
What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss

A Student Guide

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Chapter 3

How do we identify with characters?

Films and television programs offer many pleasures. They focus on what is dramatically important, filtering out the boring parts (on TV, classes are always more interesting without those pesky, long-winded lectures). Media present the fantasy that we can always be where the “action” is, and that those important actions will be perfectly visible and legible to us. They can show us exotic lands (from Tatooine to Transylvania) in lush realistic detail, allowing us to “escape” while remaining in the comfort of our chairs. We can simulate experiences (being chased or being adored) without risking any actual danger or taking any responsibility for what happens. Movies and television programs can involve us in well-told stories that make us wonder what will happen next, and we get pleasure when our expectations are partly confirmed and partly denied.¹

Media also offer us the pleasure of imagining what it would be like to be someone else for a while. With the aid of the onscreen images and sounds, we can vividly picture what it might feel like to be more powerful, sexier, smarter, and braver than we suspect we really are. We can assume the perspective of someone who is less fortunate, allowing us to feel pity or outrage at injustice without having actually to suffer injustice directly. Movies and television programs can help us extend our perspectives outside the limits of our own lives. They can mix wish fulfillment with realism (see Chapter 2) in various combinations to provide dependable, relatively low cost and low risk emotional experiences of “being in someone else’s shoes.” They offer us the pleasure of “identification.”

Like many of the terms used in this book, people use the word “identification” in many different ways. I have heard people say that

¹ If the plot is totally predictable we get bored, but if the story takes an entirely random twist we become frustrated.

they identify with the world of the film, or with a particular situation in a television program, or with the camera. Are all of these “identification” in the same way that we refer to “identifying with a character?” And what does “identifying with a character” mean? Does it imply something more than “caring for” a character? Does identification mean that we feel what the characters appear to feel? Then what about situations where we clearly care about the characters but we feel something very *different* from them (when we know that our beloved heroes are about to be attacked, but they remain calm and clueless)? People often use “identification” and “point-of-view” interchangeably, but do we identify with every character who gets a brief point-of-view shot in a movie? We all have experienced the pleasure of “identifying with a character,” but what is identification, really? How does it work? And one last question ...

Why does identification matter?

Some media forms create strongly emotional experiences without offering us characters for identification. Take the circus, for instance. When you see an acrobat bounce off a springboard and land atop a pyramid of people, you may “ooh” and “ahh” at the spectacular achievement without particularly identifying with the circus performer. You may care briefly about the person’s safety, but the circus is not designed for you to get too caught up in that individual’s story, since it will move on to another performer’s daring feat. Any “identification” you might have with the acrobat is fairly brief, although your momentary emotions can be intense enough to cause you to scream.

Consider how differently a movie about a circus acrobat might work (*Man on Wire*, a film about tightrope walker Philippe Petit, for example). We would learn the story of this particular circus performer, how he grew up wanting to master his art, the obstacles he overcame, his specific dreams, fears, motivations, and doubts. The film would encourage us to picture what it might be like to risk injury, to have perfect control of the body’s muscles, to receive cheers and applause. Using visual techniques (showing us point-of-view shots) and storytelling devices (interviews with the performer and his friends), film encourages us to do more than marvel at the acrobat’s skill (as we might do at the circus). The circus rarely gives us the same kind of backstory that makes the acrobat into an individual character with particular motivations and hardships. We assume that the circus performer must have dreams and obstacles, but we do not have much specific information about them, nor is it easy for us to see things from the acrobat’s perspective atop the

human pyramid. Any identification we might have with the acrobat at the circus is probably limited, since the circus focuses more on spectacle than story.

Or consider the pleasures of seeing a good exhibit of abstract art. You can marvel at the use of color and line, but it is difficult to picture yourself in the composition. You might identify with the painter of these artworks, but there is little in the paintings themselves that encourages you to picture yourself as the artist. Now consider a film or TV biography of such an artist (the movie *Pollock*, for example). The film offers you the opportunity to imagine yourself as swarthy, successful, arrogant, innovative, insensitive genius Jackson Pollock. We get the chance to feel what it might be like to splash bold color onto large canvases, and so identification in this biopic offers a different pleasure than looking at these artworks in a museum. Although identification is not necessary for us to have intense emotions in art, film and television usually offer us the pleasure of identifying with their protagonists and envisioning what it might feel like if *we* were that particular artist or that specific daredevil.

Identification’s prominence in film/TV/gaming helps explain why our society is so concerned with images in those media. Mainstream film/television/gaming seem to call for our participation. The characters they present are not “distant” from us like an abstract painting on a wall. These media seem to invite us to “try on” another person’s perspective. One reason we seem to care about images of women (or African Americans or gays/lesbians) in television/film is because identification asks us to place ourselves in those positions. Only a rare museum exhibit rouses broad, angry criticism of its images in the same way we attack bad “role models” in film and television.² Although certain gallery artworks can encourage strong identification, the contemporary museum tends not to emphasize identification as much as present-day film, television, and computer games do. Although some were outraged by Andres Serrano’s photograph entitled *Piss Christ* (which immersed a crucifix in urine), they objected because a social/religious taboo had

2 Of course this is a broad generalization with notable exceptions. Galleries also are more localized than film and television, which are mass media that are viewed internationally. Modern art is a less popular form than mainstream film/TV; it tends to attract a narrower, more educated audience; and gallery art is often considered to be relatively “highbrow.” All of these factors influence the ways that museums cause different controversies from popular media.

been violated, not because they identified with the Christ figure in the artwork.

Andres Serrano's (born 1950) photography tends to deal with unsettling and shocking subjects (from corpses to body fluids). His work became notorious outside of gallery circles when his *Piss Christ* was denounced in 1989 by conservative senators who were outraged that the work had received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In mainstream film and television, on the other hand, identification is a central lure for audiences, and so media scholars began to focus on identification partly because they recognized that we needed to understand how media images encourage us to care about characters. If we kept film and television images at a distance, they wouldn't matter so much to us. It is not enough to understand images of women, African Americans, and so on as if they were something separate from "us." (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of how the media portray "others.") We also need to understand how film and television encourage us to participate personally in those images. Film and television characters are not simply creations of directors, writers, and producers; we also help bring these characters to life when we lend a bit of our own selves to those figures onscreen. This is the power and the importance of identification.

The spectator

Media scholars turned to psychoanalytic theory as a way to understand identification, arguing that our earliest experiences of identifying with our parents/caregivers exert a powerful influence on all subsequent identifications with other people in the real world and onscreen. Such scholarship focused on the notion of the *"spectator,"* which is a theoretical position that we have to occupy (metaphorically speaking) in order to make sense of and get pleasure from a film. Let's talk a bit about what scholars mean by this concept.

In order to make sense out of a film, according to psychoanalytic critic Christian Metz, we first need to *"identify with the camera."* We need to recognize that each shot is taken from a particular camera position, that the camera looks upward at the characters in some shots (called "low angles") and down at them in others (called "high angles"). Although we do not usually see the camera in the shot, we have to

understand roughly where the camera is positioned if we are going to make sense out of the space we see onscreen. If we couldn't recognize the camera's position in relation to the action, then we would see the images as lines and colors in a frame (like an abstract painting) rather than people and objects in a space. Metz calls this process *"primary identification"* because it happens first. If we did not first situate our visual viewpoint in the film's space, we could not possibly identify with characters in that space. Without that orientation, we would not be able to recognize at the most basic level what the film was showing us.

Thus a film "repositions us" from shot to shot, a process so automatic that most of us are unaware that it happens. Of course, *you* don't actually move; you stay in your theater seat (hopefully!). In order to make basic sense of the stream of images onscreen, you must understand that your "position" changes whenever the camera changes. The position created by a film would be impossible to occupy in real life. At times we float above the action, then suddenly we are below it. We move close, then instantly we are far away. We may shift quickly from continent to continent or planet to planet, from the dinosaur age to a nuclear apocalypse. Film and television offer us the fantasy of being in the right place at the right time, unconstrained by distance, history, or the limits of our own bodies. And so you should not think of the "spectator" as a literal position. It is not a specific seat in the movie theater. Instead, it is a theoretical "position" that each film constructs differently, shot by shot. Each film encourages us to "occupy" that position in order to make sense of the images it shows.

Films and television programs want us to do more than just comprehend the onscreen action; they want us to feel emotions about what we see. In order to get an emotional payoff from a film or TV program, we have to occupy a certain position in relation to the story. Let's take a simple example. Imagine a shot that begins on a woman's bare legs and travels slowly up her body, lingering on her hips, moving up her torso to arrive at her perfectly lit face. At the most basic level, this shot simply asks us to label: "That's a woman." This shot also asks you to make certain assumptions about that woman. Based on our long experience with film and television, we know that this shot is asking us to see this woman as desirable. If we are going to get full enjoyment from the film, we need to feel her desirability instead of keeping her at a distance. Regardless of whether you are attracted to women (or whether you are attracted to this particular woman), this shot encourages you to feel attracted to her. It cannot force you to be attracted, but if you reject her desirability you are denying yourself the full pleasure that the film offers. You are not occupying the spectator position.

As this brief example shows, film mixes both visual and storytelling techniques to establish a spectator position. The film provides a series of shots, but it is the spectator's job to connect them mentally into a coherent story. A good film/TV program encourages us to predict what might happen later in the story, and our anticipation fuels our curiosity, propelling us forward. If we are immersed in a movie, it may feel as if the film is unrolling before our eyes with little effort on our part, but a film requires us to provide the connective tissue that links the shots and story together. The pleasure of being immersed in another world awaits anyone who occupies the spectator position, and whenever we go to the movies we hope that we will have a seemingly seamless ride.

Character identification plays a crucial role in placing us in the spectator position. The classical Hollywood cinema gives us at least one central character who is our emissary to the world of the film. In some films (from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Twilight*) this protagonist is a newcomer to the strange land, which conveniently requires that the inhabitants introduce themselves to the character (and to us) and provide explanations of how the world works. In detective films and television procedurals, we tend to receive information at the same time that the investigators do. We see the same things (as the camera follows our heroes) and hear the same dialogue, which encourages us to place ourselves closer to the protagonist's position in the story, to ask similar questions and make similar judgments.

Film and television programs often give their protagonists certain reliable qualities that encourage us to identify with them. They show us that the characters are good at what they do, or they place their characters in threatening situations. Television series can count on the added advantage of our previous identifications with its characters. Because we have a history of identifying with the same characters (sometimes over a period of decades), TV series do not need to spend much time reintroducing their cast and making us care about them. New episodes can assume that we are already allied with the beloved characters, and so they can immediately begin introducing guest stars or setting up this particular episode's dilemma.

If a film or television program can get us to identify with its characters, then this makes the spectator position appear more "natural." Characters don't have to explain the onscreen world directly to us; we simply overhear the dialogue. If the film/television program shows us an image that might make us uncomfortable, then it can reduce that discomfort using character identification. Let's return to that simple shot of the camera traveling up the attractive woman's body. Often such shots will be justified as some character's point-of-view, which means

that we do not have to feel like a dirty voyeur who is "checking the woman out." After all, that's not *our* choice of how to view the woman's body. *We* are not being sexist; that's the *character's* perspective. We are just along for the ride, which gives us a built-in defense against the charge of voyeurism. But remember that spectator positioning encourages us to participate in the story world instead of keeping it distant. The entire storytelling system encourages us to lend a portion of our thoughts and emotions to important characters, so in some sense *we* are also "checking the woman out" when we identify with the looker. By coordinating the camera's gaze with the character's gaze, this also powerfully controls the audience's gaze, offering us the pleasure of looking without seeming to give us responsibility for our emotions and thoughts.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey points out that our history of identifying with film characters in such situations is not gender neutral. In fact, because we have identified so often with male characters looking at female characters, the camera's gaze has itself become gendered. Mulvey notes that throughout the classical Hollywood period films tended to give us opportunities to identify with heterosexual male heroes and to desire beautiful women. The classical Hollywood film repeatedly coordinated the three gazes we just mentioned (the camera's, the male protagonist's, and the audience's) to position us with the male hero looking at the objectified female. This system (in coordination with society's early twentieth-century attitudes about women) helped give female characters a passive sense of "to-be-looked-at-ness." These glamorous women functioned as a visual spectacle that encouraged male characters (and the film audience that identified with these protagonists) to desire them sexually.

Because we have been placed in this pleasurable position repeatedly over time, these identifications have left their mark on our visual storytelling language. The camera positions and movements are not gender neutral, according to Mulvey. You cannot isolate the cinematic technology and language from its history, because that history shaped what various shots *mean* within that language. Throughout the classical Hollywood period, audiences were asked to adopt a heterosexual masculine position as we looked at shots that began at beautiful women's ankles and proceeded up their glamorously clothed bodies to their perfectly lit faces. This history affects how audiences interpret that simple shot. We know that this shot feminizes and objectifies; that is what this shot *means*.

"OK, maybe this was true a long time ago, but our society has changed," you might argue. "We don't think of women in the same way anymore. And we have female directors nowadays. Doesn't that make

the portrayal of women better?" Certainly our images have changed over the years, and clearly we have had many women mediamakers (from Agnes Varda of *The Gleaners and I* to Shonda Rhimes of *Grey's Anatomy*), but Mulvey points out that improving women's images is more complicated than simply putting more women behind the camera (though that is certainly a fine goal). Male and female mediamakers both have to use the cinematic language that they have inherited. No one can reinvent the language by him/herself; it takes years of effort to change such a long-term pattern in language. Mulvey emphasizes that the history of character identification in Hollywood has created a cinematic "language" that constrains what male and female mediamakers can "say." Just as no one can communicate outside of language, no female mediamaker can step outside the gendered history of how shots make meaning.

"But modern movies don't just show men ogling women. They show us women 'checking out' men, too. Directors aren't limited like they used to be in the old days." Of course you're right; female characters do look at men onscreen much more than in the classical Hollywood era. Yet even today there is still something feminizing about the visual system that Mulvey described. Yes, we can put a man into the shot we have been discussing, starting at his ankles and slowly slipping up his body. Such a shot, however, tends to feminize that man. Whenever a man is put on display as the passive object of a lustful gaze in media, that gaze usually "softens" the man. Think of Brad Pitt in *A River Runs Through It*; Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*; Patrick Dempsey ("McDreamy") in *Grey's Anatomy*; any male fashion model; or any male pinup idol from James Dean to the Jonas Brothers. Placing any body (male or female) in the position of passive visual spectacle seems to duplicate the feminizing dynamic developed in classical Hollywood identifications.

If media offer the spectacle of a male body for us, that body had better be doing something active. Physical activity gives heterosexual men a socially acceptable reason to look at another man's body without fear of being accused of homosexual desires. After all, they're marveling at the form of Kobe Bryant's jump shot or enjoying the manly battles in *300*. They're not "checking out" Kobe or the Spartans. Physical activity helps disguise and deflect the sexual voyeurism involved in the gaze. But place the same hypermasculine bodies of NBA (National Basketball Association) players or the half-clothed torsos of gladiators in a passive pinup pose (lying back on one elbow, perhaps), and they are instantly feminized. Placing male bodies as passive objects-of-the-gaze can also dependably produce comedy, as Ben Stiller demonstrates in *Zoolander*.

Although modern media may offer different "hunks" for our visual pleasure than the classical Hollywood cinema did, the visual language that structures our gaze may not have changed dramatically.

"What about the latest generation of kick-butt women in media? Don't they change our images of women?" Certainly women from Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* to Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seem a far cry from the passive visual spectacles of the classical Hollywood pinup girl. And yet notice how conventionally attractive these action heroines are, ensuring that audiences do not have to sacrifice the pleasures of "to-be-looked-at-ness" when watching these powerful women.

My goal here is to start the discussion about the interaction among attractiveness, activity, passivity, the gaze, masculinity, femininity, and identification in modern media, not to provide a definitive explanation. Does Mulvey's theory still have influence in contemporary media? Has the gendered history of spectator positioning fundamentally altered the basic visual language of the camera? How does our previous history of character identification shape our current relations with film and television characters?

What are the components of identification?

In the previous section we introduced the idea of how film and television combine visual and narrative techniques to encourage us to identify with characters. Now let's look more closely at how such strategies interact. Murray Smith has argued that "identification" is too large a term, that it refers to too many different things. He suggests that we break "character engagement" into smaller processes that we can examine more closely. Theories of spectator positioning help us understand how identification can be so powerful when we are immersed in a film. Smith's system helps us explain more precisely how our engagement varies from character to character.

Whenever we gain information about a character, Smith calls this *alignment*. In Smith's terms, we are "aligned" with anyone who appears onscreen. When a wounded person is wheeled into the emergency room in *ER*, we can potentially identify with any person we see (the patient, doctors, nurses, emergency medical technicians, family members) because we have at least some information about who these people are. Even when characters do not speak or move, we get information simply by observing their faces, their clothes, their body posture. Every time we see a character onscreen, we learn something about them, even if the character is a bit player. Alignment (the process of giving us access to

character information) is necessary before we can engage emotionally with any character. Whenever a new character appears, the film/television program is (in a sense) nominating him/her as someone we might find engaging.

Although we can identify with anyone we see onscreen, films and television programs make it more likely that we will identify with some characters more than others. Mediamakers do this by controlling the information we have about various characters. The difference between a protagonist and a supporting player is that we know more about the protagonist. In Smith's terms, we are more aligned with the main characters. Alignment, therefore, means giving us access to a character's externally observable actions and his/her internal states (thoughts, feelings, memories, dreams).

Media coordinate this access in several ways. Film and television programs follow certain characters more than others, and the more we follow a particular character, the more information we learn about him/her. We see how characters react to new situations, we hear their discussions, and we go where they go. The camera appears to be more spatially attached to the major characters. It stays nearer to them in scenes, giving us more closeups of their faces, spending more time presenting them onscreen. *Spatial attachment* is one way that film and television create stronger alignment with some characters. By following certain characters more than others, by positioning the camera near them, by spending more time with them, the mediamakers tell us which characters they think are more important.

Spatial attachment gives us the kind of information we might get if we were standing close to a character. This information is external: we see what the character is doing, we hear what they are saying. Another way to align us more fully with characters is to have us experience what is going on inside their heads, to give us access to information that we could not see/hear if we were standing nearby. Film and television have developed a range of techniques to show us a character's mental state directly: dream sequences, flashbacks, voiceover, fantasy sequences, and so on. Mediamakers choose to show us some characters' flashbacks and fantasies but not others'. *Grey's Anatomy* follows a large cast of characters, but the initial and final voiceovers are (almost) always Meredith Grey's, allowing us deeper access to the title character's head. We can identify with any of the characters on *Scrubs*, but the series more closely aligns us with J.D., partly because we see many more of his fantasies than any other character's. By providing direct *subjective access* to dreams and memories, we learn about the characters in a different way than if they had simply told us about their dreams and memories aloud.

Point-of-view provides another means of aligning us with a character. Seeing things literally through a character's eyes gives us direct information about how they are perceiving the world. Hearing things from a specific character's perspective also gives us important access to the character. Part of the power of a first-person-shooter game lies in its strong sense of perceptual point-of-view. We rarely glimpse the character who is blasting his/her way through the gameworld, but all our visual and audio perception is filtered through that singular perspective. Everything we know comes through that first-person viewpoint, which powerfully organizes our experience.

Alignment with a character, therefore, depends on spatial attachment (who we follow, who we are near), subjective access (directly showing us internal states), and perceptual point-of-view (both visual and aural). By controlling these three variables, mediamakers align us more strongly with certain characters than others. By giving us longer, closer, more detailed, and more vivid access to these characters, they encourage us to identify with them.

Let us return to the *ER* emergency room. The television show usually coordinates visual and storytelling information to make us more aligned with the doctors. We may follow the doctor into the ER and then see extended closeups of the doctor's face as she struggles to save the patient's life. We may see brief flashes of memory as the doctor remembers a previous patient who died. The camera may present point-of-view shots as the doctor cuts the patient open and desperately watches the monitor. All these techniques align us with the physician.

Or this particular episode might choose to privilege the patient's perspective. A jerky handheld camera might show us the patient's point-of-view of the ceiling lights as she is wheeled into the ER, and the sounds might be garbled as they are filtered through the injured person's perception. The camera might follow the patient as various medical personnel examine her, giving the confused person multiple closeups. We might even glimpse a drug-addled fantasy from inside the patient's mind.

Alignment (in Smith's terms) is something that the mediamaker chooses. We don't have a choice about which characters the story follows in a film or television program. If you are more interested in the witch than Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, you still have to be aligned with the young girl if you are watching the film at all. (For alignment with the witch, you may have to watch the musical *Wicked*.) Alignment with a character depends solely on the information we are given by the film. It does not commit you to identify with the protagonist, though alignment tends to make it easier for us to identify.

When we receive information about characters, we are often expected to go further than simply understanding them. Mediamakers also encourage us to make moral judgments about the characters, and this also is a crucial component of our character engagement. Smith calls the moral evaluation of a character “*allegiance*.” Often a mediamaker shows us a character’s actions so that we can see their moral stance toward the world. By emphasizing how hard the detectives and lawyers work to achieve justice on *Law and Order*, the show encourages us to see them as admirable. The early portions of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* are designed so that we will evaluate Andy Stitzer as a nice, well-intentioned, sweet, likable guy. If we make these judgments, we are more likely to care about what happens to these characters. Allegiance calls upon our broadly held social principles (we tend to value hard work and niceness) to encourage a dependable audience reaction to the characters.

Just as film and television have created many techniques to promote alignment, the media have also found reliable ways to gain our allegiance. They can show a character committing an act of kindness and generosity. If they show a chase scene, we tend to favor the character being pursued, even if we don’t know anything else about either character. In addition, we tend to evaluate characters positively if they are good at what they do. This tendency can encourage us to become allied with some fairly unsavory characters. For instance, Dr. Gregory House may be an insensitive louse on *House*, but we excuse him partly because of his brilliance. Simon Cowell may be personally abusive and smug on *American Idol*, but he is undeniably successful. Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* is an unrepentant serial killer, but part of his charm is that he is so expert at what he does.

Although character actions are important clues for our moral evaluation, there are other ways to signal how we should judge a character. Casting can play a role in our evaluation because we remember an actor’s previous roles when we spot them in a new role. Because we have seen John Cusack play a range of likable characters (from *Say Anything* to 2012), a mediamaker can assume that we will assign a certain amount of goodwill to the next character he plays. Even if the actor is unfamiliar, his/her “look” can tell us how to “read” the character, and stylistic techniques (such as music, lighting, and camera angle) can accentuate this effect. For instance, when we see Toht the Nazi for the first time in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we are supposed to label him as evil (even before he does anything). A jarring musical chord punctuates the low angle closeup as we see his beady eyes and his thin lips. The language of media clearly tells us, “This is the bad guy.” Once we decide who the morally preferable characters are, this encourages us to identify with them.

Notice that I used the words “morally preferable.” Any film or television program is a closed system that presents a limited range of characters. One way to encourage us to identify with an immoral character is to surround that person with even more evil characters. Our only choices are to identify with the least morally objectionable person or to reject identification with anyone. In *GoodFellas* we are more likely to identify with mobster Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) because our other choices are more reprehensible. Henry seems relatively moral compared to sadists like Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci). Reality television producers can cast their shows to create a network of scheming characters, which encourages us to evaluate which is the least obnoxious of the participants. Allegiance with a character does not mean that we approve of everything they do. It simply means that they are morally preferable to our other options for identification.

Now that we have the more specific concepts of alignment and allegiance, we can describe more precisely how film and television programs encourage our identification with particular characters. In most media, alignment and allegiance work together to help us identify with the protagonists. We follow the main characters as they do likable actions, seeing point-of-view shots from their perspectives, closeups of their reactions, and flashbacks of their memories. This places us in a good position to identify with Andy Stitzer in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* or Chandler Bing in *Friends*.

In other media, alignment and allegiance interact in complicated ways. When watching *A Clockwork Orange*, we have little choice but to be aligned with Alex, the gleeful, brutal sadist. Since the film follows him wherever he goes (even when he rapes women and beats the elderly), we must either follow him as well or abandon the film. We are, of course, expected to judge his actions harshly, and so our allegiance complicates our engagement with him. Similarly, we have complex engagement with the boss on *The Office* (either the American supervisor Michael Scott or the British David Brent). We spend a considerable amount of time with him, but his pompous attitude and his overbearing actions lead us to see him as a jerk. To say that we simply identify with Alex, Michael, or David does not capture the way these specific media blend moral and visual perspectives. Alignment and allegiance help us explain the complicated mix of pleasures these texts present.

Alignment and allegiance help us understand what was “new” about the stalker films of the 1970s and 1980s, and why these seemed like a disturbing social trend. There was nothing new about seeing beautiful, scantily clad women attacked with a knife. However, when director John Carpenter placed the camera behind Michael Myers’s mask in

Halloween, American audiences had the unsettling, protracted experience of stalking the victim through the killer's eyes. Yes, this encourages us to identify with a mad killer, but our new critical language helps us explain this phenomenon more carefully. *Halloween* forces us to be aligned with Michael Myers, while at the same time it expects us to be morally repulsed by the brutal slayings.

In our alignment, *Halloween* emphasizes the visual point-of-view shot over other techniques (we get no flashbacks from Michael and our early glimpses of him are brief). Though one might assume that the perceptual point-of-view shot is the most powerful way to align us with a character, *Halloween* shows us that point-of-view can actually hide character information. In the opening sequence of the film, we see the stalker's visual perspective through the mask, but we know little else about the killer. We get much more information about the victim: we hear her protests, we see her frightened face. We are therefore aligned with both victim and killer in different ways: we get Michael's visual and auditory perspective, while we see and hear the woman's emotional reactions. Because we are denied access to Michael's face, the film is able to conceal a crucial fact about the character: that the killer in the initial scene is a young boy. In this instance, the point-of-view shot (which usually reveals character) actually hides information about the character. Each individual film and television program promotes our identification with some characters, discourages us from identifying with others, and complicates our engagement with still others. Alignment and allegiance give us a language for discussing how this process works.

The limits of identification

Notice that we are beginning to discuss identification with multiple characters, not just a single protagonist. Although a film or television program may cause us to be more aligned with the main character, this does not mean that we can only identify with the protagonist. Linda Williams has argued that although the process of spectator positioning emphasizes one character's perspective over another's, the actual process of real people identifying with characters is more fluid. In all likelihood, we identify with both members of a romantic/sexual couple (according to Williams) and both pursuer and pursued in a chase. We identify in different ways with each, however. Identification for Williams is *multiple simultaneous identification*.

Also notice that we are distinguishing between actual people's identification and "spectator positioning." Remember that the "spectator" is a position; it's not a person. Every film creates a theoretical position

that you can occupy to receive maximum pleasure. If everything is working perfectly and you are totally immersed in the film, you (the actual person) are occupying the spectator position. Most media experiences, however, fall short of this ideal. Sometimes you the actual audience member occupy the spectator position and gain pleasure from the film. At other times when the film is not quite "working" for you, you are outside the spectator position. Even when you are not fully caught up in a film, you can still recognize what the film is asking you to feel and think. You can still recognize the spectator position even if you yourself are not occupying it.

Throughout this chapter I have been assuming that films and television programs are trying to get you to identify with characters. Although most mainstream media do this, some mediamakers (particularly those influenced by Bertolt Brecht) intentionally aim to keep us at a distance, to discourage us from putting ourselves in the protagonist's place. By distancing ourselves from a character, we can potentially judge their actions in a more even-handed, less biased fashion. Some have said, for instance, that certain melodramas (such as those made by Douglas Sirk in the 1950s, including *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life*) veer so wildly from one implausible plot turn to another that it is impossible to identify with their female characters in a realistic fashion. Such melodramas serve less as a tear-jerker and more as a social critique of the impossible position of women in the 1950s.

*Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was an influential German playwright who believed that typical realistic theater encouraged audiences to enjoy themselves for an evening without relating the play to their everyday lives. His plays were full of interruptions and other devices that kept audiences from getting swept up in the story. By startling the audience out of their complacency and distancing them from the characters, Brecht hoped that his theater would have a stronger political effect. His plays include *The Threepenny Opera*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.*

Not all mediamakers want their audiences to be caught up in a realistic story and to identify with the characters, because those emotional experiences can blur the audience's judgment. Lars von Trier's *Dogville* is staged on a skeletal, theatrical-looking set without doors or walls, which helps keep the audience from getting immersed in a realistic space. Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* interrupts its hospital scenes with elaborate musical productions in which patients and doctors

lip-synch old pop songs. These mediamakers intend for their audiences to be “kicked out” of their normal habits of identifying with characters and immersing themselves in a story. Such mediamakers believe that identification tends to bring us too close to characters, providing a cheap emotional pleasure instead of a useful critical distance. Not every mediamaker has identification as a goal.

Regardless of their intention, no mediamaker can completely control your identifications with characters. No mainstream mediamaker can force you to identify with a character, nor can any art cinema director entirely prevent you from engaging emotionally with a character. We have been discussing two processes (alignment and allegiance) that are components of identification, and these processes can work together to encourage you to identify, but these processes stop short of actual character identification. We can understand characters and morally evaluate them without ever committing our feelings to them.

Films and television programs can provide powerful invitations for us to identify with characters, but they can do no more than invite. You the individual can choose to accept or reject the invitation created by the media. There are many reasons that an individual might reject the spectator positioning. You may encounter a moment that feels “false” (or “unrealistic” or “implausible”; see Chapter 2), and that may kick you out of the story. You may be unconvinced by an acting performance, or the plot might confuse you. Sometimes you may reject the spectator position because your own values differ from the broadly held social values that allegiance uses. For instance, you probably recognize that *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* wants you to find its protagonist Andy Stitzer to be likable and his friends to be horny losers. You, on the other hand, may find his slacker friends to be a welcome relief from Andy’s uptightness, and so you may identify more closely with them than with the protagonist. You recognize how you’re “supposed” to evaluate Andy as morally preferable by broadly held social standards, but you the individual may substitute an alternate set of values. The film more strongly aligns us with Andy than with his friends, but you may choose to give your feelings to his buddies instead. Since alignment gives us information on several different characters, and media offer us multiple simultaneous identifications, you may identify with characters that the film/television program does not highlight.

Sometimes you can refuse the spectator position for reasons that have little to do with the specific film or television program. If you dislike action films or chick flicks or sitcoms, it may be impossible for these media to entice you into the spectator position. Or your refusal may be more idiosyncratic. I, for instance, have an irrational dislike of

Meg Ryan. I understand that in most of her films I’m supposed to find her cute and adorable. I don’t. I recognize the spectator position that a Meg Ryan film creates, but I stubbornly refuse to occupy it. For some pig-headed reason, I deny myself the pleasure of identifying with any character that Meg Ryan portrays, and so I refuse the pleasure that a Meg Ryan film offers. That is my privilege as a moviegoer with free will. I, Greg M. Smith, am not the spectator, and neither are you. The spectator is a temporary position created by the film, a position that promises you and me the pleasure of identification.

This chapter has focused on the power of identification and how film and television have developed many techniques for encouraging that experience, but I end this chapter by acknowledging the limits of identification. Films create spectator positions for us to occupy, but whether any particular individual occupies those positions is not predictable. Identification can be widely shared among members of an audience, but it is also individual. Therefore I end this chapter with a caution about writing about film and television. When you discuss a media text (particularly one you love), it is tempting to say that film/TV *makes* people feel a particular way. After all, that’s how it feels. When other people in a movie theater laugh or cry when you do, it’s easy to assume they’re feeling the same way you do. I urge you to remember that we are all individuals making our own sense out of the images we see. You have no direct way of knowing how other people feel about a film or television program unless you ask them. It is tempting to assume that because you feel something when watching, other people must feel the same, but remember that anyone can reject a film or television program’s call to identify with characters. Because identification is remarkably complex, you cannot assume someone is identifying with a character. What you *can* do is describe how the film/television program makes its appeal, how it uses various techniques to encourage us to identify, and how it offers pleasure as a reward. Identification is powerful, but it is not all-powerful.

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