Mulvey: the male gaze

Laura Mulvey's article entitled 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (first published in 1975) marks a shift away from radical and behaviourist models of feminism. Rather than seek to identify 'effects', Mulvey draws on Freudian psychoanalysis and structuralism to argue that mainstream Hollywood narrative films represent women characters as passive objects of male sexual

desire. Mulvey's theory of the **male gaze** claims that male characters are 'bearers of the look' which is aimed - far more often than not - at physically desirable, sexually submissive female characters. Moreover, we the spectators watch cinematic films through the eyes of the dominant male protagonists and are implicitly addressed as though we were men desiring heterosexual pleasures, even if we are - in fact - heterosexual women or homosexuals. To understand this theory of the male gaze, we need to understand two features of the cinematic experience that Mulvey borrows from psychoanalysis, a theoretical tradition that originates in the work of Sigmund Freud who argued that the body and the mind become inextricably linked in the early years of human life and are not - as assumed by Christianity and other, older tradi-tions of thought - separate entities.

First is the notion of scopophilia which means 'pleasure in looking'. Freudian theory suggests that pleasure in looking is a human instinct that develops in the early years of a person's existence when they begin to experience control over their sight and can fix it on various objects, such as toys. Mulvey argues that narrative cinema conventions and contexts of screening (i.e. in darkened auditoriums) foster a sense of 'voyeuristic fantasy' (Mulvey 1989: 17) in the spectator, not unlike the infantile variety. Holly-wood cinema is, above all, a provider of visual pleasure, not intellectual sti-mulation or painful visual representation. However, scopophilic desires accommodate male rather than female voyeurs. While women in Hollywood films connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness', men are doing the looking: 'The deter-mining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure' (Mulvey 1989: 19). Female spectators are excluded from this male-oriented perspective on visual pleasure. Moreover, this visual pleasure is a heterosexual male pleasure that is both narrow-minded and divisive because it constructs a voyeuristic position for the (assumed) male spectator akin to 'playing the Peeping Tom'. The type of visual pleasure constructed by mainstream narrative cinema is therefore gendered and sexist.

This leads to the second feature of narrative cinema that Mulvey explores, which is the notion of identification derived from Jacques Lacan's psycho-analytic theory of the mirror stage (first published in 1966). According to Lacan, when an infant first sees their image in a mirror they consider this image to be more superior - an 'Ideal-I' - than themselves. They do not, at first, identify this image with themselves. Instead, because of their 'motor incapacity and nursling dependence' (Lacan 1993: 34), they view their mirror image as more independent and 'complete' as a human being, and therefore they identify with - and worship - this image as a version of 'self' which they should strive to achieve. Mulvey applies Lacan's ideas to cinema spectator-ship. The cinema screen, she suggests, functions in a similar way for specta-tors as the mirror functions for infants. Spectators are encouraged to identify themselves with on-screen characters - some of whom may already be 'icons'

- and imagine these characters as superior reflections of themselves. Characters in Hollywood films can therefore become 'ego ideals' or 'screen surrogates' (Mulvey 1989: 18, 20) through which we the spectators can live out our fantasies. However, the male protagonists who do the looking become the 'main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify' (Mulvey 1989: 20). Women spectators - as well as men - are bound to identify with this controlling, dominant male character. This is what Mulvey means by 'the "masculinization'' of the spectator position' (Mulvey 1989: 29). Rarely if ever are female protagonists in films framed as bearers of the gaze for the pleasure of female spectators, although an exception would be Sigourney Weaver's strong female roles in films such as *Alien* (1979) and *Copycat* (1995). There are also female characters in films that threaten the male ones, such as the *femme fatales* of the film noir genre. These characters are subject to the male gaze in a different sense because - in Mulvey's Freudian thinking - their lack of a penis (given that they are women) coupled to the fact that they are not fetishized as sexual objects means that they signify for men the threat of castration. These dangerous female characters must therefore be killed or incarcerated in order to protect the phallic power of patriarchal identification.

Mulvey concludes that there are three ways of 'looking' associated with cinema:

1 the look of the camera that records the film;
2 the look of the audience that views the film;
3 the look of the characters in the film.

Narrative conventions of realist filmmaking, however, make the first two ways of looking invisible and instead foreground the third perspective, 'the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience' (Mulvey 1989: 25). All we are consciously left with, therefore, is the look of the characters in the film, and in most Hollywood films the bearers of this look are the male characters, who are usually looking lustfully at the female ones. As a filmmaker herself, Mulvey has worked against the grain of mainstream narrative cinema by making films that self-consciously refer to their own constructiveness. In films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), the camera not only *records* but intrudes into the action. A single camera shoots much of the action while slowing moving in a horizontal direction, contrary to the well-made Hollywood movie in which camera shots are edited and spliced together in such a way that they are unobtrusive to the action. While her filmmaking has only harboured modest critical acclaim, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze has been very influential to film and media theory *per se* - not just feminist media theory. A small library of research and theory has been inspired by it (see Kaplan 2000).

Nonetheless, a clear limitation of her theory is that it presumes audience responses rather than asking members of the audience for their own thoughts and feelings. As Annette Kuhn (2000: 442-7) points out, the theoretical analysis of spectatorship is quite different from the empirical analysis of socially situated audiences, and Mulvey's theory of the male gaze can easily be interpreted in such a way that female spectator = passive audience member; male spectator = active audience member. It is surely not the case that female audiences can only gain pleasure in a majority of films by passively subjecting themselves to the male gaze. Of course, Mulvey as a psychoanalyst and structuralist might counter that audience research is doomed to fail because visual pleasure is constructed by unconscious psychological processes and structured by invisible ideologies of patriarchy. Female cinema spectators are therefore repressed without knowing it. For some feminists though, the male gaze is not necessarily omniscient and unavoidable. Mary Ann Doane's (2000) resistant strategy of 'the masquerade' - the notion that a 'flaunting femininity', donning a mask and flamboyant dress, is able to distance itself from the patriarchal ideology of conventional femininity that caters for the male gaze - is an important reworking of Mulvey's theory.