

Towards a better understanding of Mulvey:

'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist was published in 1975 and is one of the most widely cited and anthologized (though certainly not one of the most accessible) articles in the whole of contemporary film theory.

Laura Mulvey did not undertake empirical studies of actual filmgoers, but declared her intention to make 'political use' of Freudian psychoanalytic theory (in a version influenced by Jacques Lacan) in a study of cinematic *spectatorship*. Such psychoanalytically-inspired studies of 'spectatorship' focus on how 'subject positions' are constructed by media texts rather than investigating the viewing practices of individuals in specific social contexts. Mulvey notes that Freud had referred to (infantile) *scopophilia* - the pleasure involved in looking at other people's bodies as (particularly, erotic) objects. In the darkness of the cinema auditorium it is notable that one may look without being seen either by those on screen by other members of the audience. Mulvey argues that various features of cinema viewing conditions facilitate for the viewer both the voyeuristic process of *objectification* of female characters and also the narcissistic process of *identification* with an 'ideal ego' seen on the screen. She declares that in patriarchal society 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (Mulvey 1992, 27). This is reflected in the dominant forms of cinema. Conventional narrative films in the 'classical' Hollywood tradition not only typically focus on a male protagonist in the narrative but also assume a male spectator. 'As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence' (*ibid.*, 28).

Traditional films present men as active, controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire for men in both the story and in the audience, and do not allow women to be desiring sexual subjects in their own right. Such films objectify women in relation to 'the controlling male gaze' (*ibid.*, 33), presenting 'woman as image' (or 'spectacle') and man as 'bearer of the look' (*ibid.*, 27). Men do the looking; women are there to be *looked at*. The cinematic codes of popular films 'are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego' (*ibid.*, 33). It was Mulvey who coined the term 'the male gaze'.

Mulvey distinguishes between two modes of looking for the film spectator: *voyeuristic* and *fetishistic*, which she presents in Freudian terms as responses to male 'castration anxiety'. *Voyeuristic* looking involves a controlling gaze and Mulvey argues that this has associations with sadism: 'pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt - asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness' (Mulvey 1992, 29). *Fetishistic* looking, in contrast, involves 'the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone'. Fetishistic looking, she suggests, leads to overvaluation of the female image and to the cult of the female movie star. Mulvey argues that the film spectator oscillates between these two forms of looking (*ibid.*; see also Neale 1992, 283ff; Ellis 1982, 45ff; Macdonald 1995, 26ff; Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 77-9).

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