

# Laura Mulvey and her relevance to contemporary cinema essay

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Thesis Statement Exploring the cinematic gaze and its relevance to contemporary audience.

Nurfarahin Amir 10249 (+65)93252485com A research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Media Arts. LASALLE College of the Arts 2012 [pic] Nurfarahin Amir 2012

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Throughout my dissertation I will be exploring the classical cinematic gaze

and I will be trying to demonstrate that these theories and theorists such as

Freud and Mulvey are now outdated, have no relevance and no longer relate

to contemporary audiences.

I will also be examining new established forms of ' looking' and the new

theories surrounding the different forms of cinematic gaze. I will be asking

many questions about how the ' gaze' and the theories on it have evolved,

such questions as: What is the cinematic gaze? Why is the ' gaze'

predominantly perceived to be a male gaze? How does these theories of the

' male gaze' relate to contemporary audiences? Is there room for more than

one gaze? What other gazes are there? What are these alternative gazes? Is

there really a fixed viewing position for audiences created by the

filmmakers? Who takes charge of the viewing position, the filmmakers or the audience? Part 2 I have listed below definition of terms, concepts and methodologies that are frequently used throughout this dissertation. 1. Freud and the oedipal crisis. Chapter 1 The patriarchal Gaze The cinematic 'gaze' is an established form of voyeuristic and/or narcissistic 'looking', identifying and empathising with the characters onscreen. When examining what the cinematic gaze is, and who established and prompted these theories, it seems that many of the theorists that wrote essays on the 'gaze' and cinematic spectatorship, got their ideas from Freud and his works on psychoanalysis and his Three Essays on Sexuality. Freud theorised that men suffer from an Oedipus complex combined with castration anxiety; therefore men perceive women only as sexual difference and this transfers to film viewing. Freud believed that women pose a threat to men because of their 'lack' of the penis and this causes severe trauma for men which alters the way they 'look' at and perceive women for the rest of their existence; therefore to subdue and to regain their dominant power men must position women as an object which they can control by utilising them as a source of erotic pleasure.

Freud explains how men have scopophilic and voyeuristic drives and by 'looking' at women who is unaware of his presence, these drives and sexual instincts are satisfied and control and male power are once again reinstated. . . : is it male? Understanding the role of women as defined by the male gaze is central to understanding women's position in society. Though this may not necessarily be common knowledge, we can all buy the argument that a woman's place in society's stratification is defined by the <https://assignbuster.com/laura-mulvey-and-her-relevance-to-contemporary-cinema-essay/>

outward manifestation of her person, and that person is identified first and foremost by her gender. Simone de Beauvoir claims that women are defined as “others” or as “not male.”

“This differentiation would not be possible if women were not recognizable by sight as not male. Considering this, it is logical to look to film, a major form of visual popular culture, and its associations with visual representations and the gaze. The gaze in film is basically the outlook of the camera. It is because the outlook of the camera fosters identification with the audience, the gaze can be used as a powerful discourse. As Laura Mulvey states in her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the representation of women in popular culture has been dissected. Mulvey outlines in her opening paragraph “.

.. the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (Mulvey, 1975, pg 57). This dissection in film allows women to realize the extent to which the controlling discourse flows over from popular culture and affects everyday issues. According to Mulvey, women are always the objects of the gaze, never the possessors of the gaze. In the case of film, control of the camera and therefore the control of the gaze is almost always firmly settled in the male sphere. However, as Mulvey understands, the camera, not just cinematic technology, can be thought of as a symbol and applied to patriarchal control in society at large.

It is through this understanding that the camera can be considered an instrument of patriarchal domination. For example, many aspects of life that

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women accept without thought are actually results of, very definite stereotypes about and concerning women. To bring Freud in the matter, is to recognize that all aspects of our lives are affected by the extending arm of film and popular culture; generally classified as harmless, but psychologically significant. Mulvey states, “..

. unchallenged mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In the highly developed Hollywood cinema, it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy, came near finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions” (Mulvey, 1975, pg 59). Mulvey asserts that a standard of normalcy and acceptability is presented and sustained through these mainstream manifestations of popular culture. Therefore, who controls the popular discourse and what they have to gain from its perpetuation become important. The dominant popular discourse, for instance, only focuses on the fact that women, in the majority of societies around the world, live lives of spectacle.

Mulvey categorizes women as, “ the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975, pg 58). As Mulvey’s statement suggests, unlike males, females seldom find themselves in the role of spectator, or in the case of film, in the role of control. Women form the spectacle. They are the objects while males are generally the subjects. In film, the camera almost always assumes the gaze of the male. Therefore it is he who moves the action while women have little access to the camera and/or control of the

narrative. The camera seems to constantly 'watch' women and almost always the camera assumes a male perspective and a male gaze in the narrative.

It is the male that the audience, whether male or female, relates to because it is a male gaze that moves and controls the camera. Mulvey describes how all classical Hollywood films are structured with a masculine perspective and therefore women are presented as objects to be viewed by men and as a result the camera adopts a masculine viewpoint that the viewers have no choice but to also adopt this dominant perspective. In Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' she explains how the psychoanalytic theory emphasises and reinforces the ideology of the dominant patriarchal society; and as she states the " Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form. (Mulvey, 1989, p14) First, influenced by semiology, feminist theorists stressed the crucial role played by the artistic form as the medium for expression; second, influenced by psychoanalysis, they argued that Oedipal processes were central to the production of art works. That is, they gave increasing attention to how meaning is produced in films, rather than to the " content," which had preoccupied sociological critics; and they stressed the links between the processes of psychoanalysis and cinema. Psychoanalytic discourse may indeed have oppressed women, in the sense of bringing us to accept a positioning that is inherently antithetical to being a subject and to autonomy; but if that is the case, we need to know exactly how psychoanalysis has functioned to repress what we

could potentially become; for this, we must master the terms of its discourse and ask a number of questions.

First, is the gaze necessarily male? Could we structure things so that women own the gaze? If this were possible, would women want to own the gaze? ) But what if the film's protagonist is female? Does this mean somehow the female protagonist must be masculinised in order for male viewers to identify with them or has it become evident that Freud's contradictory theories have not even considered and have completely ignored women's sexual desires and capabilities of identifying and empathising with characters onscreen? Freud does not accept, include or explore in his thesis the way a woman 'looks' or objectifies men, as it seems that men or "the male figure" cannot apparently "bear the burden of sexual objectification". (Mulvey, 1989, p20) Finally, in either case, what does it mean to be a female spectator? Only through asking such questions within the psychoanalytic framework can we begin to find the gaps and fissures through which we can insert woman in a historical discourse that has hitherto been male-dominated and has excluded women. In this way, we may begin to change ourselves as a first step toward changing society.

1. 2 : Fetishism and voyeurism Another structure to contain the fear of 'castration anxiety' is to fetishize certain body parts of women; by breaking women down into sexualised body parts she literally becomes a set of objects, which at the same time creates a distance, for the male viewer to take pleasure in viewing without guilt or shame.

Freud proposed many controversial theories about sexual difference and many film theorists took his concepts and used them to explain the cinematic 'gaze' and spectatorship such as Mulvey, she utilizes Freud's account to portray how "film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle." (Mulvey, 1989, p14) Mulvey explores the reasons for this strident male control by delving into Freud and physchoanalytic discourses.