

Miriam hansen and her researches of spectatorship in american silent film

[Literature](#)



Miriam is best known for her award-winning study, *Babel and Babylon; Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991). In her book she goes into detail about the role cinema has “ in shaping and changing the historical experience, particularly for immigrants and woman for whom it represented a new potentially liberating access to modernizing public culture. ”(Hansen) Miriam’s clarifies that she’s focusing her work in the time frame from the beginning of the cinematic institution, the silent era in the early 1890’s to the end of the 1920’s. Hansen begins by telling a story about the release of *The Corbett- Fitzsimmons Fight*.

There shouldn’t have been a reason for this picture to be more successful than previous but there was something about this particular screening that brought in large audiences. The audience ranged across all class boundaries and more than half of the audience was made up of women. What’s interesting is that normally during a live fight there were no women in the audience. Women weren’t allowed to be part of this community. This specific opportunity gave women access to this spectacle. Women weren’t allowed to see the intimate and intense physical activity of these men prior. Three decades later women go to see *The Son of Sheik* with the intention of seeing a half-naked man saving the day. This spectacle was intended for a female audience. Miriam Hansen speaks about the juxtaposition of the emergence of cinema and the transformation of the public sphere, more specifically the gender given to life and its everyday activities.

The *Corbett- Fitzsimmons* fight was a fight between two men intended for men who couldn’t be there in person, but the end result proved the power cinema has over all people regardless of class or color. Feminist critics like <https://assignbuster.com/miriam-hansen-and-her-researches-of-spectatorship-in-american-silent-film/>

Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Dolan have argued that the classical spectatorship is structurally masculine which is so clearly an issue to female viewers. Any efforts made to reverse the effects of the birth of cinema and its original rooted is aimed to contradict film history. Thus then began a heated debate of film breaking off its past by re-envisioning a new future. Film theorists analysis film history, classical Hollywood cinema in particular, and how cinema reoriented the spectators desire with certain dominant ideological positions. Miriam goes into the two approaches. The first taking the technical aspect of a film including sound and the darkness, taking the audience into Plato's cave. Audience members being passive and not able to think for themselves. While the contrasting approach is all about finding out what the spectator wants then creating a narrative, plot, and figuring out what exactly are the steps needed in order to create a particular film for a particular spectator. In the book, Miriam Hansen questions spectatorship from the viewpoint of the public sphere. This itself is a category for film historical transformation. One side establishes that cinema creates its own public sphere. It is reliable on its own institutions and its own relations and representation. It has its own style and form of production and distribution. While the other side is also very true, cinema interacts with people which then falls into a social and cultural history.

Miriam Hansen urges those who read her theory to think of classical Hollywood cinema as a type of vernacular modernism. Hansen coined the term " vernacular modernism" which is used to define cinema as a mass cultural form. Miriam Hansen's essay The Mass Production of the senses: Classical Cinema as a Vernacular Modernism takes a new view on modernity

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and cinema. The basic concept that Miriam Hansen exercises in her essay is that cinema as a whole is modern art. Miriam defines modernism as an entire “ range of cultural and artistic practice that register, respond to, and reflect upon the process of modernization and the experience of modernity”(Hansen). This includes the theory transformation of the states in which art is created, transmitted and interpreted into the world. Hansen makes the argument that the social and sensorial changes brought about by modernity are reflected both in recognized forms of artistic modernism and in the vernacular modernism of the films.

The main point is that people have been told what “ classical” cinema is. There is a specific formula for a film to be considered in this category but what it really has is an effect on the spectator. Cinema has to do the modern experiences in life like being distorted, frighten or even having a good laugh. This theory challenges the notorious conceptualization of classical Hollywood and her definition of vernacular modernism relates to cinemas role in worldwide integration. The crossroad of classical cinema and modernity points out that cinema was only part of modernity, rather it was the most inclusive as a cultural horizon. Cinema was capable of a reflexive relation with modernity and modernization that was certified by contemporaries like Benjamin and Kracauer’s writings. Hansen argued that modernization without a doubt provokes a need for reflexivity and that if sociologist would consider cinema in aesthetic and sensorial style rather than just one more media of information and communication then these sociologists would find extensive evidence, in American and other cinemas from the 20s to 40s, of modernist and vernacular reflexivity. Kracauer in his more idealistic work

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understood cinema as an alternative public sphere. Cinema traded the mass production of senses but also provided an aesthetic horizon for the experience of the mass society.

The reflexive dimension of Hollywood films in relation to modernity takes several forms but its all centered with the sensory and sensational effect. This is why more women showed up to the screening of The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight, for the experience. Hollywood didn't just throw in some images and sound then call it a day, Hollywood created and distributed a new sensorium. A massive appeal of these films is its power to engage the viewer at the narrative on a cognitive level or in its model of identification for being modern. The idea is it isn't what the films showed but it's what effect they had on the viewer.