
Current film scholarship has acknowledged that spectatorships negotiated through identity constructions such as sexuality can be understood variously as psychic, social, and political. But how can the relationship between these frameworks be theorized without simply resorting to a hodgepodge of useful concepts culled from cultural and film studies? Brett Farmer’s Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Spectatorships responds to this challenge by developing the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy into a flexible and broadly useful model of a psychically motivated social spectatorship.

As Farmer is quick to point out, fantasy-based approaches to spectatorship are not new. Yet he suggests that current scholarship, in attempting to find room for viewers outside of the rigidly determined subject positions of the classical film text, stresses fantasy primarily as an opportunity for viewers’ free identification with multiple subject positions. In doing so, it understates the importance of social contexts that privilege straight male subjects in the formation of non-straight and non-male subjectivities. Drawing upon structural psychoanalysis, Farmer insists that fantasy offers a framework for exploring directly the relationship between cultural and psychic influences on spectatorship because it “functions not only structurally, in that it positions the subject within preexisting paradigms of desire and meaning, but also contingently, in that the realization of fantasistic imperatives always depends on the determinate conditions of the subject’s cultural and historical particularity” (p. 11). In short, Farmer offers a model of spectatorship that is “a site of continuous interaction between the potential fantasmatic scenarios signalled by the text and the shifting psychosocial frames inhabited by the individual spectator” (p. 60). The result is an exchange between texts, cultural contexts, and viewing subjects, all of which play a vital and interdependent role in determining the shape of the viewing experience.

Chapters 2 and 3 develop this framework in terms of gay subjectivities and test it against an example of the Hollywood musical—The Pirate (1948)—and against camp obsessions with Mae West. Both the musical and the excessive female star have long been associated in popular culture with gay viewing practices, so much so that claiming these tastes has, in particular times and places, served as a means of assuming a gay identity. In dealing with the musical, Farmer first dismisses the widely held assumption that gay adoration of this genre is a kind of escapist utopianism, which, he argues, makes little sense given the incongruity between gay subjects’ structures of desire and its extremely heterocentrist tendencies. Instead, drawing on Elizabeth Ellsworth’s analysis of lesbian spectatorship (an analysis that concludes lesbian viewers find pleasure within heterocentrist narratives by focusing their attention on marginal narratives or characters), he suggests that gay viewers are likely to gravitate to film forms—such as the musical—that offer the most opportunities for a gay reworking of narrative. Because the musical is rich with textual excesses that distort and fracture the narrative, gay viewers are given nearly free play to rebuild the film outside of, or even contrary to, this dominant narrative in order to satisfy their particular desires. This genre thus attracts particularly strong gay attention. In the end, he suggests that the overdetermination of the heterosexual union that caps these narratives can be read as an attempt to close off play of this kind.

In a similar way, camp divas such as Mae West radically exceed normative definitions of gender. In camp, gender is performance and allows for gay pleasures in non-normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Though he acknowledges that camp has been critiqued by several scholars as a form of sexism—specifically as a masculine appropriation of the feminine—Farmer insists that camp operates outside of the essentializing and binary frameworks that are the basis of these critiques and demands that gay and camp misogyny be evaluated outside of them as well. In the end, he suggests that camp prevents
the equation of gender with the sex difference that undergirds patriarchal hierarchy and thus multiplies potential sites of gay identification in a politically useful manner.

Having established that particular forms of excess allow for gay fantasy play, in chapters 4 and 5 Farmer argues that gay fantasy springs from, and occupies itself with, a continued maternal identification. Accepting Kaja Silverman’s work on marginal masculinities as a starting point, Farmer argues that the gay fantasmatc is deeply involved in a continuing maternal identification that denies the hierarchies of sexual difference demanded by patriarchal identification. In doing so, he acknowledges the work of scholars who have rejected the concept of maternal identification—and frequently, by extension, psychoanalysis—as a tool for pathologizing homosexuality; he likewise acknowledges that Freud’s writings encourage this use of the concept by suggesting that maternal identification, and thus male homosexuality, is a failure or denial of the Oedipal crisis. Yet, distinguishing psychoanalysis from its practices, he insists on exploring the implications of a maternally identified gay subjectivity on our understanding of spectatorship. Taking his cues from Freud’s claim that heterosexuality is “a problem that needs elucidating” (p. 262) and Lacan’s later insistence that prejudice led Freud to define paternally identified heterosexuality as “natural, rather than normative” (p. 158), Farmer insists that maternal identification be positioned alongside paternal identification as a legitimate means of sexual maturation. He then attempts to assess the impact of maternal identification on potential gay viewings of melodrama and male stars.

Drawing on letters he solicited from gay men through community publications, Farmer notes the importance of gay men’s mothers in forming their movie tastes: first in their memories of shared, childhood viewing experiences; and second in gay men’s tendency to watch films enjoyed by their mothers. He connects this last to Barthe’s definition of history as “the time when my mother was alive before me,” a definition Farmer believes expresses Barthe’s desire to “position himself with and possibly as the mother” (p. 171). Maternally identified viewers may make similar choices, resulting in gay men’s engagement with particular forms of cinema. Turning to the films Suddenly Last Summer and Sunset Boulevard, he then examines the relationship between gay men and the portrayal of discreet maternal realms, a relationship, he argues, that offers maternal identification as the source for “a politically resonant refusal, or at least disruption, of patriarchal hegemony” (p. 158).

The final chapter turns to the relationship between gay subjectivities and Hollywood masculinities. Claiming that gay engagement with these images is at best transitory, Farmer again argues that maternal identification is a politically resonant refusal of patriarchy. By examining the films of Montgomery Clift and a variety of contemporary gay-fan publications, he suggests that gay engagement with masculinity takes the primary form of a rejection of normative masculinity. At its mildest it celebrates performers such as Clift who fracture normative patriarchal masculinities by assuming stereotypically feminine postures and attitudes, thus internalizing the mark of castration. At its most extreme and especially in the form of fan writings, it aggressively re-creates films such as Point Break as sexually explicit violations of masculine norms, frequently through fantasies of anal penetration.

These last remarks, though provocative, seem to take Farmer away from his primary interest and away from the main strengths of his book. Concerned with forms of gay spectatorship frequently associated with pre-Stonewall gay life—in short, the typical behaviours of the “flaming movie queen” (p. 21)—Farmer’s book revives an important gay figure that is too infrequently examined by contemporary queer studies. Equally concerned with reviving the utility of a psychoanalytic practice dismissed because it seems to rest firmly in the clutches of a heterocentrist patriarchy, he discovers new ways of productively and positively using the tools it provides for a politically resonant gay criticism. As a result,
he is able to reveal that for gay spectators, pleasure can be political, even in the Hollywood cinema.

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