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"What about the Audience?/What About Them?": Spectatorship and Cinematic Pleasure

Tamara Harvey

Poststructuralist analyses of subjectivity tend to focus on the constitution of the Subject through the process of desire and the Subject's perceptions of an Other. These theories have broken ground in their critique of the unified Cartesian subject (the subject of empire) and of metaphysically guaranteed truth. But I want to explore pleasure, not desire. If desire is an experience of *différence* subtly informed by lack, pleasure is an experience of multiple differences often figured (I believe improperly) in terms of excess. In particular, I am interested in a kind of cinematic pleasure evident in genre film spectacles involving many bodies and moving outside an individual's *jouissance*.

Specifically, I discuss cinematic pleasure and the "Kool Thing" dance number from Hal Hartley's 1992 film *Simple Men*. Though Hartley's movie is not a genre film, I use recent genre film theories because they say something useful about pleasure and because this specific scene works as a "number" like those found in genre films. I chose *Simple Men* because it gives me pleasure, and because, though I don't have time to develop these ideas today, how we understand this scene reflects on our understanding of postmodernism—analyzing this film in terms of pleasure and spectacle provides an alternative to readings which emphasize market excesses and ironic citationality.

Genre films have been traditionally excluded from the canon of "serious" and aesthetically-redeemable films largely *because* they are concerned with pleasure rather than desire. Successful narrative is frequently connected to notions of desire—narrative is driven by a lack whose fulfillment is the carrot which leads both characters and readers alike toward the *dénouement*. When genre films are characterized as a string of numbers loosely held together by a weak plot, the "pleasure" of these films is still being defined in terms of desire. Their weak plots suggest that satisfaction comes too soon and too crudely; by this model, pleasure is simply the fulfillment of desire. The problem, I would argue, is that this

desire-model is still too subject-based and even elitist in its implicit judgment of the audience of genre films as cultural lemmings. The genre film theories I explore help us see the audience as a competent *community*.

Rick Altman, Carol Clover and Linda Williams point out in their studies of musicals, horror films, and porn that the logic of genre films is not that of a linear narrative aimed at suturing spectators into identifying with a central protagonist. Their work suggests three important aspects of spectatorial pleasure in these films: 1) connoisseurship, 2) multiple identifications, and 3) spectacle.

The first of these pleasures, connoisseurship, involves a sense of spectatorial mastery. As Carol Clover points out, horror film audiences are well versed in the topoi and traditions of the genre, and enjoy seeing how those elements are played out in a given film: "The 'art' of the horror film, like the 'art' of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance, and it is understood as such by the competent audience" (11). Thus, one takes pleasure in being able to recognize and evaluate the differences and similarities which occur between an individual film and the genre as a whole; there is a pleasure in the very sense of familiarity and competence. Moreover, there is also pleasure to be found in the social activity of comparing evaluations of these generic differences with others; discussion and debate over these differences brings out differences and similarities *among the viewers*.

The logic of comparison and connoisseurship extends to the general narrative logic of these films. Altman, Clover and Williams all argue for a logic of comparison between numbers as opposed to a more traditional narrative trajectory. For instance, musicals operate according to a logic of opposition and pairing in order to bring about the marriage of opposites which constitutes the inevitable happy ending. Likewise, the murders in slasher films usually establish a difference between the sexually active, expendable characters and the sexually inactive "Final Girl," and the sexual numbers in many hard-core films establish differences between bad, over-technical sex and good, spontaneous sex. In each of these cases, the dominant narrative logic is one of comparison rather than causality.

The second aspect of pleasure I have listed, multiple identifications, is especially emphasized by the above mentioned theorists. Again, this reflects an experience of difference rather than lack. Perhaps because of the sense of mastery arising from generic competence, perhaps in addition to this mastery, genre films can be seen as creating what Judith Mayne calls a "safe zone" (Mayne 97) in which spectators try on different identities. The predictability of the films' general moves creates a critical distance which adds to the sense of a safe zone already fostered by the typically anonymous viewing conditions of cinematic spectatorship. Altman, Clover and Williams especially focus on this "trying on" in terms of cross-gender identification, though the degree of play they identify varies considerably. These films foster non-unified spectators who inhabit different subject-positions rather than being dislocated by the experience of desire.

Finally, these movies provide the pleasure of spectacle and sensory stimulus. On the most simplistic level, spectacle in these films is to be found in the individual numbers considered apart from any narrative logic. Because of their non-linear narrative structures and their disruption of simple spectator-character identifications, there is a greater emphasis in genre films on atemporal sensory perception than in traditional narrative films. If pleasure is the experience of *differences* as I have defined it, how does this work in spectacle? The effect of spectacle is felt in the body of the spectator, and those felt sensory responses which accompany fear, arousal, or jubilation are sparked by outside stimuli. Pleasure felt in the body is dependent upon a sensory awareness of things outside the body. Again these are materially present differences rather than the lack of the Other.

Altman, Clover and Williams do not say as much as they could about spectacle. They are each interested in defending much maligned genres against detractors who characterize these films as feeble vehicles for a string of barely distinguishable numbers. In building this defense, they tend to emphasize alternative narrative structures and spectatorial economies while subordinating spectacle to these other elements. In general, they explain spectacle in terms of narrative relationships, although narrative itself is redefined in order to accommodate spectacle. This is a logical counter-attack against those who overemphasize and simplify numbers. Additionally, they tend to emphasize the question of gender

identity and bisexual masquerade, yet though the model of subjectivity posited here is multiple it is still characterized in fairly traditional, binary terms. Subjects identify with roles which are either male or female, and the bisexual blending of the genders is described as just that, a merger. This is no doubt reflected in the genres themselves, but I also want to suggest that there is something in the methodology of genre studies that contributes to both the narrative treatment of spectacle and the binary, merger model of cross-gender play. The methodology is not really spectacle-friendly. Clover, Altman, and Williams are all doing the initial work of establishing and categorizing a wide variety of films which are unfamiliar to academic audiences (at least in their academic capacities). This project resonates well with the logic of comparison that characterizes the narrative structures of these films. However, it is much more difficult to treat spectacle sympathetically and adequately within this methodological structure because spectacle, I argue, involves a sensory play which *defies* the dynamic of comparison. Comparison introduces notions of multiple identifications and subject positions which bring into question stable notions of subjectivity but it is still grounded in a relatively individualistic notion of subjectivity. Spectacle, I suggest, helps us move more radically away from individualistic subjectivity as the controlling paradigm.

Rick Altman provides both the foil and the foundation for my approach to musical spectacle in *Simple Men*. According to Altman, musicals and other melodramatic genres have a dual-focus rather than a single-focus structure. "Pairing-off is the natural impulse of the musical, whether it be in the presentation of the plot, the splitting of the screen, the choreography of the dance, or even the repetition of the melody" (32). Instead of seeing one scene as leading causally to the next, scenes in musicals work in pairs which establish the opposition between the central romantic pair. Thus, if the leading woman sings a song in one scene, the leading man must sing a song in a similar scene. This reflects the guiding romantic logic of musicals. Since the union of the romantic couple is the goal and outcome of most musicals, dissolves become structural metaphors for romantic merger. Dissolves leading into musical numbers also initiate a move from "real" into ideal space which mirrors the spectator's own relationship to the ideal space of the movie. Although I find Altman's analysis largely convinc-

ing, this emphasis on pairs and oppositions seems rather reductive. There has to be something more to cinematic pleasure besides the dynamic of synthesis best exemplified by romantic union.

Altman has a hard time accounting for dynamics that fall outside this binary model. In addition to duet and solo shots (solo shots are almost always paired), he describes a third shot as follows:

The third type of shot might be called unmarked, since it includes both men and women without marking any particular pairings. In general this rather unbalanced shot involves secondary characters and is more closely related to traditional notions of plot than are the other two types. Even here, however, where the love interest may seem absent, the viewer remains aware of the importance of any given shot or scene for the ultimate coupling. (35)

Similarly, Linda Williams compares trios like "Good Mornin'" in *Singin' in the Rain* to ménage à trois, suggesting that they are just another number in the typology of numbers (133). Indeed, they are less important than those duets which in musicals and porn alike embody the heterosexual romantic and sexual ideals of the genre. In other words, like Altman, she sees these scenes as being relatively unmarked. I believe that these scenes are especially important for our understanding of cinematic pleasure *because* they are unmarked and it is precisely these unmarked scenes which categorizing genre studies have a difficult time dealing with. Whereas Altman suggests that unmarked shots are "more closely related to traditional notions of plot," (35). I would suggest that they are less so because they are less clearly informed by the dynamics of desire. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that these scenes are better examples of spectacle because they are concerned with the surfaces of bodies as such rather than the play of desire between a pair or expressed by a solo. Unless it involves a lovers' triangle, trios tend to de-emphasize interpersonal dynamics because the exchange of looks between characters is much more difficult to follow and interpret.

The "Kool Thing" dance scene in *Simple Men* is one of only two musical scenes. As with numbers in genre films, this scene is logically connected to the narrative and serves important narrative functions, but is also in many ways separate from the narrative

of the film. And as in genre films the relationship of the viewer to this scene cannot be discussed in terms of simple identification. The scene begins with Martin driving up in his pick-up, squealing to a halt, jumping out and screaming "I can't stand the quiet!" as Sonic Youth's song "Kool Thing" begins. The film then cuts to the interior of the bar/pavilion where all the major characters dance. This entire dance scene is made up of a single shot, filmed at eye-level but at a distance and framed so as to suggest a sort of proscenium arch. First, Elina dances alone, with Martin and Dennis watching and then joining her. Then, Bill and Kate dance into view in the foreground of the scene, lit with a blue light. While they dance seductively together, we continue to see the trio dancing back and forth in the background. The camera then focuses once again on the trio and follows them to the right and back to the left, this time catching a glimpse of Kate and Bill in the foreground. The scene ends with an abrupt cut to a close-up of Kate sitting at a round table talking about Madonna. This inaugurates a discussion among the characters, who are seated at the table, about music and the exploitation of women.

It would be easy to read this dance scene as an ironic or campy production number in the midst of a film marked by absurd circumstances, vivid cinematography, and deadpan dialogue. Such a reading, however, does not do justice to the pleasure of this film. Rather than simply bracketing the dance as a random moment, I believe it is valuable to look more closely at the way pleasure engages viewers of the film. It is impossible on a single viewing to watch all the characters in the trio at once, and that, along with the dancing itself evokes the pleasure of spectacle that I've been describing. It is difficult to *organize* this scene in one's mind because we cannot easily map the specific dynamics of looking, approaching, and touching among the trio, as we can the gazing and touching between a pair of people, and as a consequence we are drawn into and *feel* the spectacle more. The pair of Bill and Kate, on the other hand, embodies desire and returns us to the realm of cognizable narrative. When there are only two figures, it is fairly easy to use binary comparison and narrative evaluations in order to make sense of the totality, but this is not as easy to do with three. Thus, the figure of the three is useful to me because it disrupts the binary and narrative logic which I find so troubling in Altman.

This is evident in the staging of the scene. The dance space is divided into three parts by a blue curtain (tied back) several feet from the left wall and a blue post several feet from the right wall. During Elina's original dance across the space, we see the left curtain but not the right post—the curtain does not organize the space in this first portion of the scene, and thus our attention is on Elina's movement through space. In the next traversal Dennis follows Elina, and in the third Martin joins in. Although with each addition the interpersonal dynamics of this trio changes somewhat, the emphasis remains on movement and dance. Thus it is very difficult to read the first part of this scene in terms of narrative. The dancers don't look at each other and their movements are basically in unison but idiosyncratic, further inhibiting narrative evaluation and emphasizing the physical play of difference. The third traversal, however, includes the blue post on the right, and once the trio passes this post, Kate and Bill dance from the right third into the center space as if from off stage, redefining the space as a stage rather than unmarked space. As the threesome continues to dance back and forth in the background, we see Martin jealously watch the couple in the middle. Finally, the camera leaves Kate and Bill and focuses on the threesome again in the right third of the space. They start traversing left once more, and this time while they are in the center space we see Bill and Kate blurred in the foreground. The scene ends in the left third of the space.

The space changes according to which set of dancers is inhabiting it. When the trio is dancing, the emphasis is on movement and space. On the other hand, when the couple dances into the center of the dance area it becomes a stage. Martin's jealous looks now remind us of his desires and the narrative more generally. According to this model, desire is connected with theatricality and narrative whereas pleasure is connected with spectacle and movement. The desiring couple have more power to redefine the space than does the trio—during the final traversal of the dance floor, the trio is not able to regain the space of pleasure.

Although I find it useful to make concrete distinctions between desire and pleasure in order to recognize a sense of materiality and non-binary play which is not subordinated to the presuppositions and impositions of narrative and which is in some ways empowering to the audience, there is something utopian in this urge. And, of course, it is a false dichotomy—part of the felt

pleasure I describe is driven by the *desire* to master the scene and see everything at once, just as the movement of narrative and desire also evokes pleasure. This utopian urge is perhaps natural; as both Richard Dyer and Rick Altman explain, musical entertainment is often concerned with creating a utopian effect. The musical number represents an ideal which differs from the "real" of the film's narrative while being connected to it by dissolve. Likewise, the musical space is held at a distance (a distance emphasized in this case by the smooth single shot which mimes a spectator's point of view and by the staged framing of the scene) so as to create a distinction between our real space and the film's ideal space which can then also be connected by dissolve. It is impossible to truly separate spectacle from narrative or pleasure from desire, yet it is important to remain aware of the differences between pleasure and desire, difference and lack, spectacle and narrative. Rather than seeing trios as inessential, unmarked anomalies, we need to recognize that they perform a different kind of work which destabilizes any pat model of narrative logic and of ideological closure. Utopian models often provide this kind of destabilizing impetus.

One problem with shifting away from familiar issues of individual subjectivity to spectacle is the potentially dangerous loss of agency or notions of agency through this dissolve into pleasure. The discussion of Madonna's sexuality which follows raises many of the ethical questions surrounding spectacle. As in the dance scene, the camera appears to mime self-consciously a spectator's point of view. However, our position as spectators in this second scene is less empowered. The camera looks up at each character from a position at or slightly below table top level. It focuses on each character in turn, while both that character and others speak. The characters are drunk and we too seem to share in this drunkenness: we watch each character's physical reactions to the others' comments for awhile after that character speaks instead of turning our attention to the new speaker. While this focused attention to the physical is to be expected when watching dance, it is unsettling when listening to dialogue. Again this suggests an interest in the visible apart from narrative or even discursive meanings, but because the camera does not move, we are trapped into a submissive position which is enhanced by the low-angle shots. Of course, during the dance scene we had to submit to the camera as well, but there the movement of the camera created an illusion of control—

the panning back and forth seemed natural. Here, though, we are made to submit, and that submission is pleasurable in a drunken sort of way.

Significantly, the discussion explicitly addresses problems of sexual exploitation and audience.

DENNIS: Everyone is involved with exploitation: The person whose body it is, the salesperson, and the audience that is entertained.

BILL: The significant distinction is: Who earns more money, the exploited body or the salesperson?

KATE: And what about the audience?

DENNIS: What about them?

BILL: Exploitation of sexuality has achieved a new respectability because some of the women whose bodies are exploited have gained control over that exploitation.

DENNIS: They earn more money.

BILL: (*Concurring*) They call the shots.

KATE: They're not thought of as victims.

BILL: If they earn the most money, no, they probably don't think of themselves as victims either.

DENNIS: But what about the audience?

BILL: What about them? (Hartley 57-58)

When the characters callously say “What about them?”, it is funny, and we enjoy the joke not only despite, but because we are its butt. The first time the question of audience is raised, Kate seems to be asking whether the audience participates as an exploiter; the second time, Dennis seems to be asking whether the audience is victimized. Whereas during the dance scene we were able to enjoy the pleasure of spectacle and the play between pleasure and desire, spectacle and narrative, this scene both imposes and withholds from us the positions of victim and victimizer. I want to argue for a positive, active audience engagement with spectacle, but this scene reminds us thematically of sticky problems of agency while reinforcing those problems with its camera work. We may be able to try on different subject-positions, and we have some freedom in the viewing choices we make, but in many ways we are controlled by the camera. In fact, this can especially be the case when we are dealing with spectacle because outside the narrative we are less apt to think in terms of choices—we become victims or victimizers

according to our affective relationship to the spectacle. And often we enjoy it. In other words, despite the opportunities it offers for complex spectatorial engagement, spectacle may be seen as both covering up our relative lack of agency and allowing us to take pleasure in our submission.

Returning to the dance scene, we might observe that the women tend to both lead and to be the focus of both parts of the dance—Elina invents and leads the dance for the trio, while Kate leads Bill in a circling dance which reflects her position as the one who will decide whether they sleep together. This appears to be the kind of strength and self-determination which Elina praises in Madonna. However, in both cases the women seem to represent “leading women” rather than individualized characters. Elina initiates the dance, but her execution is smooth compared to the flailing attempts of both Dennis and Martin, making her into more of a seductive object than a seducing subject. Similarly, while Kate initiates the circling, Bill halts it by caressing her back with his finger—he exercises the decisive gesture. So are these women in control of their own sexuality and exploitation? If not, do we as spectators exploit them or are we victimized by this perhaps subtly sexist portrayal of feminine initiative? I don’t have an answer and clearly no single answer can suffice. Yet, I believe there is some benefit in recognizing the power of pleasure in all three of the manifestations which I discuss in this paper: pleasures can be both liberating and damning. Perhaps that is a necessary risk if we are to get beyond individualistic Self-Other interpretations of desire and narrative in order to imagine more communal dynamics, in this case those of a competent, engaged audience.

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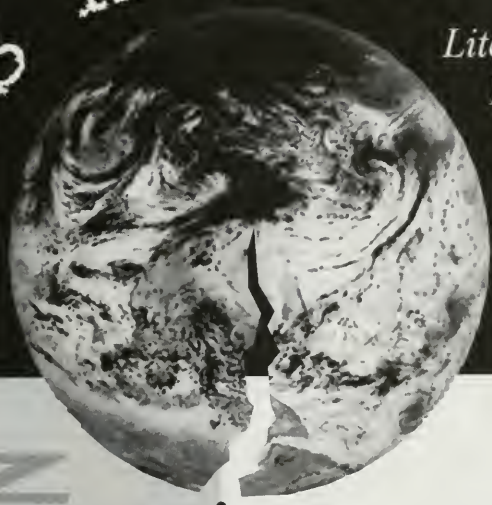
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