‘Video Replay: Families, films and fantasy’ as a transformational text: Commentary on Valerie Walkerdine’s ‘Video Replay’

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Abstract

In this commentary I explore the significance of Valerie Walkerdine’s paper ‘Video Replay: Families, Films and Fantasy’. I review its impact in 1986 and then discuss how some of its ideas about subjectivity and popular culture – specifically film - can be developed in the contemporary context. A recurring fantasy of Rocky II and its reception is that of social and psychological transformation. I address this theme by drawing on the work of Christopher Bollas to argue that Walkerdine’s psychosocial analysis continues to facilitate, across a range of contexts, some of the transformational processes described in her article.

Keywords: transformation; masculinity; popular culture; fantasy; film; creativity

Valerie Walkerdine’s 1986 paper, ‘Video Replay: Families, Films and Fantasy’, continues to be significant for those of us working across the boundaries of psychosocial and cultural studies. In this brief commentary, I discuss that essay’s usefulness in deploying psychoanalytic theory to explore unconscious investments in the fantasies and narratives of popular culture and the media.

I first came upon Walkerdine’s paper when I was an undergraduate Cultural Studies student in the 1980s. Burgin et al’s (1986) Formations of Fantasy, the book in which the paper first appeared, was regarded as a cutting-edge text for those of us interested in the vexing questions of subjectivity, popular culture and the unconscious, and I have returned to it in various contexts ever since. For a student coming to Walkerdine’s work for the first time, her style was emancipatory. In both its reflective honesty and also the boldness of its ‘can-do’ approach it has challenged the commonly held assumptions about what is ‘allowed’ in cultural studies research. In this sense, Walkerdine’s paper has opened new spaces for identification and creativity on the part of readers. Importantly, it has afforded, across a range of contexts, some of the transformational processes Walkerdine describes.

In the late 1980s, the use of psychoanalytic theory to explore the relationships between subjectivity and popular culture was limited mainly to a Lacanian Screen theory model, which focuses on a universalising notion of the spectator, governed by the psychical dilemmas of the male oedipal journey. Laura Mulvey’s (1975) ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ was a landmark paper in this regard, and Walkerdine’s work provides a useful counterbalance to Mulvey’s vision of the passive (female) spectator, pinioned to her seat by the forces of the cinematic apparatus and the patriarchal male gaze.

‘Video Replay’ takes an interdisciplinary approach that combines aspects of cultural and psychoanalytic theory, challenging the passive Screen model of the subject in popular culture to produce what Walkerdine

calls ‘an ethnography of the unconscious’ (Morley, 1992). Walkerdine questions previous methodological approaches by combining psychoanalytic, social and cultural theory to explore the contradictory psychosocial processes that shape subjectivities, including the unconscious desires and defences that mediate the experience of everyday life. Walkerdine thus makes a key intervention into the study of film and its reception by drawing our attention to the identifications and fantasies that take place within and among the viewers, the text and the lived experience of family; she disrupts the conceptual duality that hitherto has located the processes of fantasy in opposition to the experience of ‘real life’. As she points out, for example, the fantasies invested in the film Rocky II cannot be separated from the investment of fantasy within the family itself and the domestic relational context in which that process of viewing takes place (p. 192). Paying due attention to context and demonstrating the political slippages of the universalising Screen studies approach, her paper draws attention to the various constituencies that construe meaning differently. Such a move is associated with the idea of politics in this period – in particular, the emergent notion of ‘identity politics’ with its emphasis on subjectivity.

Walkerdine’s sympathetic analysis of male identification challenges Mulvey’s (1975) critical feminist stance regarding the all-powerful male-gaze of cinematic texts of such mainstream Hollywood films as Rocky II. Instead, Walkerdine provides a highly nuanced discussion of the ways in which fantasies of class transformation, and the experience of masculinity as a fragile construct, become interwoven in everyday life through engagement with popular culture. In so doing, she anticipates much of the work that has since taken place in media, cultural and gender studies of masculinity ‘in crisis’ and its fragilities as both cultural construction and as lived experience. As Walkerdine argues, the key theme of Rocky II, and Mr. Cole’s identification with it, is the active narrative of transformation. This theme – ‘masculinity in crisis’ – has since been explored indepth by feminist scholars of media, film and cultural studies (Kirkham and Thumim, 1995; Bainbridge and Yates, 2005; Yates, 2007). Walkerdine shows us the limits of research that remains within a textual, theoretical framework and that ignores the interrelation of fantasy and the cultural context of lived, everyday experience. Looking for meaning outside the film text enables us to see how film works in a complex, contradictory and transformational way, providing avenues for identification and affective pleasure that potentially disrupt dominant discourses of patriarchal mastery and creating new spaces to experience the psychical realities of masculinity and loss.

The idea of transformation is a recurring theme both in relation to the narrative within the film itself - which centres on the bourgeois dream of ‘bettering oneself’ – and also in Walkerdine’s poignant description of how the film’s themes resonated with her own family history and the desires for transformation that emerged from it. Subjectivities are shaped in this ongoing, uneven process, in which the irrational sphere of fantasy may reinforce or even refuse the limits of discourse and cultural practice and shape our engagements with it.

Walkerdine’s autobiographical method attracted criticism from those who regarded it as narcissistic and overly confessional in tone (Probyn, 1993). ‘Video Replay’ may not have been written explicitly as a feminist piece, yet what disturbed those readers may have been what some have defined as the ‘feminine’ elements of its approach. Such an approach disrupted the boundaries between the expert ‘observer’ and the ‘observed’, making explicit the ‘psychical realities’ of class and gender and the psychosocial defences that emerge from those positions. Today, researchers are far more ready to own up to the pleasures of their own engagements with mainstream popular culture through films such as Rocky and through the analysis of fan culture (Hills, 2002). The identifications that take place in relation to lack and vulnerability when ‘women read men’ have, following Walkerdine, been explored and problematised, providing the

potential for a less authoritarian and 'feminine' gaze on the part of researchers (Yates, 2007; Bainbridge, 2008). Yet, in the late 1980s, such engagements with Hollywood cinema were seen as far more problematic than they are today and constituted a sort of political 'giving in' to the consoling narratives of popular culture (a reflexive, critical analysis of such pleasures can be found in Kirkham and Thumim, 1995).

However, the 'ethnography of the unconscious' as used by Walkerdine in 'Video Replay' is still distrusted in cultural and media studies; and while the paper has appeared in several collections (for example, Alvarado and Thompson, 1990; Thornham, 1999), its exclusion from some readers that survey audience studies may be attributable to that lack of trust (see, for example, Turner, 2002, and Brooker and Jermyn, 2003). AsWalkerdine (1997, p. 19) later reminds us, by1986 there was in UK cultural studies a fair amount of hostility to the use of psychoanalysis. This hostility stemmed from a distrust of Lacanian Screen Theory and its supposed universalising tendencies and the apparent rendering of its audience as essentially passive 'dupes', with little inclination toward political resistance. The scepticism in cultural studies toward psychoanalytic theory was also linked to a perception of its individualising tendencies and a distrust of psychology generally, a distrust that continues today. The application of psychoanalytic theory to the analysis of popular culture has also been underrepresented in the field of psychoanalytic studies – especially in the context of UK clinical psychoanalysis, where engagement with popular culture has in the past been undervalued by some clinicians as 'escapism' (see, for example, Britton, 2007), compared say, with more 'serious' 'high' cultural forms such as art house cinema, prize-winning novels and theatre (further discussion of psychoanalytic clinical cultural criticism can be found in Bainbridge et al, 2007).

For the reasons outlined so far, Walkerdine's article received a mixed reception in 1986. Yet it anticipated some key areas of research in psychosocial, media and cultural studies, including the focus on the relation of researchers to their material and also, as we have seen, in the study of masculinity 'in crisis' and its relationship to popular culture. So how has the application of psychoanalysis to popular culture and our engagement with it evolved since then? Psychoanalytic ethnography and data research have flourished in psychosocial studies, most notably through the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and others (eg, Price, 2002; Brown, 2006). Hollway and Jefferson draw on the tradition of object relations and Kleinian psychoanalysis – an approach that has been more readily accepted in the social sciences than in the humanities (see, eg, Clarke et al, 2006; Day Sclater et al, 2009). Yet, although audience research continues to flourish in cultural and media studies in the form of media ethnography, the analysis of unconscious processes in reception studies through observation and interviews remains underdeveloped, creating absences and silences around ideas of identity in much of the audience-based work.

In 'Video Replay', Walkerdine says that her psychoanalytic approach is based on the 'dreamwork' of Freud, where the boundaries between 'fantasy and reality' become blurred through the processes of free association. She also draws on the work of Foucault, Althusser and Lacan, which allows her to historicise unconscious fantasy by linking those fantasies to the discourses and regulative processes of everyday life. At the same time, Walkerdine also reminds us of the limits of the Freudian and Lacanian models when she discusses the feminine processes of identification and fantasy, and she cites the usefulness of Melanie Klein's work as a means to explore preoedipal fantasy.

The application of Kleinian ideas within the field of media and cultural studies remains limited; but as I have argued elsewhere (2010), object relations theory has proved useful when exploring our engagement with the media and the psychological processes of transformation that shape everyday experience. With this engagement in mind, my colleague Caroline Bainbridge, of Roehampton University, and I recently set up a

network to explore the role of emotion and therapy in popular culture and the media (see www.miwnet.org). The work of D.W. Winnicott and Christopher Bollas has been used, for example, to explore creative engagement with the media as an object of fantasy that constitutes a transitional bridge between inner and outer worlds (Silverstone, 1994; Bainbridge and Yates, 2010). Bollas (1987) used the term transformational object in relation to the metamorphosis of the self through the search for experience and engagement with transitional phenomena, an experience that is also linked to the desire to return to the fantasy of the first beloved object. A potentially fruitful avenue of research in this context lies in the pleasure derived from the attachments formed to the objects of new technology such as home cinema. Although the relational dynamics of watching films within the domestic setting have been explored, for example, in ethnographic media studies (Bjarkman, 2004; Gray, 2004; Kendrick, 2005), the unconscious dynamics of domestic engagement have tended to be downplayed. Thus, the potential of developing Walkerdine's work in this context continues, perhaps, to be neglected.

The use of Winnicott and Bollas to explore the transformational role of the media and its relationship to formations of male fantasy was recently illustrated in a small pilot study carried out by a colleague and me. Several male focus groups discussed their attachments to certain key films associated with masculinity (Bainbridge and Yates, 2010). Paying attention to the themes of the films, but also to the materiality of DVDs as objects of desire and other extratextual elements of consumption (such as websites), we interviewed men to explore the fantasies underlying the appeal of these films and the role they play in shaping masculinities in the contemporary British context. A central theme that emerged from this study was the affective investment made when the subjects relate to media objects and popular culture, investments that often reinforce cultural modes of masculinity as a defensive formation. Yet playing and collecting DVDs also facilitated, in a more poignant guise, a form of creative identity work that enabled the men to explore the contradictions and the disappointments of masculinity as a flawed cultural ideal, and also the relational bonds that are shaped in the context of watching and consuming films at home.

I am also often struck by the transformational qualities of film in the classroom, where DVDs are increasingly used to facilitate interactive modes of teaching and learning. The application of psychoanalytic ideas to teaching and learning is not new, and the ethnographic study of unconscious processes within the classroom setting has been fruitfully explored over the past 10 years (Price, 2002). In my own teaching of psychoanalytic studies to third-level psychosocial students in the BA Honours Psychosocial Studies degree program at the University of East London (Yates, 2001), I have screened excerpts from the film Billy Elliot (2000) to focus on themes of transformation that can be analysed in terms of Winnicott's (1971) 'transitional phenomena'. There is a scene where the young hero, Billy, reads his teacher a letter from his mother, who is now dead. Billy and his teacher have met to create a dance for Billy's audition for the Royal Ballet. Evoking the transformational fighting narrative of Rocky, the meeting takes place in a boxing ring in the local gym. As in Rocky II (1979), the masculine body provides a site for the potential pain and pleasure of transformation.With regard to the politics of masculinity, the film is progressive in its depiction of Billy Elliot's identification with his mother, his rejection of boxing and his struggle to be a dancer. In terms of class, however, the characters are drawn rather crudely; for example, the father is depicted as a striking miner, reduced to the trope of a clumsy, working-class brute.

Yet as 'Video Replay' suggests, one cannot ignore the pleasurable fantasies engendered by the film for its viewers – or the students in the classroom. As Walkerdine's work shows us, such a perspective does not negate a critical reading of the regulatory forces that continue to reinforce the experiences of class inequality; rather it acknowledges the affective investments that are made when one is relating to media

objects and popular culture. Most of the students in my third-year class are women, over 35 years of age, working class, and of mixed heritage or black, 'ethnic minority' backgrounds. Yet the images of loss and change, which in the film are mainly associated with personal and political struggles of masculinity and class, could be appropriated by these students, who had little knowledge of the miners' strike and its causes.

For some, the fantasies of transformation engendered by the scene in the gym appeared to resonate strongly with their own and the desire for positive mirroring. In this sense, just as Billy's mother's letter represented a Winnicottian transitional object between the boy and his teacher that facilitated creativity through dance, so did the film facilitate creative discussion amongst the students, some of whom later used the film as a case study for their essays. This brief vignette of my own classroom experience is highly subjective and anecdotal and says something, perhaps, about my own narcissistic fantasies about being a facilitating teacher, at the same time as it tells us about the ways in which students can interact creatively and at many levels with film. Yet as a vignette of teaching and learning in a post-92 UK university, it does point to the continuing relevance of Walkerdine's approach and to the usefulness of film, in particular, to explore issues of subjectivity in a non-cinematic setting.

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