

ETS 142

THINKING PAPER #4: SUBVERSIVE FIGURES AND REPRESENTATION

By now you should have a solid sense of what poststructuralist thinkers have to say about the degree to which the individual is constructed by, and made to answer to, the codes governing a given social context. Some relevant quotes from *The Theory Toolbox*:

- “The ‘subject’ is an outwardly generated concept, an *effect*, an understanding of personhood based on the social laws or codes to which we are made to answer”.... It “is always understood in reference to preexisting social conditions and categories” (37).
- We are “self-interpellating creatures, which is to say we can only recognize ourselves...in terms of some preexisting social laws or codes. Our identities only take shape in *response* to already given codes, to the ‘hailing’ of the law. So, in the end, every time we recognize ourselves—every time we say ‘yeah, that’s me’—we confront or construct *not* the freedom and uniqueness of our individual selfhood but rather the cultural codes of subjectivity” (46-7).
- “(C)ultures ‘author’ subjects, but of course those subjects are not merely characters in a book, because those subjects—like readers—are able to respond to and remake the signifiers that are placed before them” (47-8).
- “Our agency—what we want, what we strive for—has contextual sources rather than some source deep inside us.... Our agency is both *constrained* and *enabled* by the contexts in which we find ourselves” (195)

Fiske and Landry, however, both focus on the kinds of characters—carnavalesque figures and tricksters—who are able to disrupt the social order, however briefly, in meaningful ways. Lee’s film, *Bamboozled*, seems designed to complicate our understanding of such disruptions.

Considering the above, select a text that you think is interesting in the way it depicts subjectivity and agency. Use the contesting interpretations offered by Fiske and Landry on one hand and Lee on the other to discuss your chosen text. **The prompt: To what extent is your character subverting or reinforcing dominant ideologies about that kind of character’s subjectivity? Which is more important?**

Some questions to consider:

- What space does the character often occupy? Does that have anything to do with how we understand him / her?
- What features most strongly characterize the person? (Actions? Appearance? Speech? Others’ reactions?)
- Why do people enjoy this text? What are the appeals?
- What does the character do to disrupt social codes? What does that disruption tell us about those codes (their place in our culture, their power, etc.)?
- What “pre-existing social laws or codes” are being activated by this character? If you analyzed the character with an eye toward issues of representation, what would be your focus?
- What about the show might some audience members find unsettling or problematic?

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RESPONSE PAPER GRADING RUBRIC

A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Clear, insightful claim that addresses the prompt.▪ Rich analysis of supporting evidence, linked to the claim; covers most of the text’s essential components.▪ Thoughtful organization clearly guides the discussion and allows for a rich exploration of the text.▪ Clear prose throughout.
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Clear claim that addresses the prompt.▪ Strong analysis of supporting evidence, linked to the claim; covers many of the text’s essential components.▪ Thoughtful organization clearly guides the discussion.▪ Clear prose throughout the majority of the response.
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Claim addresses the prompt, but the initial statement may not be clear enough or may come later than it should▪ Engages some supporting evidence; analysis may be vague at times, may be inconsistent / contradictory, or may include too much summary.▪ Organization is acceptable but could be more precise.▪ Generally clear prose, but with fairly frequent grammatical errors.
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Response attempts to address the prompt, but claim needs to be clearer or may be conflicted in some way.▪ Engages minimal supporting evidence; minimal / vague analysis, or excessive summarizing.▪ Organization is not strong enough.▪ Frequent grammatical errors are a distraction and may interfere with meaning.