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Degrees of Separation in Annie Baker's *The Flick*

I think we've all heard it in some iteration or another, whether it be to emphasize the importance of networking or to gloat that one might be loosely connected to a celebrity or political leader: the idea that everyone in the world is connected to everyone else by an average of six degrees of separation (in other words, by six mutual acquaintances or friends). In fact, this sentiment is *so* popular that a professor of psychology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Dr. Judith Kleinfeld, felt it necessary to review the literature on the subject to discover whether the theory is a strongly-supported sociological fact or, simply, "the academic equivalent of an urban myth" (2). In short, Kleinfeld found that, although not proven false, the six degrees of separation theory is not as well supported as people would like to think. Not only did she think the original published findings were based on "scanty" evidence (1), she also found that the truest replications of the experiment were less than successful (and often revealed deep divides, especially between various races and socioeconomic statuses) (1-5). In her own words, she concludes, "Perhaps Milgram [the founder of separation theory] was right that we live in a world with six degrees of separation. Perhaps he had discovered a fundamental and universal truth about the human world. But the evidence was simply not there" (5).

However, for humanities research, it is not nearly as important whether or not this theory is scientifically verifiable but, rather, what about the theory appeals to humans that enables it to persist in the American cultural landscape. Kleinfeld was interested in this as well, and—after

questioning others about why they believe in this pervasive myth—cited that many people believed because it gave them “a sense of security” (6). In one interview, she cited a federal judge as saying, “It’s a scary world out there” and “It’s good to believe we are all somehow holding hands” (6). It seems that the fundamental purpose behind believing this theory (against all evidential odds) is likely a relational one. We, as humans, *want* to believe that we are all connected in a real and meaningful way.

However, even if this theory is true, does it prove that we are connected in any meaningful way? After reading *The Flick*, I doubt Annie Baker thinks so. And I’m not so sure Kleinfeld thinks so either. In talking about how the digital age affects the separation theory, she writes, “In the digital age, many of us believe, the world has shrunk even more, turning us into a ‘global village.’ But is this really the case?” A little further down in the paragraph, she continues, “Could our coming together through technology have the unintended consequence of driving us apart? Cultural groups may set up psychological boundaries when geographic boundaries slip away” (2).

And now, I think we are honing in on what Annie Baker explores in *The Flick*. Baker doesn’t seem to be very interested in the degrees of separation by which every person can be connected to another (if she is, the scope of her play is much too narrow). I think, rather, she is more interested in the degrees of separation between people (the discrepancy between the image one presents to others and the image one understands as oneself) as well as the degrees of separation between a person and his or her true self (the image one presents to the self and the true self; which may be largely unknown, unknowable, or even non-existent).

In other words, enter Sam, male, 35, still lives with parents. Enter Avery, male, 20, has anxiety and a well-to-do father. Enter Rose, female, 24, “sexually magnetic,” lives from

paycheck to paycheck. Are the members of this unlikely theater cleanup crew, consisting of vastly different ages and genders and races and socioeconomic statuses and personality types, able to connect in any meaningful way? Are they able to connect with their true selves? And, the more unsettling question, what does that say about the ability of human beings to connect with one another and with themselves in general? I think the primary ways Baker chooses to study these degrees of separation is through the metaphor of acting or performing, like in movie roles, and through the metaphor of film (be it a thirty-five-millimeter Century projector or a digital one).

Firstly, I think it would be best to explore how she uses acting as a metaphor, specifically how she explicitly connects acting to the separation theory in her use of the game “the six degrees of Kevin Bacon.” The theory behind this game is very similar to the separation theory: it is the idea that any actor is no more than six degrees from collaborating with Kevin Bacon in a movie, and—by extension of that theory—*no* actor is more than six degrees of connection away from any other actor. For example, in act one scene three, Avery connects Jack Nicholson to Dakota Fanning by pointing out that Jack Nicholson plays a role with Tom Cruise in the movie *A Few Good Men*, and Tom Cruise plays a role with Dakota Fanning in *War of the Worlds* (Baker 22-23).

The degrees of Kevin Bacon game is so important in the play because it is the main point of genuine human connection between Avery and Sam. Even though they miss each other on so many occasions throughout the play, they almost always seem to find a common ground in this game. Sam enjoys trying to stump Avery with unlikely actor combinations, and Avery genuinely enjoys showing off his movie trivia skills as he rises to the challenge.

Although it is not a profoundly meaningful game at first glance, its symbolic resonance is. In fact, the game seems to be a symbolic representation of all the characters' hopes of meaningful relationship with one another. Like the unlikely actors Avery connects, these three characters come from vastly different walks of life. If they were actors, it is unlikely that they would ever be cast in the same movie. This game seems to be, in a strange way, a source of comfort for all of them that, even if they don't star together in the same (hypothetical and metaphorical) movie, someone with excellent movie trivia skills might be able to connect them with six degrees.

However, there lies a problem in their symbolic hope of relationship: it is based on actors and not real people. Just because one can show how Dakota Fanning starred with Tom Cruise in *War of the Worlds* doesn't mean that Dakota Fanning and Tom Cruise have a meaningful connection. Their relationship is forged merely through the roles they play in the film. Their true selves never interact in any real way. In the same way, Baker seems to demonstrate that Avery, Sam, and Rose never truly interact except through the veneer of the various parts they play in the "movie" of their lives together. In other words, these characters don't just have a degrees of separation problem in the larger sense; they have a degree of separation problem in the interpersonal sense (there is a discrepancy between the images of themselves they present to one another through the various parts they play and what they understand to be their true selves).

There are many examples of this type of acting (or part playing) in the text to verify my claim. For one, in act one scene five, they all (Avery, Sam, and Rose) discuss their astrology signs. In this scene, they discuss what their astrology signs (be it Leo or Capricorn) say about how they might relate to one another (Baker 47-56). Instead of basing their analysis of how they might relate to one another on anything real, they choose to connect through their various

astrology signs, which—in the end—is just an artificial typing of their true selves. For a second example, in act two scene two, Sam confesses his love to Rose (Baker 122). In this scene of overwrought devotion, one can easily make the case that Sam fulfills the role of a hopeless romantic or a knight-errant with Rose as his fair maiden. And, interestingly enough, Rose points this out explicitly when she accuses him of not loving the real her and of acting, saying, “Like even right now. It’s like you’re performing or something.” To which Sam responds, “I’m not performing” followed by a long, thoughtful pause and a repetition of that same line, arguably, to convince himself of his own authenticity (Baker 124-125). And finally, I don’t think Rose is innocent of part playing either. After all, what other thing does Sam fall in love with if not the image that Rose projects of herself to others? To explain this in more depth, I think Magen Holly provides a very apt description of Rose’s character:

Her identity is variously obscured and inadequately described. From her dyed green hair to her fascination with astrology, from her too-cool attitude to her self dramatization...to her tendency to quickly lose interest in the men she dates, Rose is desperately casting around for an identity that she hopes will stick. (2)

In other words, in her “casting” around to find an identity that matches her true self, Rose is as guilty of part playing as Sam.

Although I think these are three strong examples, they just scratch the surface. If one scours the play, one will find numerous other examples of the characters playing parts. They take on roles based on their socioeconomic statuses. They take on roles based on their races. They take on roles based on movie clichés. The possibility for further investigation in this area is vast. But rather than survey the whole play for examples of part playing, I think it would be more useful to analyze how this part playing affects the characters’ sense of themselves. As they take

on these various roles, in what ways does it obscure their true self? In other words, in what way does it place a degree of separation between their understanding of who they are (the image they present to their selves) and their true selves (which may be largely unknown, unknowable, or non-existent).

I can think of quite a few ways in which Baker probes into this concept more deeply, but none are more poignant than scene eight, a sort of climactic ending to act one. In this scene, Rose attempts sexual intimacy with Avery, and Avery ignores it; he remains purposely transfixed by the movie they are watching together. After this failed attempt at connection and the unbearable awkwardness which follows, the theatergoer finally witnesses a scene where there seems to be genuine vulnerability. Both Rose and Avery make serious confessions to one another. Rose confesses her inability to hold a relationship longer than four months and Avery confesses to having attempted suicide and being depressed (Baker 91-98). Rose asks Avery why he is so depressed, and the way Avery responds gives us incredible insight into his character and the themes of the play as a whole. He explains, “Um. Because everything is horrible? And sad?” (Baker 99). And then after a short, thoughtful pause, he continues:

And the answer to every terrible situation always seems to be like, Be Yourself, but I have no idea what that fucking means. Who’s Myself? Apparently there’s some like amazing awesome person deep down inside of me or something? I have no idea who that guy is. I’m always faking it. And it looks to me like everyone else is faking it too. Like everyone is acting out some like stereotype of like...of like...exactly who you’d think they’d be. (Baker 99-100)

In this scene the theatergoer can clearly see how this part playing or “acting out some...stereotype” is affecting Avery. Because he is such a self-aware character, he realizes that

the image he presents to the world is not his true self. He tries to understand his true self, but it is obscured by the stereotypes he presents to the world. He just can't seem to reach that "amazing awesome person" deep down inside of him, and for that reason, he begins to question whether that amazing awesome person even exists. Even in this bearing of his soul to Rose, even in this profound confession, at the end of the scene he still questions whether or not his confession is just another portrayal of stereotype, another example of him "faking it" (Baker 101). Is it possible for him to reach his true self through yet *another* degree of separation?

Unfortunately, what Annie Baker renders in this scene is not simply fiction. Real people, especially those who take on roles for a living, namely actors, express this same sentiment. In fact, after playing Andy Kauffman in the movie *Man on the Moon*, Jim Carrey expressed his profound identity crisis, which sounds eerily similar to Avery's:

As an actor you play characters and then if you go deep enough into those characters you realize that your own character is pretty thin to begin with. And then you suddenly have this separation and go, 'Who's Jim Carrey?' Oh, he doesn't actually exist. There is just a relative mass of manifestation of consciousness appearing and then someone gave him a bunch of ideas. They gave him a name, religion, nationality, and then he clustered them into something that's suppose to be a personality. It doesn't actually exist. None of that stuff if you drill down is real. (Galli)

Although he uses radically different terminology, the meaning is essentially the same as in Avery's speech. Jim Carrey recognizes that the image he presents to the world is not his true self. In the taking on of various roles, he begins to lose his sense of self and, eventually, begins to questions whether or not his "true" self is even real.

Now, moving on from the idea of acting as a metaphor for degrees of separation, Annie Baker also uses the metaphor of film and the projected image as a way to show these degrees of separation between people and between a person's understood self and true self. In no place is this symbolic resonance more clear than in Avery's letter to the theater owner, pleading with him not to go digital. Avery writes, "Mr. Saranac, projecting a thirty-five-millimeter film digitally is like looking at a postcard of the Mona Lisa instead of the Mona Lisa itself" (Baker 141). Embedded in this short argument is two degrees of separation: the separation between the postcard and the actual painting and the separation between the painting and the real person lost in history, Mona Lisa herself. In this way, Avery's letter becomes a kind of plea for genuine human connection in the face of technological advancements that actually obscure the true self, obliterating the subtle variation of the light and shadow of film into a million, tiny dots of digital inauthenticity rendered through a machine and projected onto a screen. "Could our coming together through technology have the unintended consequence of driving us apart?" I cited Kleinfeld as saying at the beginning of this paper (2). It seems, in Avery's opinion, it definitely could and, potentially, it already has.

And, finally, I would like to address the way the audience is drawn into the metaphorical resonance of this play. In her own description of the staging, which feature the seats of the movie theater facing the audience, Baker writes, "We, the theater audience, are the movie screen." This is especially poignant considering that Skylar, a character who only appears briefly, touches the movie screen in act two scene seven. In this scene, he breaks the fourth wall and, in a sense, reaches into the audience, almost as if to connect. He makes the audience aware that they *are* the movie screen, and—in feeling the need to touch it—asks the question, "Are you, the audience, real?" This one action projects all of the philosophical and psychological

questions of the play onto the audience. I can almost sense the audience shifting in their seats as the degrees of separation manifest in their psyches. *Who am I?* I can almost sense the audience members eyeing the person next to them, perhaps a spouse, a close friend, a parent. *Will I ever be known?* Perhaps they came into the theater with the idea that anyone can be connected to anyone else on the planet in six easy steps, despite huge geographical distances. But I think they may just have left with the disconcerting possibility that the psychological distances between us all are often vaster than many oceans. Perhaps, despite the technological advancements that have supposedly turned us into a “global village”(Kleinfeld 2), it is not such a small world after all.

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