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Postwar Representations of the Child* (review)

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 87-89 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0074>

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Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child

by Lisa Cartwright

I have never thought much of Jacques Lacan. Not only did Lacan lead film theory somewhat astray with his complete emphasis on chains of signification that reduced any pretense of political agency to meaningless play, he was scornful of most things to do with the body, particularly affect. Thus, I was overjoyed to read, in the introductory chapter of *Moral Spectatorship*, that Lisa Cartwright too has “important reservations about Lacan’s influence” (6). Cartwright, in particular, is interested in reclaiming affect not just because it is timely (which it is) but because it can serve as the basis of a theory of communication drawn from theorists as diverse as Emmanuel Levinas, André Green, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Such a theory of communication is important to Cartwright because of her focus in this book upon representations of deaf, mute, and disabled children—children who would have been doubly and triply devoid of agency in Lacan’s thought. Despite his famous claim to “a return to the meaning of Freud,” Lacan’s thought was, of course, a synthesis of Freud and Saussurian semiotics; meanwhile, there were other schools of psychoanalytic thought that paid greater tribute to Freud’s theory of the self as an embodied subject.

One of these schools of thought is the object relations school, which is also central to Lisa Cartwright’s book. This school of thought is said to have been founded by Melanie Klein, although it, too, takes its origins from Freud. It is a much misunderstood field, but the reality is that many concepts from object relations are (mis)employed both in film theory and in popular culture on a regular basis: identification, splitting, projection,

introjection. We all understand very well what it is to have a love object and what it is to have that object torn away from us, how it seems to literally leave a hole inside us. For me, the glory of the object relations framework, however, is how it ultimately deemphasizes the strange complexities of drive theory and becomes a story of intersubjective identity formation. The foundational object relations “story” is not Oedipus but the mother-and-infant as one unit, the infant’s ego boundaries gradually forming within this environment. As the school developed, this story was told and retold in a various ways by Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, Heinz Kohut, and others, but its great strength is in its ability to explain how we become thinking, feeling entities and how the process of identification is at the core of selfhood. This is obviously of potential relevance to a theory of film spectatorship, and while it also bears some resemblance to Lacan’s tale of the mirror stage, the difference is that within object relations we have a story of subject formation that is fully embodied. The ego of object relations takes shape because we have bodies that experience sensation; experiences of pleasure and displeasure are stimulæ to projective and introjective processes, which ultimately relate to the accretion of objects—the cognitive-emotional matter from which the subject is formed.

Now if you ask me, all of this sounds like a very plausible scenario and a useful theory for building a theory of spectatorship, but to my grief it was never taken up by U.S. film theory, particularly the feminist theory and apparatus theory of the 1970s and 1980s. In her enthralling first chapter Cartwright provides a very convincing explanation as to

why this is the case. She cites an interview in the British feminist journal *m/f* with Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (14) in which they suggest that American feminist theorists had a strategic aversion to certain kinds of psychoanalytic work, including psychosis, developmental delay, infant-maternal relationships, and the body—all of which would rule out object relations theory, at least as they interpreted it. Indeed, Cartwright explains, these “aversions” are for the most part based on misunderstandings of object relations theory. For instance, it has often been assumed that object relations argues for a “whole” subject with strong ego boundaries, a concept that was politically highly distasteful during the 1970s, just when Althusser was calling into question the very concept of individuality and Foucault was proclaiming the death of the author. However, this is a misunderstanding; anyone familiar with the object relations theory will see that the ego in Melanie Klein’s thought is highly fragmented, comprised of many part-objects that are constantly forming and re-forming. It is clear from Klein’s theory that our identity is constantly being restructured because we are constantly creating new objects and part objects, constantly splitting, projecting, and introjecting. Even in Winnicott’s theory we are constantly at work remaking our boundaries, playing with our own destruction as a *necessary process* for being with others. However, Cartwright also points out that feminists had an aversion to what seemed to be an essentialist, mother-and-child story. Yet it could be caretaker-and-child, for the key to ego formation through object relations is libidinal attachment. The fact that it has been, historically and culturally, women who do the majority of the caretaking is merely an observable fact, but the theory does not depend upon it. The reality is that feminists of the 1980s had a strategic aversion to anything that relied too strongly on the body (in this case, the maternal body), as it would have seemed too much like essentialism; object relations theory, therefore, seems to have been grouped with the likes of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous. Something similar occurred with theories that dealt with affect, as affect is irrevocably linked to the body. Thus, the theories of André Green, a student of Lacan’s, have never received much play in the United States either, as much of his work focused upon building intersubjectivity around affect, “the anticipation of a meeting between the subject’s body and another’s body” (35). Meaning, therefore, is not based in lack, as claimed by Lacan, but in the body.

This may seem like a long prologue, but it is necessary to understand the various theoretical maneuvers being made in this complex book. Cartwright is at some pains to rehabilitate object relations theory, for her primary project is, first, to revive and reconsider theories of filmic identification. She supplements object relations with the philosophies of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, with their prescient and humane comments on the nature of compassion and morality, in order to explicate a new theory called *projective empathy*. Indeed, as she explicates, the entire body of theory surrounding film spectatorship based upon psychoanalytic identification has been largely discredited, for “without evidence as to the production of meaning in any given spectator” (22) there is no way to prove or disprove any of the claims made with regard to these spectatorial processes. Furthermore, Cartwright points out that the concept of identification has often been misused. Most people tend to think of identification as a kind of “I know how you feel,” whereas it is a more specific type of psychic mechanism that involves a fantasy of seeing from the place of the other founded upon libidinal investment, introjection, and projection. Cartwright proposes the alternative of projective empathy based on the dynamic, volatile, and sometimes even violent dance of intersubjectivity as explicated by object relations. Such a model envisions a relationship between spectator and the filmic action that is complex, diverse, grounded partly in fantasy and partly in the cognitive. The spectator may sometimes project and sometimes be projected upon (be introjected). Characters on the screen may have intersubjective relations amongst themselves as well as between spectators. Most importantly, this is no mere fantasy relationship between a subject and a mirror. It is a material relationship, as it must be because it is based upon psychoanalytic theories that do not shy away from the physical reality of the subject. Because there is an implication of understanding the other, there is also the potential for political motivations. The “moral” in *Moral Spectatorship* is the question of how “I” respond when “I believe I know how you feel” (49), although “my” responses could be diverse, and the potential range of responders is also diverse, to be sure. Nevertheless, there is a prospect of a moral response: How does a subject act in accordance with his or her moment of empathy when “feelings are projected through representations” (49)?

Clearly, this is some very ambitious theory, and perhaps I am not yet ready for all its implications. I admit that I expected Cartwright to proceed to build a model of

spectatorship (or reception) based upon this and apply it to some films, but this is not what the theory of projective identification truly portends. The chapters following her theoretical intervention (chapter 3, “The [Deaf] Woman’s Film”) focus on a subgenre of the maternal melodrama whose topic is mute or deaf-mute girls—the (deaf) woman’s film. Films analyzed include *Johnny Belinda* (1948), *Mandy* (1952), *The Miracle Worker* (1962), and *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), but rather than employing the theory to analyze a theoretical relationship of spectators to these texts, as some film scholars might expect, at this point Cartwright turns in a number of surprising directions, considering the technologies of film sound, on the one hand, and theories of voice and listening, on the other. The “coming to voice” of the deaf or mute child is equated with the acquisition of agency. Cartwright also analyzes the intersubjective relations of characters on the screen, a move that is often frowned upon in undergraduate film classes. In chapter 4, “A Child Is Being Beaten: Disorders of Authorship, Agency and Affect in Facilitated Communication,” she leaves the realm of film to enter the “real” world of children who are able to come to voice through facilitated communication, highlighting famous cases (including that of Helen Keller) where the facilitators were accused of “putting words in the mouths” of these children. As Cartwright argues, these cases highlight society’s need to imagine that subjectivity is equitable to individual integrity and that we are all in command of our own voice when in fact we are all essentially engaging in “facilitated communication.” That is, we exist within an intersubjective web in which our words are not entirely our own or entirely controlled by us. Returning to Freud’s much-traveled essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” Cartwright suggests that it is a reminder of how intersubjective memories “demand a story” (205). This is not to say that we should not be concerned with who is telling the truth but that the truth is ultimately a shared narrative and subject to certain emotional needs.

It is difficult to judge a book like this because it is so sophisticated and well written, drawing upon such diverse theoretical resources, and yet at the same time so entirely and explicitly aware of its own project to break new meth-

odological ground. Moreover, and as Cartwright explains, the book was originally part of a larger project that has been divided into two volumes, this book and a companion, *Images of Waiting Children*. This may account for its apparent eclecticism, which may not have existed in the original project. I do wonder at the decision to split it in two, and I look forward to reading volume 2, hoping that it will help me to understand more fully this fascinating project. Eclecticism can be an asset rather than a burden, but in this instance the central thesis, which is her proposal for a model of projective empathy, seems to be obscured. I fully acknowledge that this obscurity may be more in the mind of this reviewer than in the book itself, but in my opinion the single greatest flaw in this book is that Cartwright could have done more to explicate how her chapter case studies explicate her theory of projective empathy. As it is, I have only a vague understanding of how projective empathy might be applied. She very astutely interprets films and situations using the theoretical resources she has invoked, but this does not somehow add up in my mind to an understanding of the term *projective empathy*. For example, her readings of the relationship between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan (both in *The Miracle Worker* and in “real life”) are fascinating deployments of object relations, André Green’s theory of affect, and Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten,” yet they did not demonstrate to me how projective empathy would work either as a film theory or as a theory of intersubjective relations in a broader sense. And I really do want to know.

So I have high expectations of the companion volume to this book, and in the interim let me reiterate my excitement to see object relations theory finally receiving the kind of substantive, sophisticated treatment that it has so long warranted. Perhaps we are ready for a revival of psychoanalytic film theory—with a complete rebuild, of course, and, thanks to Lisa Cartwright, a fresh consideration of some ideas that were prematurely tossed to the curb.

Lisa Cartwright. *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 287 pp. \$22.95 (cloth).