

Laura Mulvey

*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," written in 1973 and published in 1975, is based on psychological principles posited by Sigmund Freud and his follower Jacques Lacan. Mulvey proposes that classic Hollywood cinema places the spectator in the masculine position of subject, and that doing so leaves women as objects of the male gaze. Mulvey links the structures of "looking" in cinema—and the pleasure derived from looking—to gender differences in society and consequently postmodern art. These gender differences take the form of inequality and oppression of women within "a capitalist, but more particularly, patriarchal society." (982) The goal of Mulvey's essay is to destroy the current notion of scopophilic "pleasure" as an outdated and patriarchal view based on antiquated gender biases, and through that destruction to create a new model of equality for the sexes. In her words, "it is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it." (984)

Mulvey explains that there are three basic types of "looking" created within the mainstream cinematic process. The first is that of the camera as it records the actual events that occur on film. The second is the inherently voyeuristic audience watching the film. The third is that of the characters as they interact with one another throughout the film. All three types of looking fall into the patriarchal construct that dictates gender roles within contemporary art and culture. From camera to audience to actor, the gaze exemplifies a male-dominated model of desire: "among other things, the position of the

spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer.” (985)

In all instances of looking, the masculine audience and male character on screen is the active “looker.” The female fulfills the role of the passive object to be gazed upon, “her visual presence tend[ing] to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.” (986) In revisionist Freudian terminology, Mulvey explains that the woman is present solely as “the male other,” describing that she is “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” (983)

Within the position of the looked-upon bearer of meaning, Mulvey differentiates between two different types ways in which a woman can be viewed. The first is the “voyeuristic” gaze, in which a woman is a highly sexualized object of desire. The second is the “fetishistic” gaze. In this gaze, the woman is still a sexual object, but has become untouchable and therefore de-sexed. She is now in a position cinematically to support her man: “as the narrative progresses, she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her showgirl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone.” (987) She becomes a possession of both the male protagonist and, thereby, of the spectator, and is a representation of the way in which women are classified, viewed, and expected to function within society.

Mulvey believes that radical change is the only way to reconstruct and redefine the female role both in film and society. She seeks to subvert the traditional cinematic codes that “create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.” (988) Mulvey posits that the only way to fundamentally change the structure and assumptions of mainstream film is to free the camera’s gaze from the dictates of male desire.

Mulvey’s seeks destroy the pleasure and satisfaction of an oppressive and patriarchal societies’ portrayal of women in film, modern art, and society—the destruction of pleasure is her radical weapon. Mulvey calls to end the “ease and plentitude of the narrative fiction film” with the goal of “leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.” (984)

Cyndi—a nicely done summarization of Mulvey’s proposal to “destroy” the pleasure we derive from the male gaze as cinemagoers. Next question: just how would a feminist filmmaker go about doing this?

GRADE: A

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