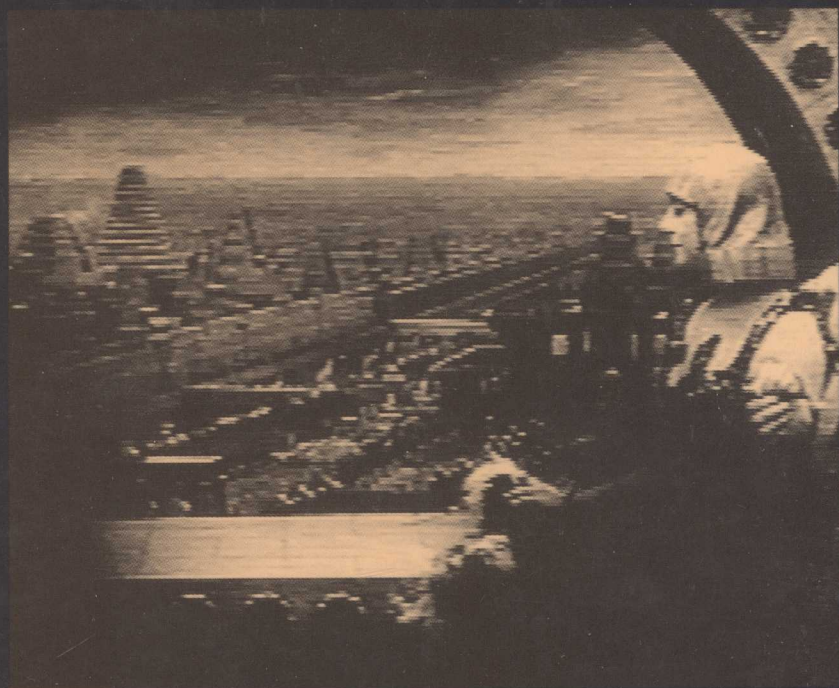


BABEL & BABYLON

Spectatorship in American Silent Film



MIRIAM HANSEN

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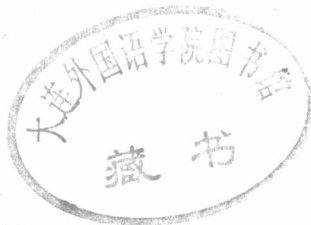


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Babel and Babylon

Spectatorship in American Silent Film

Miriam Hansen



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Introduction: Cinema Spectatorship and Public Life

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The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight, a Veriscope “illustration” of the long-delayed bout for the heavyweight championship, premiered at New York’s Academy of Music in May–June 1897 and subsequently ran in major American cities for many weeks. Approximately 100 minutes long, usually accompanied by an expert’s running commentary and occasionally interrupted by vaudeville acts, the film made up one of the first full-length programs centering on motion pictures. But length was not the only unusual thing about the success of *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight*. While the film attracted large audiences that cut across class boundaries, reviewers noted with amazement that the shows were heavily attended by women, in Chicago, according to one source, women made up 60 percent of the patronage.¹ Unlike live prizefights with their all-male clientele, the cinematic mediation of the event gave women access to a spectacle from which they traditionally had been excluded. To be sure, this access was not the same as participation in the live event, the experience was abstracted into visual terms, removed from the sensuous impact of noise, smell, and audience excitation. At one remove, however, it afforded women the forbidden sight of male bodies in seminudity, engaged in intimate and intense physical action.

Almost three decades later, following the death of Rudolph Valentino in August 1926, millions of American women went to see *The Son of the Sheik*, the star’s last and most perverse film. In one of the early sequences of that film, the romantic hero is captured by a gang of swarthy villains, half-stripped and suspended from his wrists on the wall of an exotic ruin, then whipped, taunted, and tortured at length. Although reverse shots showing the villains as gloating spectators ostensibly disclaim the effects of the sadistic spectacle, there is no doubt for whose benefit this spectacle was really staged—for the spectator in front of the screen, the fan, the female consumer. The

prolonged display of Valentino's naked torso, proven successful in previous films such as *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1922) and *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924), had become a calculated ingredient of star packaging. Taking the fate of the matinee idol to unprecedented extremes, Valentino became an emblem of the simultaneous liberalization and commodification of sexuality that crucially defined the development of American consumer culture.

These two snapshots condense, individually and in juxtaposition, a number of issues I will explore in this book. To begin with, they both turn on the spectator, on a particular mode of spectatorship, as a fundamental category of the institution of cinema. Like other media of visual representation and spectacle, but more systematically and exclusively, the cinema focused the creation of meaning on the register of the look, on processes of perceptual identification with seeing and seen. Yet the two instances also reveal a crucial distinction: in the case of Valentino, the film anticipates a spectator, specifically a female spectator, through particular strategies of representation and address; whereas, in the case of *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight*, the film's success with female audiences was more or less accidental. When, how, and to what effect does the cinema conceive of the spectator as a textual term, as the hypothetical point of address of filmic discourse? And once such strategies have been codified, what happens to the viewer as a member of a plural, social audience?²

The two vignettes speak of spectatorship in pronounced terms of gender and sexuality, as visual pleasure revolves around the display of bodies of the opposite sex. Yet because the bodies in question are male and the beholders female, the configuration of vision and desire seems to violate a long-standing taboo in patriarchal culture—the taboo on an active female gaze, linked to the woman's traditional position as object of spectacle. This taboo, operative in different ways in high art and popular entertainment alike, had not yet been elaborated in specifically cinematic ways when *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* was made. In the Valentino films, however, it served as a backdrop for a self-conscious and lucrative transgression. How did the cinema respond to women's massive moviegoing, and how did moviegoing change the patterns of women's lives?

What I wish to suggest with the juxtaposition of the two vignettes is that the emergence of cinema spectatorship is profoundly intertwined with the transformation of the public sphere, in particular the gendered itineraries of everyday life and leisure. The period of American film history on which I focus—roughly from the beginnings of the cinematic institution in the 1890s through the end of the silent era toward the end of the 1920s—marks a major shift in the topography of public and private domains, especially

with regard to the position of women and the discourse on sexuality. What changed were not only the standards by which certain realms of experience could be articulated in public while others remained private but also the methods by which these delineations were drawn. The very fact of female spectatorship, for instance, assumes a different meaning in relation to the homosocial tradition of popular entertainments, as invoked and subverted in the boxing film, than from the perspective of the systematic appropriation of female desire by an emerging culture of consumption.

To consider the question of spectatorship under the aspect of the public sphere seems especially important in light of developments both within and beyond the discipline of cinema studies. As even film scholars have begun to notice, we are on the threshold, if not already well past it, of yet another major transformation of the public sphere: the new electronic media, in particular the video market, have changed the institution of cinema at its core and made the classical spectator an object of nostalgic contemplation (in the manner of Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*). This does not mean that the category of spectatorship can be dissolved in favor of cynical celebrations of corporate communication or a wide-eyed advocacy of postmodernist participation.³ On the contrary, now that cinematic spectatorship is becoming sufficiently contaminated with other modes of film consumption, we can trace more clearly its historically and theoretically distinct contours: on the one hand, a specifically modern form of subjectivity, defined by particular perceptual arrangements and a seemingly fixed temporality; on the other, a collective, public form of reception shaped in the context of older traditions of performance and modes of exhibition.

It is no coincidence that at this historical juncture spectatorship has become a key issue in scholarly debates, especially since the mid-1970s. The shift of focus from the filmic object and its structures to the relations between films and viewers, between cinema and spectator, was a prime motor in the development of a particular direction in film theory, derived from linguistically informed paradigms of semiotics and psychoanalysis. In the writings of Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and others, in the pages of the British journal *Screen*, the spectator was conceptualized under the poststructuralist category of the subject (as elaborated by Lacan and Althusser) and corresponding notions of ideology. Arguing from critical perspectives, mainly Marxist and feminist, film theorists advanced a systematic analysis of how the cinema, in particular classical Hollywood cinema, works to bind and realign the spectator's desire with dominant ideological positions; above all, how it simultaneously mobilizes and masks the subject's fundamental heterogeneity in such a manner as "to create within the specta-

tor the comforting illusion that s/he is in fact a transcendental, unified subject."⁴

This approach has yielded two overlapping types of inquiry. One centers on the concept of the cinematic apparatus (a concept combining basic technological aspects, Althusser's *dispositif*, and Freudian metapsychology), in which the spectator figures as the transcendental vanishing point of specific spatial, perceptual, social arrangements, such as "the darkness of the auditorium and the resultant isolation of the individual spectator; the placement of the projector, source of the image behind the spectator's head; and the effect of the real produced by the classical fiction film."⁵ Whether theorized in terms of the analogy with Plato's cave, the metaphor of the mirror stage, the principles of Renaissance perspective, or the ideological self-effacement of classical continuity conventions, the apparatus refers to the *general* conditions and relations of cinematic reception, the technologically changing yet ideologically constant parameters of the institution. By contrast, the other type of inquiry is concerned with the step-by-step solicitation of the spectator in the textual system of particular films. Relying on the linguistic concept of "enunciation" (Emile Benveniste), writers such as Raymond Bellour and Stephen Heath developed methods of textual analysis guided by the question of how positions of understanding and subjectivity are being offered to—and expected of—the film's recipient, how knowledge and authority, pleasure and identification, are organized through systematic processes of vision and narration.⁶

In either case the spectator under consideration is not to be confused with the empirical moviegoer, as a member of a social audience. Rather, psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory deals with the spectator as a term of discourse, an effect of signifying structures. Yet this does not make the spectator simply an "implied" or "ideal" reader in the sense of literary reception aesthetics. Instead, the emphasis is on the constitutive tension between the spectator inscribed by the filmic text and the social viewer who is asked to assume certain positions—on identification as a *process* which, on a temporary yet institutional basis, interweaves empirical subjects with the discourse of the Subject.⁷

Despite the theoretical recognition that there is more to reception than textually and ideologically predetermined subject positions, the spectator of film theory remains a somewhat abstract and ultimately passive entity. Although the subject of textual analysis (inasmuch as he or she is engaged in a hypothetical reading) may appear to perform a more active part than the subject of the cinematic apparatus, the concept of enunciation likewise implies that the spectator has been duped in some way, since the signifying

process depends upon the gratifying illusion by which the viewing subject imagines him or herself as the enunciating author of the filmic fiction. Moreover, as feminist critics from Laura Mulvey to Mary Ann Doane have argued, classical spectatorship is fundamentally gendered, that is, structurally masculinized, which makes textually dominant routes of identification problematic for the female viewer (or for that matter any viewer who is not male and heterosexual, middle class and white). Increasingly, therefore, efforts to conceptualize a female viewer have gone beyond the psychoanalytic-semiotic framework to include culturally specific and historically variable aspects of reception. In effect, the question of female spectatorship has been a major impulse for film theory to confront empirical levels and formations of reception (such as the industry's catering to female audiences through particular stars and genres)—in other words, to take up the contradictions posed by film history.⁸

During the same decade that film theory moved into the forefront of scholarly debate—in a sense constituted itself as a movement, a new discourse—film history too made a break with the discipline's past by redefining the entire area of research. Film historians dissatisfied with the traditional surveys of pioneer inventions and great works of film art set out to revise the standard narratives—of American cinema in particular—through detailed empirical studies. Like film theory, the new historiography questioned the primacy of the filmic object, of canonized products and oeuvres, and turned its attention to the cinema as an economic and social institution, to relations between film practice and developments in technology, industrial organization and exhibition practices. The spectator enters these studies as a consumer, as a member of a demographically diverse audience. According to Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, even the notion of a socially and historically specific audience is already an "abstraction generated by the researcher, since the unstructured group that we refer to as the movie audience is constantly being constituted, dissolved, and reconstituted with each film-going experience."⁹

This may be an extreme statement of the empiricist case (not necessarily endorsed by Allen and Gomery), but it is indicative of a self-imposed abstinence of the new film history with regard to the social and cultural dynamics of cinema consumption, with discourses of experience and ideology. We seem to be faced with a gap between film theory and film history, between the spectator as a term of cinematic discourse and the empirical moviegoer in his or her demographic contingency. The question, then, is whether the two levels of inquiry can be mediated at all; whether and how the methodologies and insights of each can be brought to bear upon the

other. There is no doubt that theoretical concepts of spectatorship need to be historicized so as to include empirical formations of reception. By the same token, however, a reception-oriented film history cannot be written without a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the possible relations between films and viewers.

Among a number of attempts to overcome the split between theoretical and historical-empirical directions in cinema studies, the recent recourse to cognitive psychology is of particular interest, especially if it is combined, as in the work of David Bordwell, with the project of a historical poetics of cinema.¹⁰ As in psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory, perhaps even more so, the spectator appears primarily as a function of signifying structures, specifically, the strategies of filmic narration. But the viewer, Bordwell insists, is more than a passive victim of ideological conspiracy; the viewer is an active participant in the filmic narration, "a hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film's representation." Supplemented by "many sorts of particular knowledge," the viewer's "experience is cued by the text, according to intersubjective protocols that may vary." This concept of reception may seem to include a historical dimension on two counts: the somewhat vague reference to "many sorts of particular knowledge" and the "intersubjective protocols" which vary according to different paradigms and norms of narration, such as the classical Hollywood example, the art film, or different types of modernist cinema; each paradigm in turn is flexible as to its various components and, in the case of modernist types of narration, specifically concerned with foregrounding "the historicity of all viewing conventions."¹¹

What kind of history can be grasped through the meshes of cognitive psychology, as a model that crucially relies on the assumption of human, if not biological, universals? (The same question of course applies to certain aspects of psychoanalysis.) It might also be of importance that, by limiting the viewer's activity to conscious and preconscious mental processes, the cognitivist approach deliberately evades the contested zone of sexuality and sexual difference. But it is equally problematic that the tension between the textually inscribed spectator and the empirical viewer seems to evaporate altogether—that nothing but the one-hundred-percent successful performance of perceptual operations expected of the viewer should qualify as spectatorship. If the viewer exists only as the formal function of the filmic address, where does this leave the female audiences of *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight*? And how do we distinguish between historical acts of reception and the contemporary critic's analysis of narratorial cues?

What is eliminated with the tension between textually inscribed and empirical viewer is not merely the contingency of individual acts of reception, but rather the hermeneutic constellation in which a historical spectator makes sense of what he or she perceives, how he or she interprets the filmic narration.¹² This is less a question of the "many sorts of particular knowledge" that get called up to enable the reception of particular films than of a specific social horizon of understanding that shapes the viewer's interpretation. That horizon is not a homogeneous storage of intertextual knowledge but a contested field of multiple positions and conflicting interests, defined (though not necessarily confined) in terms of the viewer's class and race, gender and sexual orientation.

What is missing from any theory that conceptualizes the spectator as a function—or effect—of a closed, albeit flexible, system, be it the formal codes of narration or the script of Ideology, is a place for the public dimension of cinematic reception. This public dimension is distinct from both textual and social determinations of spectatorship because it entails the very moment in which reception can gain a momentum of its own, can give rise to formations not necessarily anticipated in the context of production. Such formations may crystallize around particular films, star discourses, or modes of exhibition, but they are not identical with these structural conditions. Although always precarious and subject to ceaseless—industrial, ideological—appropriation, the public dimension of the cinematic institution harbors a potentially autonomous dynamic which makes even a phenomenon like the Valentino cult more than a consumerist spectacle orchestrated from above.

In this book, I approach the question of spectatorship from the perspective of the public sphere, as a critical concept that is itself a category of historical transformation. In light of the blind spots resulting from the increased specialization of both film theory and film history, the concept of the public sphere offers a theoretical matrix that encompasses different levels of inquiry and methodology. On one level the cinema constitutes a public sphere of its own, defined by particular relations of representation and reception; these depend upon processes specific to the institution of cinema, that is, the uneven development of modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, in conjunction with particular forms of film style. At the same time the cinema intersects and interacts with other formations of public life, which fall into the areas of social and cultural history. In both respects the question is which discourses of experience will be articulated in public and which remain private; how these delineations are organized, for

whom, by whom and in whose interest; how the public, as a collective and intersubjective horizon, is constituted and constitutes itself under particular conditions and circumstances.

The idea of the "public"—and the concomitant distinction of public and private—has a vast history, which has been taken up by various traditions of social and political thought; in the American tradition, for instance, by writers like John Dewey, C. Wright Mills, Hannah Arendt, and Richard Sennett. More recently it has been of concern to social and women's historians, particularly in studies of mass and consumer culture.¹³ Although I draw on some of this work, I rely primarily on the German debate on the public sphere, initiated by Jürgen Habermas' 1962 publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.¹⁴ This debate not only offers the most elaborated theoretical framework on the topic so far but also implies a number of significant trajectories because of the contexts in which it was elaborated: discussions on the conditions of culture under advanced capitalism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, in particular Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the development of the German New Left and of the "alternative movements" of the 1970s (including the women's movement), which, adopting a concept from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, defined themselves as "oppositional" or "counter public spheres"; and, finally, the conception of the cinema in terms of the public sphere in Kluge's writings, films, and media politics.

Unlike sociological attempts to conceptualize the "public" in typological and functionalist terms, or traditional political theory's efforts to ground it in idealized versions of the Greek polis, Habermas sets out to reconstruct the public as a fundamentally historical category, linked to the emergence of bourgeois society under liberal capitalism. He complicates "the standard dualistic approaches to the separation of public and private in capitalist societies"¹⁵ by establishing the "public sphere" as a fourth term, distinct from the Hegelian trinity of family, state, and civil society, terms which in turn participate in the dialectic of private and public. Habermas traces the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere in the informal association of private persons vis-à-vis and in opposition to the "sphere of public violence" (the state, the realm of the "police"). The forms of civil interaction that define this new type of association—equality, mutual respect, general accessibility, and potential openness to all subjects and subject matter—are based on an autonomy grounded in the private realm, that is, civil society and its property relations (commodity circulation and social labor) and, at the core of that realm, the intimate sphere of the nuclear family. Yet, as the

public emerges as an arena in which social status is suspended, it brackets economic laws and dependencies, thereby suppressing the material conditions of its historical possibility. Its very claim to expressing and representing a discourse of general, "merely" or "purely" human concern depends upon the assertion of separateness from the sphere of economic necessity, competition, and interest.

What distinguishes such an assertion from earlier formations of public life, for instance in the Greek polis, is that it is subtended by a specific form of subjectivity, rooted in the sphere of familial intimacy. This subjectivity is articulated through the symbolic matrix of culture, especially writing, reading, and literary criticism—activities which challenge the interpretive monopoly of church and state authorities. As culture emerges in the modern sense, as a commodity that pretends to exist for its own sake, it functions as the "ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogene*) subjectivity communicated with itself."¹⁶ In the rehearsal of critical self-reflexivity and intersubjective argument, cultural discourse (*Räsonnement*)—as it unfolds in the eighteenth-century institutions of the French salons, the English coffeehouses, book clubs, and the press—prepares the ground for political emancipation and the rise to hegemony of the bourgeois public sphere. At the same time, this mutual empowerment of politics and culture depends upon the idealization of its source, the nuclear family, as the mainstay of a private autonomy whose economic origin and contingency are denied. The identification of propertyowner and patriarchal head of the family with human being provides the linchpin for the fictive unity of the bourgeois public sphere. As this sphere disintegrates, the idea of humanity collapses into the ideology that naturalizes the subjectivity of a particular class as "generally human."

Habermas' concept of the public sphere has a dual function: as a *historical* category, it offers a model for analyzing fundamental changes in relations among economy, society, and state, and in the conditions and relations of cultural production and reception; once institutionalized, the idea of the public becomes a *normative* category which, though never fully realized, is effective as a standard for political critique.¹⁷ As a regulative principle, then, the emphatic sense of the public outlives its Enlightenment origins; it overlaps with the dimension that Habermas, in his later work, has theorized as the ideal of undistorted, domination-free communication. (In a similar, even more partisan way, Richard Sennett reconstructs the eighteenth-century public sphere as a model for the "conditions under which human beings are able to express themselves forcefully to each other.")¹⁸

Much as the emphatic connotation of the public seems indispensable—

especially in light of scientific claims that would use the notions of public and private as "purely" descriptive tools—the oscillation between a historical and a normative concept of the public is problematic for at least two reasons. For one thing, the history of the public sphere subsequent to its early bourgeois formations can be conceived only in terms of disintegration and decline—which obviously poses problems for dealing with the cinema and other modern mass media. Another, perhaps more fundamental, problem concerns the relationship between idea and ideology in the conceptualization of the public sphere. Are the contradictions between idea and ideology an effect of historical decline, or does this decline reveal the ideological inscription of the bourgeois public sphere from its inception, in its very constitution?

The latter problem is of particular significance for the place of women in relation to the public sphere. As feminist historians have begun to demonstrate, the bourgeois public sphere was gendered from the start—as an arena of virtuous action, and civilized interaction, for the "public man." By contrast, a "public woman" was "a prostitute, a commoner, a common woman."¹⁹ Habermas himself notes a gender discrepancy in the constituencies of the literary and the political public (whose symbiosis is crucial to his argument). Although women and social dependents make up the majority of the *reading* public, which mediates familial subjectivity with public discourse, they are excluded from the *political* public sphere by virtue of both law and brute fact.²⁰ Despite his persistent critique of the bourgeois family (the denial of its economic origin, the ideological fusion of human being with propertyowner and paternal authority), the sexual imbalance that sustains the fiction of "private autonomy" remains marginal to Habermas' theory; his basic conception of the public sphere is gender-neutral. However, as Joan Landes argues in her study on the French Revolution which revises Habermas' framework from a feminist perspective, "the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public was not incidental but central to its incarnation." Hence, "the bourgeois public is essentially, not just contingently, masculinist, and . . . this characteristic serves to determine both its self-representation and its subsequent 'structural transformation.'" Not only was one of its founding acts the suppression of an actively female and feminist public sphere, that of the prerevolutionary *salonnières*, but the masculinization of public life also involved a restriction of women's activities to the domestic space, and the concomitant alignment of the familial sphere with a new discourse of an idealized femininity.²¹

The asymmetries of gender also complicate the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, precipitated in Habermas' analysis by the antagonism of