SUTURE

In *A Seventh Man* , John Berger describes a passport photograph of a young boy belonging to

a migrant worker (Berger and Mohr 1975). To us the photo suggests a presence, but to his

father it represents an absence. This dialectic of presence and absence is one clue to the

concept of suture, except that suture is not about the missing boy, but the address the

image makes to its reader. Suture describes the relations between a film and its spectator,

specifically to two apparently contradictory qualities of film viewing: that the action of the

film and its style produce meanings in us, but at the same time we produce meanings in

the stream of images we watch.

The word suture was used with subtle differences by a small group of thinkers and critics

inspired by Jacques Lacan, especially some specific theories about how meaning is created.

For the film theorists, the first important thesis is that any film is a discourse. Here the

word ‘ discourse’ means simply something spoken by someone and addressed to someone

else. Lacan refused to accept the thesis that individual human beings exist before their

socialization through language and other symbolic systems (table manners for example, or

any rule of behaviour). As discourse, the film produces the subject – the part of us that

experiences subjectivity, our experience of existing – as an effect of its discourse (see

CONTEMPORARY FILM THEORY ).

J.-P. Oudart’s ‘Cinema and Suture’

When the spectator is addressed by the film, who is actually speaking? In the first film

theory to take on the concept of suture, J.-P. Oudart (1977/8) argues that the viewer

imagines a source the film comes from. Oudart suggests four stages. At first the viewer is

lost in the flicker of the image, mesmerized. Then something – his example is a visual gag

in Keaton’ s The General (1926) – makes them aware of the artifice of the scene they are

watching. At first it is a delightful surprise, but it also brings the spectator back to themselves:

just someone in a cinema staring at the pictures, the signifiers. Then they ask

themselves who is ‘ speaking’ the discourse of the film, and the troubling answer comes

back: no one, an absence. But when the very next shot reverses the angle, we see the

person, animal, or thing from whose point of view the previous shot was seen. Of course,

the subject cries out, that is who is making the film, who is telling the story, who is calling

the shots. This last move, imagining a subject who recounts the film, heals the absence

created in the previous moment: it is a suture in the sense of a surgical stitch which both

confirms the meaning of the film and the construction of the viewing subject as subject of –

and to – the film. At this basic level, suture is a theory which accounts for the way we carry

attention across edits without losing narrative, intellectual, or emotional connection with

the movie.

There are a number of reasons why this simplified version of the concept needs to be

unpacked. In the first instance, as Barry Salt had demonstrated in an early response, shot/

reverse-shot transitions accounted for only 30 to 40 per cent of classical Hollywood edits.

The theory needed a more general sense of the oscillation of the viewing subject into and

out of the surface of the film. This is one challenge taken on by Stephen Heath’s 1977/8

‘Notes on Suture’. A second is that the title is very accurate: the four sections of the essay

seem to have rather different tasks in mind. Third, one of those tasks is to work out how to

reconcile three main versions of the concept, or to get one version that works. The essay

appeared in a ‘Dossier on Suture’ in Screen, including translations of essays by Miller and

Oudart, and Heath also refers to three essays published in the journal Film Quarterly by

Dayan (1974), Rothman (1976) and Salt (1977). Here we will follow the structure of

Heath’s essay: two sections of critical commentary, a critique of reductive use of the

concept, and a suggestion as to the future of suture in film theory.

Stephen Heath’s ‘Notes on Suture’

In the first section of ‘Notes on Suture’, Heath shows how J.-A. Miller (1977/8) develops

the term from Lacan. Miller uses an analogy from mathematical logic: a proof that all

numbers can be derived from zero. There are two main steps: first, to define zero as the

non-identical (everything that exists is self-identical, so nothing, which does not exist, must

be non-identical); and second, that the set of non-identical things – the empty set – is

nonetheless a set, and must be counted as one set. All subsequent numbers come from

adding one to the primary one which ‘names’ the empty set. (A demonstration: how many

numbers on a blank page? None. Write ‘0’. How many now? One. Write ‘1’. How many

now? Two. And so on.) The analogy is with the non-identical nature of the human psyche.

Naming it gives it a sense that it is a unit, whole, complete. Yet the name actually names

non-identity. And every other word that follows keeps moving between non-identity

(emptiness) and unity (fullness). This oscillation as an effect of naming, of discourse, is what

Oudart has applied to the discourse of film. Incidentally, it also explains why suture theory

always refers to the ‘logic’ of the signifier.

Miller was trying to demonstrate that at the origin of logic, the science of truth, there is

a repressed lack or absence. Classically, logic refuses to accept subjectivity: truth is a formal

property of well-made statements. For Miller, the non-identical zero is not just an analogy:

it is the excluded figure that speaks and is spoken to in logical discourse. The subject both

exists and does not exist, just as zero is represented by one (or indeed, as he puns, by the

symbol ø, the empty set).

In Lacan, language is representation. What is represented is not present in language, but

only re-presented. The subject is no exception: it is only presented, never present. The

subject is absent from language: as a kind of zero, by analogy with Miller’s argument about

logic, its exclusion actually causes language. The purpose of language is to speak the subject

which started it off, each new signifier adding another ‘plus 1’ to the chain in an

attempt to control, and perhaps to conclude the attempt to make the subject whole again.

This leads Lacan to argue, in a phrase repeated by almost all the authors involved in

suture theory, ‘a signifier represents a subject for another signifier’. This, as Heath is at

pains to describe, is the obverse of the more familiar statement ‘a signifier represents

something for a subject’. As an effect of language, the ‘something’ that is represented by a

signifier is the subject to whom it is addressed. Therefore the subject is present in language

after all. For Miller this contradictory condition is the basis of suture: a flickering in and

out of existence which is managed through the succession of signifiers in the unfolding of

language.

But film is not language. Heath now turns to film theory, to Oudart’s essay, and to his

commentators and critics in Film Quarterly. Oudart’s essay is elliptical and obscure even by

the standards of the day. Heath clarifies it to a great degree, without losing its complexity.

Language can be analysed into two parts: a system of rules, and the actual use of them to

make statements. The second of these can be split again into the things spoken, and the act

of speaking. Oudart emphasized the latter: the enunciation. The question for the subjectivity

called into existence by the address of the film is: who is calling me? Who enunciates? The

problem is greater because the moment it is posed, it makes it obvious that everything the

subject sees is a signifier. Which means, once more, a representation which actively

excludes what it represents – like the little boy absent from his photograph in Berger’s

story.

Here Oudart’s expression gets murky. He names the absent ‘speaker’ of the film the

Absent One, presumably in reference to the role of numbers in Miller’s article: not just an

absence, but the absence of a unified subject capable of speaking the film as a complete

account of the subject. That complete account he calls the signifying Sum. This is the goal

of the film, but it is illusory or, more specifically, imaginary, a term with a special significance

for Lacanians. The imaginary is the realm of images of ourselves we create in

response to the splitting and loss that characterize infancy – separation from the mother,

discovering you are separate from the rest of the world, discovering that your body is made

of parts that could be lost. To describe the Absent One and the signifying Sum as imaginary

suggests that they are self-images characterized by being imagined as whole and

indivisible. This will be something Heath takes exception to, because it de-emphasizes

other aspects of the process. What Heath does accept is the formulation describing suture

as ‘cinema’s necessary representation of the subject’s relation to its discourse’ (Oudart

1977/8, 38). Note the words ‘representation’ and ‘relation’: there must be a relation for

there to be a representation, but representing excludes what it represents, that is, the

relation which makes representation possible.

To get over this problem, cinema uses cutting. This is one of the formal elements of

cinema that can work as suture: in fact Oudart discusses depth of field at length, and one

key example from The General involves not a cut but characters entering the frame. Suddenly

aware of the frame, the spectator realizes that where she was before free-floating,

immersed in the screen, now she is included in the construction of virtual space in the

scene before her. The indefinite becomes definite; but in place of the proximity she felt in

the first phase of her involvement, the trick reveals the irreducible distance between

camera and what it portrays. The image is then composed of three elements: frame, distance

(depth of field), and object depicted. Concentrating on any one of them makes it

impossible to see the others: again, the subject flickers between modes of perception. For

Oudart the object has a key role: it can be simply the end stop of distance (what the

camera is distant from) or a mere signifier, but if it does appear as object, it seems to

appear from out of pure absence, as the representative of the Absent One whose imaginary

gaze – synonymous with the omni-voyant gaze of the camera – is the imaginary unifying

principle of both the film and the subject. The object ‘sutures the cinematic discourse’.

Heath now moves on briefly to Dayan’s commentary, which seeks to place Oudart’s

suture in terms of the theory of ideology. He goes back to earlier work of Oudart’s on

classical painting, where it was argued that the object depicted always signifies a subject

who will look at it. But that viewer can never be represented (with the famous exception of

Velàzquez’s Las Meninas) because the place must be left empty so that any one passing by

can occupy it. So a classical painting proposes both itself and how it is to be viewed. But in

cinema each shot posits a different subject, setting up the conditions for ideological

communication in the cinema.

According to Dayan, in the first shot we see from the point of view of the Absent One.

In the second we see a figure we presume (imagine) to be the Absent One, but at that

moment the Absent One moves from the enunciation to the fiction – the enunciated, what

is spoken – of the film. This also means that shot two is the ‘meaning’ of shot one: meaning

is deferred, but also operates retroactively, ‘remodeling memory’. Dayan’s conclusion is

neat: the spectator finally realizes that in the cinema no one speaks. It is as if things speak

themselves. And that is the very definition of ideology.

Heath begins to assemble these three disparate variants into his own thesis. Oudart, he

says, emphasizes the imaginary too much. By ignoring the symbolic, Oudart has allowed it

the power to create meaning, a ‘theological’ power (Heath 1977/8, 60), while Dayan

muddles his analogies (suture is not a speech but a writing, the etymological root of cinematography).

As a result it is unclear whether suture is an ideological operation or the basis

of any signification whatever. Suture, he argues, stitches together the imaginary and the

symbolic: the fantasy of unified being (ego) and the subject as effect of all systems that

produce meaning. Quoting Miller, Heath defines suture as ‘the general relation of lack to

the structure of which it is an element’ (26). Whether logic, language, or the film, any

utterance creates both the subject of its address and that subject’s absence (because it is

signified and therefore excluded from the discourse that represents it).

In the third section, Heath moves on to critique Althusser and his student Pêcheux for

their pseudo-Lacanian theory of interpellation. Here ideology is described as the discourse

of power, a power which calls out to the subject, and which the subject recognizes and in

that moment becomes subjected to. Heath argues that interpellation ‘presumes the subject

it is supposed to constitute’ (71), and that the existing politicization of suture confuses

imaginary, symbolic, unconscious, and ideology. In fact, suture is a way of naming the

relation between these four elements. He adds that Lacan is his own worst enemy when he

claims, on occasion, to be the master of truth: there is no final truth. This is the lesson of

suture, and the reason why ideology starts with suture, not with the subject.

This account of the constant fading and emergence, the pulsing or flickering between

immersion and withdrawal, matches the flicker of projection, the movement from cut to

cut or in the space and duration of a single shot. That made the concept an influential one

(e.g. Silverman 1983), not least because it recognized that the specific work done by any

particular film was different from that of others. Other structural theories tended to lump

all films together, perhaps with exceptions from the avant garde. This theory was more

nuanced. It still emerges from time to time (e.g. Butte 2008). But the declining fashion for

psychoanalytic film study has seen suture move from target of mockery to forgotten concept,

although Slavoj Žižek’s intervention into the debate, in the first section of his book

devoted to Krzysztof Kieslowski (Žižek 2001, 13–68), has revived the concept (although has

not necessarily dispelled the mockery) and has renamed it ‘interface’ (see INTERFACE).

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