eventually overcome it, the audience feels the same peace, closure, and positivity at the end of the movie.

Metz would explain this as the film industry's attempt to invoke filmic pleasure in the spectators. The creators of the movie force its viewers to identify with Charlie by only showing the audience what Charlie knows so they can only feel the emotions Charlie feels. The connection to Charlie is not one of choice, but created by design. If the screen is a mirror, the audience sees its reflection in Charlie. The audience feels as if they are experiencing the same events Charlie experiences. For example, when Charlie and Mary Elizabeth date, the audience feels the same irritation Charlie feels at Mary Elizabeth's inability to care about Charlie's feelings. After Charlie and Mary Elizabeth break up, the spectators feel the same loneliness and desperation he feels because he's lost his friends as a result of the way he breaks up with her. The audience wants Charlie to be included in his friend group once more, and rejoices when he is finally accepted back. Because the audience already identifies so closely with Charlie, it is necessary for the film to end with Charlie letting the viewers know he has hope for the future so the viewers can have hope as well. If the spectators leave the film without this sense of hopefulness, the anxiety Charlie and the audience had previously been feeling throughout the movie remains unresolved, and the spectators will not feel filmic pleasure. Instead, the spectators

leave the screen with filmic displeasure, which is the opposite of filmic pleasure; the film displeases and it is a failure in the eyes of the cinema institution: “The institution as a whole has filmic pleasure alone as its aim” (Metz 19).

Altman article coincides with Metz’s argument and takes filmic pleasure a step further. While Altman also sees the film screen as a mirror, thus accounting for the viewer’s identification with Charlie, Metz’s argument assumes the all-perceiving spectator has the ability to disengage from the film world. As previously noted, Altman realizes the dangers in mistaking the imaginary for reality. To go along with his argument, the spectator does indeed identify with Charlie because the film screen is a mirror and the ego desires completion, so the spectator views Charlie as coherent and whole after his repressed memories merge into his conscious since the reasons for his blackouts are revealed. However, if the spectator is unable to release his or her filmic identification at the movie, then it is not the cinematic institution’s fault; the viewer is to blame since audiences should watch film with the knowledge that what they are seeing is imaginary. In other words, Altman’s argument agrees with the forced identification with Charlie, but it is up to the audience to realize the fiction of the events of the film, such as Charlie’s feelings for Sam and his past trauma with Aunt Helen, because the audience knows they are taking part of the film industry by watching the movie. This can explain the shift from Charlie’s perspective to his sister’s after his repressed memories of Aunt Helen begin to enter his conscious. When the image of Charlie splits into three different figures, this is the film industry’s way of telling the spectator what they are seeing on the screen is fiction; the screen invites the spectator to separate from Charlie’s world by giving the audience this new perspective.

Ultimately, Altman and Metz agree when it comes to the film screen being a mirror, but diverge slightly in the area that involves the film spectator. The film screen, in a sense, is a

Lacanian mirror where filmic identification occurs between the spectator and film character, just as the audience of *the Perks of Being a Wallflower* experiences. However, Metz assumes the spectator is able to separate the real from the imaginary and because of this, filmic pleasure is the outcome of cinema. Though Altman agrees that the spectator should be all perceiving, there are cases where the spectator may not be able to realize the fiction of film because he or she gets too caught up in the world of the imaginary.

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