

A Listserv of Loneliness:
An Ethnographic Study of On-line Support for Cinephiles



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Mark Ashley wakes up “shit faced and rat arsed” after a long night at a Gloucester pub (Cheer). Mark’s been dealing with his recent birthday and the fear of getting older (Aside). His melancholy is spread everywhere, but so is his genius. Muffy Cave thinks Mark’s prose is beautiful. She teaches English and resists Hollywood, but after his ecstatic praise for *Great Expectations* she now can’t wait to see the film. Lev David, who has a thing for Muffy (or at least her name), is concerned that Mark is steeling all the “wimmins.” Eleanor, too, has a thing for Muffy and is hoping that she’s really a man--she wants to “do” him/her. Muffy, who insists it is her real given name, informs Eleanor that she is indeed a woman, and straight at that (Oprah). Kristen and Mark seem to be an item--maybe even in reality. There are other conversations that surround, explore, connect, and ignore the central characters, but the drama lies here, and its center is Mark Ashley.

Here in this particular cul-de-sac of lovelorn longing is where the Information Superhighway has lead me. My professional interest areas are in the rhetorical and cultural criticism of film. CINEMA-L, A listserv focusing on the “integration and expansion of cinematic ideas, techniques and understanding,” seems the perfect place to begin my professional affiliation with the net (Liszt). Maybe I can keep up with the latest theories and meet some important people in the field. “Commentaries on Theater, Film, Television and Popular Culture” reads the shingle over the doorway, but when I have finally proffered the secret password to enter, I am confronted with scarcely more

than a love line for losers (Cinema-L). There is longing on every page. Movies seem to be their only escape from their pathetic realities--aside, that is, from CINEMA-L. The loneliness is palpable in Eleanor's plea, "where is everyone today" (Ghost). She laments to Mark that maybe his depression stems from the early Fall slag of movies (Cheer). When the holiday fare starts hitting maybe things will look up. "Hello, my name is Bob, and I'm addicted to escapism" one expects to read in the very next post.

Although my affiliation with CINEMA-L has proven less than profitable in the professional sphere, it does indeed present itself as a rhetorical text ripe for observation. It is therefore my project to examine the creation and adherence to of norms within the group, to look at who speaks and how they go about it, and to discover what peripheral needs might be getting met within the continuing discourse around movies.

Within a group of 70 somewhat active personalities, only 10 characters seem to drive the conversation. These 10 personalities make up some 63% of the conversation. Six of the 10 are female and the other 4 are male. During the week I was observing the group, there were some 439 posts. More males responded to the list, but they posted fewer posts each than the females. There were 31 active males and 20 active females. Males posted an average of 6.9 times each, whereas the females posted an average of 9.3 times. Of course there is no way of knowing the true gender of the clientele--assumptions were made on the genderedness of their names. Some 19 persons chose names that do not betray their sex, or are ambiguous (e.g. ripley, phoenix, mka900, Cinema24, and user LISI245). Interestingly, these individuals without name/ego investments only posted 38 times, averaging a mere 2 posts each. They also seem to ignore the central characters' rather interpersonal conversation.

Wood and Duck in *Under-Studied Relationships* give us a glimpse of what a typical gendered Internet interaction might look like:

[M]en's messages [are] longer and use more "male language" (assertions, challenges, authoritative tone) than women's which tend to use less confrontational and authoritative styles. The salience of these cues to gender is also revealed by their effects on the participants' communication behavior, which are dependent in turn on the social context of communication. In work group discussions, women's messages tend to receive fewer responses (from men and women), and topics initiated by women [are] less likely to be taken up by the group, whereas in recreational situations, women's messages tend to receive more attention than men. (217)

CINEMA-L seemed to back up the assertion that men generally speak in a more authoritative tone and that women are less confrontational. However, discussions on CINEMA-L lean towards the women being more verbose and participating more often. Men tend to be more broadly represented and to set topics of discussion. Women's messages concerning social issues garner more responses, but men's critical concerns seem to hold more weight.

Participation seems to come in spurts, with persons posting several times back-to-back. Males posted some 87 times in this shotgun manner, whereas females posted only 78 times. Non-gendered persons posted only 9 posts in this manner. Males also tend to post more successive salvos, with Mark averaging 4 or 5 shots each round (his posts accounting for some 12% of the total conversation). Females averaged only 2.5 posts in this manner each time. The trend towards multiple male salvos may stem from a need for authority and presence, or from something as trivial as less frequent checking of e-mail. Those assuming non-gendered identities seem to fit the mode for what are

known as “lurkers.” These characters often see themselves as outsiders and many groups are hostile to them.

The content of the discussion meanders among popular culture, cult films, new movies, forwards, and critiques. Some major threads of discussion that actually focused on cinema have been musings on the cast of the upcoming *X-men* movie, critiques of *Great Expectations* and *The Mission*, guesses at the voices in the *Antz* trailer, and how do you define a sleeper. Related, yet trivial, threads included what celebrities one would invite to the ultimate party, Siskel’s brain surgery, and the joy of cheap movies when video stores go out of business. Completely “off topic” threads featured a discussion of Oprah Winfrey fat jokes, the ugly Americans, birthdays and melancholy, dating, babies and cousins, and what does it mean to be twice removed. Surprisingly, males and females seem to jump in on every topic without discretion.

The interaction is that of a group of friends and acquaintances. And as Wood and Duck have observed, “I’m still constantly amazed at the ‘companionship’ and warmth one can find at the computer terminal” (204). For the most part, this group seems to have found that warmth they were seeking in CINEMA-L. Although the discussion can get harsh at times, every attempt is made to make everyone happy. I have yet to observe strong dismissal within the group. If a member violates the norms, typically he or she is politely reminded of his or her responsibility to the group and usually an apology ensues. A sample follows between Mark Ashley and Dave Edsall over sensitivity issues surrounding members’ personal appearance.

Dave responds to Mark’s comment on Oprah Winfrey’s weight:

>Last time I saw Oprah she was so fat looks like she's got room for three more inner selves in that body of hers.

Mark, I really enjoy reading your posts, am impressed by your

intelligence and wish I was living in your part of the world. Can I ask you and others on this list to restrain your negative impulses when referring to fat people. I for one am a fat man and I don't like the implication that fat makes everything else about a person worthless. I'm a great guy regardless of my weight. I am not trying to dictate to people how and what they say. I am just asking politely that people try not to do this in the future as it personally offends me.

Mark saves face but responds affirmatively:

Sorry, no real offense intended. To tell the truth I lifted the joke from Absolutely Fabulous, written by Jennifer Saunders (directed at herself in this case), comedy partner of Dawn French who enjoys being fat. In fact I recently saw an interview with her on TV about how she was told that she should never have children because she was "overweight" (she has a child now), the same program discussed various athletes who are classed as clinically obese - the true irony being that they are fitter than most "thin" people. (Oprah-Kill)

Gently the norms for future discussion are set by the exchange between Mark and Dave. Several other members jump in to signal their agreement with the new, more sensitive, norms.

Not always are norms so civilly established nor their borders cleanly defined. Non-mediated groups are particularly problematic in this area (Wiener 273). Where does mild flirtation end and harassment begin? Lev David's response to Juli seems to bear out the research that suggests women's posts are often responded to by men in sexual, rather than intellectual, ways (Wiener 275):

You're lucky you're wearing that sexy black and white, leave-everything-to-the-imagination number of yours, or thing could've gotten ugly -- you're my bad habit, baby!

>When you talk about "Pre-Matriculation Stress " are you the student or the teacher?

Heck, lil darlin! To everybody else I'm the student, but for you, I can be just about anything you want me to be! Want me to play teacher today? Did naughty juli do her homework? (To Juli)

Certainly, Juli's flirtatious manner and nun jokes are not to be dismissed, nor is Lev to be chided too harshly. What are the rules? Is this the attention Juli really wants when she says, "As far as being flirtatious on this list - it's is more fun than it used to be but flirting is better than silence when there aren't any films to comment on."

And then there is the flame, thankfully a rarity on this list, but extant nonetheless. In a rather ironically self-incriminating reply to recent accusations against the "Ugly Americans," Kristen posts:

WARNING: DIATRIBE: LONG: MEAN: even HATEFUL:

(CHRIST, ALMIGHTY GOD -- how do we always get on this fucking topic?) Americans do not call themselves "the world" -- I don't know where that comes from -- no one I know considers themselves an American citizen and thus "the world". American movies may be based in America but, Christ, they are American fucking, goddamn movies. The ones everyone is so up in arms about are shit anyway (INDEPENDENCE DAY, ARMAGEDDON). Do you think we deserve it just because we are *here* ...do you not think there are people on this list who give a shit about

their country and maybe don't like to hear these slams? Be personal, call me a bitch, and I'll fight you on it. Be personal still and slam my country and I'll fight you again. Most people would do that no matter where they are from -- have a little fucking consideration and let up on the ugly American crap.

This post seems to single handedly violate every norm concerning hateful and inappropriate language by which most groups abide (McLaughlin 98). Although a seemingly closely-knit group, almost a family, the list is made up of a diverse collection of individuals from all over the world (e.g. Great Britain, Australia, Italy, and the United States). True, their remarks have, at times, been insensitive but how will Kristen's post make things any better. Doesn't she merely play into their stereotype? Yet, flaming is "in the eye of the beholder" as Lemisch has espoused. And for there to be productive speech, at least in this non-mediated group, flaming must be allowed (279).

Even among this often tasteless, foolish, habit forming, time-suck, there are brief flashes of genius (Elmer-Dewitt 8). Here in this cul-de-sac where people find what they have set out to discover is merely their backyard, there are inspirations--some truly insightful, others merely sappy (Kadi 40). Even in these gems the longing for connection aches within the group. Their very choice of films to analyze, and the way in which they go about it, betrays a deeper need for which CINEMA-L is only the current incarnation. Mark writes:

It's been about four months since I saw GREAT EXPECTATIONS and it still affects me. I still feel an emptiness around my solar plexus when I listen to "Siren" and "Life in Mono", the muscles in my hands and arms still tense when I think of the sea and the streets and that small back room.

And I still want to run and keep on running when I hear "I walk this earth alone." . . . This is how GREAT EXPECTATIONS makes me feel, some great and terrible unknown loss, profound unexplainable sadness, and anger and bitterness, and a desperate urge to return to an unknown place, to find a person that I never knew.

Shari L. Rosenblum's analysis of *Buffalo 66* continues the longing, but the analysis is far more mature. It is posts like hers that makes me wish I could indeed linger here in this particular dead end on the info-highway, yet there is far too much trash to shuffle through to make it worthwhile. If the latest studies hold true, then the loneliness that these individuals seek to overcome here will only become stronger (Adler). Maybe a vicarious representation of CINEMA-L, Shari's description of Billy in *Buffalo 66* bears a curious resemblance to those she addresses--I am left with her words, "His life the way he saw it -- with all the delusions, all the frustrations, all the re-crafted memories that reality shoots to hell. His deformed, distorted vision as if it were the objective truth."

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