

Applying Film to Public Administration

Gary Marshall

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Film is a form of narrative knowledge that supplements our understanding of public administration (McSwite, 2002). Its value lies in its capacity to convey the singular. The richness of social life is often reduced to abstract ideas that do not convey its uncanny details. To state it plainly, films can make us feel and imagine in unique ways. For example, Chaplin's classic *Modern Times* captures both the positive and the perverse effects of scientific management in a way that the writings of Taylor or the Gilbreths could never do. Similarly, the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* dramatically shows us the highly technicized and videographed postindustrial world. Further, the phrase intoned by the character Morpheus, "Welcome to the desert of the real," gives us a richer picture of the structure of social relations than is offered by the traditional discourse of public administration.

Film has its language, that is, signs and syntax. In addition, it has both a sociopolitical and a psychopolitical dimension. As Monaco (2000) reminds us, films help us lay bare the norms, rules, and social practices of a particular culture. Further, its mimetic quality, that is, the capacity to recreate an image of a particular reality, is unparalleled. Finally, the unique link between the film and the spectator, for example, the suturing effect of film as a form of direct experience, also affirms film's place as a unique medium for re-presenting social experience (pp. 261–263).

APPLYING FILM THEORY TO SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The Public Administration Literature

In this section, I develop the groundwork for showing how we can use film in public administration research. To be sure, film has been an important dimension in public administration discourse. Goodsell and Murray's (1995) edited book *Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts* includes several chapters on film and public administration. The journal *Public Voices* has actively published articles on the application of film to public administration, including a 1999 symposium called "Bureaucracy on the Silver Screen: A Worldwide Perspective." Some key articles from *Public Voices* are Chandler and Adams (1997), Holley and Lutte (1999), Larkin (1993), and Shaffritz and Foot (1999) as well as the essay by McSwite (2001a) that serves as the founda-

tion for this article (an abridged version of the McSwite essay was published in *Public Voices* the following year). Additional writings in the field on film include Lee (2000) and Lee and Paddock (2001).

As noted earlier, the sociopolitical dimension of a film is evident in its ability to depict a key social trend or general aspect of culture. A film's psychopolitical dimension is a reflection of the viewer's subjective relationship to the film. The predominant approach to film analysis in public administration has been a deductive one, emphasizing the sociopolitical.

Goodsell and Murray's (1995) framework for understanding and explaining the application of the arts to public administration is representative. They suggest that the arts, including film, can provide insight at five levels: (1) theory, (2) values, (3) leadership, (4) policy, and (5) teaching. This framework is important because it brings a humanities approach to what often has been labeled a technicist field, not only in the "doing" of administration but equally so in the training of administrators. Goodsell and Murray aptly quote the political scientist Stephen Bailey, who wrote in 1959:

Whether we care to admit it or not, most cartoonists, many novelists, poets, and playwrights, some painters and musicians, and even a few literary critics have a far deeper insight into political man, or more accurately, into man in a political or administrative context, than all but a thimbleful of political scientists and public administration experts. (Bailey, in Goodsell and Murray, 1995, p. 9)

Waldo championed the application of the arts to public administration throughout his career, including a short book about the depiction of administration in novels (Waldo, 1968) and an experimental film sponsored by ASPA entitled *Public Administration in a Time of Revolutions*. As indicated, the study of film and its application to public administration has continued. Two recent titles are "Wonks and Warriors: Depictions of Government Professionals in Popular Film," by Beth A. Wielde and David Schultz (2007), and "*Office Space* as Hyperreality—Using Film as a Postmodern Critique of Bureaucracy," by Steven Kochheiser and Robert Alexander (2008).

The Lacanian Approach

Lacanian film theory is an approach that focuses more on the psychopolitical dimension of film. McSwite (1997, 2001b, 2006, 2009), Catlaw (2005, 2006), Catlaw and Jordan (2009), and Marshall (2007), among others, have introduced the work of Jacques Lacan to the field of public administration. Lacan's work is unique not only because it provides insight for understanding the psychological problems of individuals but also because it provides an understanding of social relations. Lacan was born on April 13, 1901, in Paris, France. He studied medicine and specialized in psychiatry, completing his

specialization in 1926. He also completed a Ph.D. in psychiatry in 1932. His interest in other intellectual currents at the time—specifically the intersection between the psychoanalytic and surrealist movements—led to friendships with Breton and Dali. Lacan, along with others such as George Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Raymond Aron, was greatly influenced by Hegel's work as a result of attending seminars held by Alexandre Kojève in the mid-1930s in Paris. (The structural elements of Lacan's "discourse of the master" are traceable to this study of Hegel.) In the mid-1950s, Lacan's association with Claude Lévi-Strauss led to an important turn in his work. Lacan's contention that human subjectivity is simultaneously created as a result of language and forever alienated by it stems from his understanding of signification. His perspective on language is grounded in the literature of Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss. It is predicated upon a definition of language as something more than a mere one-to-one correlation between word and object.

Known as the "French Freud," Lacan applied this structural linguistic approach to Freud's work, thereby putting it on a new footing. His oft-repeated aphorism that the unconscious is structured like language refers to his view that repressed unconscious material operates in a manner similar to discourse. He showed how metaphor and metonymy are analogous to the condensation and displacement of the Freudian schema.

As indicated earlier, a semiotic reading of film uses the core elements of linguistics as its tools. In the 1970s and 1980s, a Lacanian theory of cinema was developed by Christian Metz and others. Lacan uses the term "mirror stage" to connote the developmental moment between 15 and 18 months when a child is first able to recognize him/herself in the mirror (called social referencing in the psychology literature). He suggests that this recognition is a moment of instantiation that is actually misrecognition. In a sense what the child recognizes and imagines is an ideal of which he/she will always, in one way or another, fall short.

Metz draws a parallel between our experience as spectators of a film with our gazing at ourselves in a mirror. As spectators of a film, we have a sense, when we regard the screen, that we are experiencing the movie in a way that is consistent with how we imagine ourselves in relation to what we are experiencing. Film theorists suggest that it is a kind of mastery or power that we feel. We see the film with our eyes, and we have a reaction to it that we recognize through our unique subjectivity. This feels like a kind of mastery because it is analogous to each of us looking in the mirror and recognizing ourselves. The gestalt that we see is familiar to us and provides a certain comfort in its familiarity.

An Emphasis on the Imaginary

The term "imaginary" connotes both our imagination and what we see visually (McGowan, 2007, p. 3). Lacan calls it an imaginary register, a realm that is an

index of how we imagine things as well as how we imagine that others perceive us. The imaginary order also includes our imagined ideals; how we would like to be. In that sense, it is part of our subjective division, the internal rivalry we have with our ideal or with others to whom we compare ourselves.

For Lacan, the imaginary register of experience is one of three overlapping domains that combine to affect human experience. The imaginary covers over the gaps in the symbolic register; the second of these domains. The symbolic register of experience is the world as defined by language, customs, social norms, and practices as well as patterns of knowledge and experience. It is what we often refer to as culture writ large and includes the established identities that are conferred upon us within the culture, for example, father, mother, professor, or student. Commenting on the identities conferred upon us by the symbolic order, McGowan notes:

They [the identities] come ready made, and as I become a subject, I see myself realized in these identities. Though no symbolic identity fits me perfectly—I never feel, for example, like I completely embody what it means to be a professor—my imaginary sense of self, an ego, covers over this gap. (2007, p. 3)

Early Lacanian film theory emphasized the relationship between the imaginary and symbolic domains. The approach was analogous to the psychoanalytic setting, where the role of the analyst was to work with the analysand and with repressed signifiers to link together the symbolic chain that was singular to the analysand. Specifically, the idea was to determine the master signifiers that drove the analysand's life story.

Film theorists such as Metz (1974), Heath (1981), and Mulvey (1975) saw their task as one of laying bare the chains of signification that, albeit hidden from the spectator, affixed the spectator's subjectivity. From the perspective of these theorists, it was not so much that the spectator had mastery over the film experience through the power of his/her own gaze. Rather, it is the director, through the use of shot placement, sequence, and editing, who fixes the spectator in a particular way. Film theorists, led by Metz's work, emphasized the process of interpellation that was occurring in which the film's symbolic structure had the effect of structuring the spectator into predictable social roles (McGowan, 2007, p. 2). Mulvey's seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), emphasized the way in which women were depicted in cinema as objects of the male gaze.

While we are now, with our postmodern sensibilities, easily able to point out the "Hollywood ending" replete with its redemptive structure, it was the semiotic approach of the film theorists of the 1970s and early 1980s who made us aware of the sophisticated symbolic structure that sewed the film spectator into the cinematic narrative that films produced. As McGowan summarizes:

For someone like Baudry, the cinematic image acts as an imaginary deception, a lure blinding us to an underlying symbolic structure and to the material cinematic apparatus. While watching a film, we remain unaware of the act of production that created the images for us, and in this way the cinematic experience dupes us. When we buy into the illusion, we have a sense of control over what we see on the screen. This theoretical approach conceives of the gaze (what would become a pivotal concept in Lacanian film theory) as a function of the imaginary, the key to the imaginary deception that takes place in the cinema. . . . Beginning with this idea, the task of the film theorist becomes one of combating the illusory mastery of the gaze with the elucidation of the underlying symbolic network that this gaze elides. (2007, pp. 3–4)

Suture Theory

An important theoretical construct developed during this period was the concept of suture, first enunciated by Jacques-Alain Miller (1978/1966) and then used in film studies by Oudart, Dayan, Health, Mulvey, and Rose (Silverman, 1983, p. 201). Suture is the mechanism of “stitching” over the fact that for Lacan there is no “true self.” Rather, we are subjects in discourse, and as Miller notes, “suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse” (1978, p. 25).

In the world of film suture analogously represents the stitching of the view as subject into the filmic text/discourse. Suture occurs through: (1) shots logically following one another, (2) the illusion of adjacent locations, (3) conversations depicted through the use of the shot/reverse shot formation, and (4) the viewer’s desire to accept the film’s world (Silverman, 1983).

A supporting definition of suture is that it constitutes “the overarching syntactical structure that determines all instances of cinematic meaning . . . the spectator must experience an absence or loss which is then ‘sutured’ or reconciled via film/camera technique” (Magrini, 2006, p. 2). Stage one of that technique is a “cut” through which the Other makes its presence felt. Stage two reverses the field of the first shot and provides a response to the question created by the experience of the first shot. Once sutured, the spectator becomes a signifier among many other signifiers within the filmic text/discourse (Magrini, 2006).

A key dimension of suture theory is the connection between the “view” created by the shot and the “relationship” to the character in the film with which the viewer or spectator identifies. Therein is the parallel between suture theory as conceived originally in psychoanalysis and the way in which it becomes manifest in film theory. Kaja Silverman notes that “discourse involves the ‘match’ of the linguistic signifiers ‘I’ and ‘you’ to ideal representations, and it is through those representations that the subject finds itself” (1983, p.

197). In the process of viewing a film, a unique identification occurs wherein the spectator is sutured to the narrative of the film.

In an insightful analysis of the Peter Greenaway film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, White and McSwain note that:

Suture theory provides a powerful device for understanding how culture works through media to constitute such an oscillating self. . . . the director's use of the camera threatens the film viewer (with castration) by controlling his or her attention and then provides relief from the threat thereby obscuring the role the camera plays in producing the sense of threat. . . . What happens as the scene unfolds is that the viewer begins to experience a great sense of apprehension and horror but nonetheless continues to watch. The horror is coming from the slow disinterested gaze of the camera rather than from the events themselves. . . . The specific fear—reported by both men and women—that develops in the audience is that one is going to be forced to watch as the dogs are brought up to attack the naked man, probably tearing away his genitals. This fear of castration becomes virtually unbearable but the event itself never occurs. The relief at this realization is enormous and at that moment a powerful identification between the viewer and the victim occurs and the viewer is brought into the narrative of the film in the posture that the director wants him or her. The perpetrators are repulsive and by contrast the victim becomes an acceptable object of identification. . . . What the director accomplishes through the use of the camera to control the attention of the viewer is to open once again the viewer's primal wound and force them to experience their own castrated condition within the capitalist system. (1993, pp. 30–31)

This extended quotation captures the crucial elements of suture theory and how it supports the logic of Lacanian film theory. Referring back to the discussion of the shot/reverse shot sequence, Greenaway's opening film segment, captured so poignantly by McSwite, gives us a sense of the relationship between spectator and director. Equally evident is the underlying symbolic structure the tracks of which Greenaway lays down through the dialogue, imagery, and plot. Many have noted the critique of neoliberalism that undergirds Greenaway's narrative (Johnson, 2002; Pagan, 1995).

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover

The antagonist of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* is a brute of a man named Albert Spica, referred to semiotically in the film as "A. Spica" a gibe at the legislators in the House of Commons during the Thatcher era (Pagan, 1995, p. 47). He and his gang of thugs practice the usual criminal racket of extortion—again a swipe at privatization and the new capitalism

of postindustrial society—and in owning the streets, he owns, among other things, a gourmet restaurant called Le Hollandais.

Albert Spica has hopes of improving his social status. While clearly a comparison can be made between Spica's desire for social legitimacy and the behavior of the nouveaux riches of the late 1980s and the decade of the 1990s, what is also evident is the *plus-de-jour*, the Lacanian *objet a*. The *objet a* referenced by the lower case *a* is an other (*autre*) of enjoyment which Spica is certain that artists and intellectuals enjoy. In the plot of *The Cook, the Thief*, the character Michael, a modest bookseller and frequent diner at Le Hollandais, represents this "desire in the Other" that A. Spica seeks to attain through his physical "mastery" over the chef, his wife, Georgina, and other guests in the restaurant.

In *The Cook, the Thief*, the symbolic register of experience is structured by the social relations of the New Capitalism and the New Public Management. Greenaway is particularly effective in using film as a canvas to index this structure semiotically. In doing so he applies the filmic logic discussed earlier in this article. As much as the symbolic structure of the New Capitalism and the New Public Management seeks to capture all meaning with its ideology, there is always a remainder that cannot be captured, that is, symbolized. In this movie, it is the "literary" as represented in the books that Michael reads, understands, and of which he is the caretaker. When Spica is unable to obtain this *jouissance*, he and his thugs force Michael to eat the pages of his own books until he suffocates.

Objet a and the Real

On this point, more recent applications of Lacanian film theory emphasize that Lacan's notion of the gaze is not the subjective gaze of the viewer but the gaze as an object that is the cause of the viewer's (as subject) desire. The gaze as object cause of desire is the locus of the real, the place where the imaginary cannot cover over the impossibility of the symbolic order to fully represent the subject. This perspective is radically counterintuitive, as our normal impulse is to think that we affix our gaze on something or someone. However, we have already shown the ways in which our gaze and our subjectivity as such can be sutured by the shot selection and sequencing.

Lacan's claim is that the gaze is not what we look at but in a sense what is looking at us. It is the gap in the visual field, where meaning is unrepresentable. As a result, the spectator cannot see the filmic image with a detached eye but is implicated in the image.

CONCLUSION

A film is different from more traditional forms of knowledge production in the university. It is useful to note that knowledge production in the university

is based on a specific social link. Films often help us enhance the complexity of this link. What films can offer us, then, is a dynamic connection between broader social process and individual processes (Rocchio, 1999, p. 11). As McSwite notes, film theory and narrative in general offer “the possibility of healing the wound between theory and practice” (2001a, p. 13). The use of film or other forms of narrative confronts us with a complexity that often belies rationality or belies the coherence that we want to ascribe to everyday life.

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Gary Marshall (gmarshall@unomaha.edu) is a professor in the School of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also coeditor of the Lacanian Compass, a U.S.-based publication on the work of Jacques Lacan. His research emphasizes the centrality of human identity as it relates to work in public agencies. Recent publications with a Lacanian orientation include “Commanded to Enjoy: The Waning of Traditional Authority in Public Administration” in *Administrative Theory & Praxis* and an English translation of J.A. Miller’s essay “Lacan’s Nightingale” in the *International Lacanian Review*. He has also published in *Administration and Society*, *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, *Public Administration Review*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*.

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