

Spectatorship and the Ethnics of Looking

In his essay “To Be a Spectator” from *Scenes from Bourgeois Life*, Nicolas Ridout (he teaches here in London!) examines the British television phenomenon *Googlebox*. If you haven’t seen *Googlebox* before, take a quick detour to YouTube.

But essentially, *Googlebox* is a show about spectatorship. A camera shoots the responses of people watching television, alternately showing their derision and sympathy for television characters, reality show contestants, or documentary subjects. Ridout examines one particular episode that reveals spectators responding to the 2018 documentary *Drowning in Plastic*. The watchers recoil in horror to the suffering of birds who ingest plastics, and Ridout notes that this “theatrical presentation of suffering” shows the spectators their “incapacity to do anything about it.” “The condition of the spectator,” he concludes, “is one in which you feel powerless to act, separated from those whose suffering you watch.” The spectator is one who can “understand that the sense of powerlessness is not a necessary component of the real situation, but instead the result of a spectatorial situation that you . . . have made for yourself, inserted yourself into.” In this way, Ridout defines spectatorship essentially passive (and “bourgeois”).



Other scholars like Caroline Heim examine spectatorship as more active and participatory. In her book *Audience as Performer*, Heim characterizes theatre as an artistry of encounters: “the encounter of the actors with the audience, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other.” The very notion of an “audience as performer” identifies spectators as agents who act with intent or motivation.

So, is spectatorship active or passive? Who do we become when we assume the role of a spectator. Or even when we *perform* the role of a spectator?

Our syllabus describes this class as a *community* of travelers and spectators. Even though you might be a solitary spectator at certain times and places, on this Maymester you won’t. We will be watching together. And, we will be asking questions not only about the things we watch but also about the practice of watching.

One question we want you to ask persistently during our time together: how can someone visit an unfamiliar (or less familiar) culture and engage in a meaningful and ethical observation of that culture, asking not only “what am I seeing?” but also “how am I looking?”

The reason so many people have so many negative perceptions of “tourists” is that often visitors to unfamiliar places view it and the people who live there from a recreational perspective. “I’m here to be entertained,” their demeanor seems to suggest. The same could be said for many theatre spectators as well. “Hey you, actor...show me something great so I can go home and tell everyone what I saw.” It’s a perspective that insinuates a hierarchy: the actor serves the spectator, or the local serves the tourist.



In his essay “I Am Here as a Tourist,” Stephen Purcell makes an argument that the theatre (he’s most interested in Shakespearean performance) provides an opportunity for spectators—the “perpetual tourist”—to engage more ethically, “to acknowledge the position from which we are looking, to recognize the gaps in our knowledge and deficiencies in our cultural competence, and to [discuss what we think we see] with openness and honesty.”

And this is what we hope to practice over the next few weeks. So, keep asking these questions:

- What am I seeing AND how am I looking?
- Am I engaging in meaningful, ethical practices of spectatorship?
- Am I willing to acknowledge what I don’t know and what I still have to learn?

Spectatorship, Positionality, & Intersectionality

As we think about our month long stay in the UK, we also want to take some time to think about who we are in the world and how we lie at intersections of difference. Two terms we’d like you to acquaint yourselves with include **positionality** and **intersectionality**.



Positionality refers to the place where a person is located in relation to other social identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, geographical location, etc.). Locating where we are in a particular cultural context helps us understand how we engage with the world and how our individual perspectives have been formulated.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a sociological framework which analyzes the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination intersect in particular dynamics. This concept helps us understand the multiple identities a person holds and how those characteristics intersect.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, J.D.

Discussion Assignment:

1. As we consider these terms and make them part of our lexicon as we investigate spectatorship in London, Dublin, Glasgow, and Edinburgh, we ask you to increase your self-awareness regarding your own identity, how you see the world, and how your individual characteristics inform the way you see performance. How would you self-describe your identity and how have all these parts of yourself informed the way you perceive an array of performance (i.e., plays, musicals, sports, fringe theatre, mainstream theatre, street theatre, popular entertainments, etc.) Engage in a conversation with a peer on this trip whom you have not known previously. Have a 10-minute conversation about your conception of positionality and intersectionality and write down 3 take-aways which we will share during our first class.