



# The Absent Polyphonist: Reconstructing Spectator Identity in the Era of Images

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**Abstract:** The image has evolved beyond a mere visual medium into a force that actively reconstructs reality. The identity of the spectator has undergone profound transformations from the era of written language to the age of images. In the face of fragmented imagery, the subject — gradually rendered absent — becomes infinitely replicated within mass media and the industrialization of cinema, only to be reconstructed amid polyphonic flux. The “invasive” nature of images leads to the absence of the spectator’s subjective identity, while simultaneously resetting it through differential viewing practices. Though the spectator is suspended in a blur of self-awareness, audiovisual perception — mediated through the body schema — enables the experience of different roles and perspectives. Within the consumer landscape of mass culture, spectator identity thus emerges as a circulating, polyphonic system in which the roles of producer and consumer continuously alternate.

**Keywords:** images; spectator identity; absence; reconstruction

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## 1. Introduction

In the current era of images, the visual medium not only serves as a material carrier for perception but has also evolved into an agent that actively reconstructs reality. Within these seemingly primordial images of reality, the primordial quality itself vanishes, giving way to artificially composed immediacy, which presents a fragmented world of illusion. As reality is transformed into its own image, the process of imaging does not aim to clearly demarcate subject and object; instead, it absorbs both into its own logic, reconstructing them in the process. This reconstruction alters the linear progression of reality within a unified temporal-spatial order, intervening in artistic expression through the rules of non-linear language. By means of alteration, resetting, reversal, and repetition, non-linear language transforms the irreversible flow of time and space into an arbitrarily manipulable coded process, thereby reshaping the logic of existence and the relationship between subject and object. As noted in the critique: “Electronic media communication suggests a prospect for understanding the subject — a subject constructed within historically specific configurations of discourse and practice. This prospect clears the way for regarding the self as multiple, variable, and fragmented. In short, self-construction becomes a project in itself.”[1]. Immersed in cinematic imagery, spectators may not consciously recognize their ongoing postmodern identity construction. Yet whether actively or passively, the identity of the spectator has undergone a profound transformation from the age of writing to the age of images. The subject gradually effaced by fragmented imagery is infinitely replicated as multiple identities within mass media and the industrialization of cinema, undergoing continual reconstruction amid polyphonic flux.

## 2. The Spectator in the Cinema: The Absent Subject

The cinema, as a modern site of consumption, is a quintessential space where artworks are sold as commodities. Unlike traditional art forms, what the cinema sells are commodified images. Within the cinema, the act of viewing masks the absence of the spectator’s subjective identity under the guise of contemplation, while the unique “invasiveness” of the cinematic medium reconstructs new, multiple spectator identities.

In his book *Theory of Film Practice*, the American scholar Noël Burch offers a clear description of this cinematic “violence”: “No matter what the level of critical awareness, a spectator left alone in the dark, suddenly face to face with the screen, is utterly at the filmmaker’s mercy — and the latter can assault him at any moment and in any manner. If the spectator is forced beyond the threshold of pain, his defense mechanisms are activated; he may remind himself that it is ‘only a movie’... But it is always too late... The damage is done”[2]. In all horror films, thrillers, and certain grotesque films, the continuous assault and ambush of the spectator’s emotions are often treated as dramatic expressions, even becoming turning points for new plot developments. Thus, terror itself becomes a powerful invasive effect, shattering the spectator’s primal viewing experience and anticipatory psychology through uncontrolled surprise. The “invasiveness” noted by Noël Burch reveals, from another perspective, the interventionist nature of the cinematic medium, which in turn alters viewing effects

and reconstructs the spectator's mind and body.

The cinema, first and foremost, functions in an "in-between" manner, redefining the environment and demarcating a dual structure of inner and outer space with the spectator as the boundary. By physically enclosing the space, the cinema blocks the apparent external environment from the act of viewing, creating the first distinction between outer and inner space. Simultaneously, through cinematic narration, it estranges the spectator's clear subjective awareness as a latent external environment, while the blurring of subjectivity within the imagery constitutes the second layer of outer and inner space. Within the first layer, the enclosed independence of the cinema intensifies the spectator's subjective consciousness, positioning viewing as the central act. Within the strategies of consumption and entertainment, the choice to view is active and pleasurable. Within the second layer, however, cinematic narration gradually dissolves the centrality of the viewing subject, erases the psychological distance of viewing, and fulfills the strategy of entertainment. It is precisely through this second layer that the viewing subject ceases to be merely an observer of the narrative and becomes a participant. At the same time, active participation in the narrative causes the spectator to disperse their tangible identity into the absent entities of characters within the imagery, thereby leading to the absence of the spectator's subjectivity.

When Noël Burch describes film viewing as a process of "assault," he implies that the spectator becomes a passive, innocent, and helpless victim. In reality, however, the spectator consciously chooses and immerses themselves in this state of absent identity. Burch identified the dimming of cinema lights as dissolving the spectator's subjective center, yet he overlooked the fact that when the screen brightens, the spectator with an absent subjectivity merges into a new context and acquires multiple interpretive identities. This aligns with what Metz noted as the distinction between spectatorship and dreaming. The absence of the spectator's central subjectivity serves to construct new, multiple identities. Decentering becomes a strategy of consumption and entertainment; through the fragmented expressions created by the cinematic medium, the spectator actively chooses and engages in a continuous process of shedding. They shed the inescapable constraints of the real world and daily life, the unimaginative and emotionless material existence, and the narrowness of humanity confined to a singular limited perspective. Absence, as a mode of decentering, enables the spectator's identity to undergo a new polyphonic construction within the imagery, reorganizing fragmented reality. Gradually, the spectator comes to enjoy a sense of satisfaction derived from starting anew after loss.

### **3. Modes of Viewing: The Multiple Identities of the Spectator in the Age of Images**

Regardless of how scholars define postmodernism, none deny its heightened emphasis on the visual system. In *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that postmodern culture arises from an "obsession with the visual and its effects"[3], stating that "when culture becomes visual, it is at its most postmodern"[3]. This primacy of the visual not only elevates images, videos, and spectacles above the written word but also transforms visual images into the material of reality, visual judgment into the basis for intellectual judgment, and visual modes of viewing into the foundation that shapes representational expression.

The spectator's subjective identity, rendered absent in the cinema due to the "invasiveness" of images, is simultaneously reorganized through the act of viewing. On one hand, the absence of the subject fractures the direct relationship between the viewer and the act of viewing; on the other, the viewing act, detached from a singular subject, attaches itself to multiple subjects, allowing the spectator to experience diverse viewing pleasures through the reassembly of multiple identities. Based on different viewing behaviors, we can categorize viewers into three primary forms: first, the spectator in the cinema; second, the viewing character within the film; and third, the hidden spectator representing the viewing mechanism.[4]

The spectator in the cinema is the original identity of the viewer, the primal agent of the viewing act. The viewing character within the film is a narrative figure who observes and examines the environment and other characters as required by the plot, often appearing as a narrator at different levels and achieving viewing objectives through shifts in narrative perspective. The hidden spectator representing the viewing mechanism possesses a dual identity and implies the rules of viewing: on one hand, it appears as the imagined spectator during film production; on the other, as the ideal spectator capable of technically comprehending and artistically accepting the film during viewing.

Since the original relationship between the spectator and their own viewing act is disrupted within imagery, viewing becomes a connective mode that shifts across different contexts. Through various reassemblies and connections, it reveals the different identities of the viewer, thereby highlighting the composite appeal arising from the overlapping layers of the film. Different viewing modes primarily facilitate the following four types of reconstructive frameworks, enabling the spectator to transition among four corresponding identities.[5]

#### **3.1 The Identity of the Onlooker**

Viewing Mode: Spectator in the Cinema + Viewing Character within the Film

This is the most commonly adopted viewing identity. The spectator enters the cinema as a member of the audience and, while watching the film, engages in analytical thinking, continuously follows the plot, understands the film's themes through its characters and narrative, and ultimately accepts the film's storytelling intent.

### **3.2 The Identity of the Intervener**

Viewing Mode: Viewing Character within the Film + Spectator in the Cinema

Unlike the purely consumerist onlooker, the spectator adopting this identity engages emotionally, allowing their inner self to be moved and their own feelings to be stirred. They are no longer merely a spectator who has entered the cinema but become an intimate participant who can empathize and intervene in the story.[6]

### **3.3 The Identity of the Dramatis Persona**

Viewing Mode: Different Viewing Modes of the Viewing Character within the Film

Some spectators, when choosing a film to watch in the cinema, tend toward those with narratives close to their own experiences. During viewing, they merge and immerse themselves, entering the plot and even becoming a part of it — embodying one or several characters. Through the twists and turns of the plot and the transformations of the characters, their own life experiences are deepened and elevated.

### **3.4 The Identity of the Film Critic**

Viewing Mode: Spectator in the Cinema + Hidden Spectator

This spectator identity exists in a detached state — whispering and commenting in the cinema, never fully absorbed by the plot. Yet they are able to evaluate the film from the perspectives of artistic effect and technical execution.

## **4. Audiovisual Perception: The Absent and Reconstructing Body Schema**

Within the cinema, spectators are suspended in a state of blurred self-awareness. However, the absence of subjective identity does not equate to a loss of audiovisual capacity. On the contrary, this blurred consciousness brings the faculties of audiovisual perception into sharp relief and intensifies them.

Through the body schema, the body becomes a phenomenon where the whole precedes its parts. It is precisely due to this pre-existing, holistic body schema that humans, possessing the same senses, can react similarly to identical stimuli. However, the body schema cannot be divorced from specific senses and a subject. For millennia, throughout the classical philosophical era, the unified relationship between bodily perception and the subject had been deeply ingrained. This very relationship is fragmented and pluralized within the subject rendered absent by the image medium.

Within the three-dimensional illusion of the cinematic image, although the characters in the narrative are beings with complete perception, their planar mode of representation severs them from their own body schema. This severance results in the absence of the body schema for characters on screen. In other words, while characters in a film can receive stimuli from the external environment through their senses and react accordingly, these imaged reactions, constrained by planarity and the film frame, cannot manifest as an integrated body schema.[7]

On the other hand, since imagery primarily mobilizes only the spectator's visual and auditory capacities, it implies that the information acquired through sight and hearing must also encompass the integrated perceptual functions of other senses — including taste, smell, and touch. Consequently, within imagery, audiovisual perception is compelled to assume the function of the holistic body schema due to the absence of other sensory modalities, leading to an intensification and enhancement of audiovisual perceptual abilities. In this sense, vision and hearing within imagery are no longer merely sensory capacities aligned with artistic distance, and their intensification serves not only to construct the film's artistic effects. More importantly, through the holistic body schema function that audiovisual perception is forced to adopt, the spectator breaks free from the realistic constraints of specific sensory capacities. Within the fictional yet verisimilitudinous medium of imagery, they mobilize the imaginative potential of their own body schema via simulation systems to experience, without limit, the perceptions of various characters. Thus, while it may seem that the spectator has lost sensory capacities beyond sight and hearing, in reality, their synthetic sensory ability is infinitely amplified. Through the empathetic function of the body schema, they shape diverse life experiences of their own.

## **5. The Spectacle of Consumption: The Consumer and Producer within Imagery**

As the film ends and the lights gradually brighten, spectators immersed in the cinematic imagery awaken from their blurred subjective awareness. They then exit the cinema in small groups, carrying with them the emotions and memories evoked by the viewing. The conclusion of the film marks the end of an act of consumption, but simultaneously, as producers

before the next act of consumption, spectators are integrated into a larger reality — the spectacle of consumption — through this perpetual cycle.

As consumers of imagery, spectators engage in consumption primarily across three levels. The first level involves consumption tied to material entities, such as purchasing DVDs of a film. At this level, the spectator's consumption is constrained by the produced commodity, exhibiting characteristics of productive consumption, where consumption and production maintain a unified commodity relationship.

The second level is the act of purchasing the viewing experience itself within the cinema. Here, the spectator pays for the image — an entity stripped of materiality. Through the act of viewing, the spectator's subjectivity is dispersed and rendered absent, thereby breaking the unified relationship between consumption and material goods. By consuming virtual signs, the spectator becomes a crucial element in constructing the spectacle of consumption. Modern artistic activities have long transcended the confines of secluded temples distant from everyday life, permeating the leisure and consumption practices of urban populations. "In this aestheticized commodity world, department stores, commercial squares, trams, trains, streets, towering buildings, all displayed goods, and the bustling crowds moving through these spaces evoke half-forgotten dreams. The curiosity and memories of the passing crowds are constantly stimulated by shifting scenes detached from their backgrounds. Interpreting the aura diffused by the surfaces of these objects generates mysterious associations. Thus, everyday life in the metropolis acquires aesthetic significance"[8]. Cinemas located in bustling shopping centers exist precisely on the boundary of this aestheticization of life, connecting commercial strategy on one side and housing aesthetic activity on the other. Spectators who seemingly enter the heart of consumption become bona fide producers — this constitutes the third level of consumption.

At the third level, consumption becomes production. The process of consumption is simultaneously the process of the spectator producing their own identity. It is precisely because these three levels of consumption coexist and mutually transform that the spectator's identity within consumption becomes enriched. They may serve production as consumers of commodities; realize entertainment strategies through dispersal and pluralization as viewers of images; or as producers, continually generating their own social identities through consumption. It is within this variable, polyphonic system that spectators construct new, cinephilic lifestyles through multiple identities.

Although the current comprehensive mobilization of the spectator by cinematic imagery remains largely in a stage dominated by contemplation, it is believed that with deeper understanding and analysis of spectator behavior, the renewal of representational techniques will be fostered, the process of cinematic commercialization will be advanced, and the comprehensive artistic appeal of cinema will be fully realized.

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