Chapter 1 Feminist Film Theory: An Introduction

This book is aimed at helping media and film studies teachers introduce the basics of feminist film theory. No prior knowledge of feminist theory is required, but it is expected that readers will be familiar with the basic language of film form. The intended readers are secondary school and university undergraduate teachers and students of film and media studies. Areas of emphasis include spectatorship, narrative and ideology. Many illustrative case studies are used to offer students an opportunity to consider the connotations of visual and aural elements of film, narrative conflicts and oppositions, the implications of spectator 'positioning' and viewer identification, and an ideological critical approach to film.

The book begins with 'potted versions' of the contributions of two influential authors whose seminal texts have fostered new understanding of gender representation in the visual media – John Berger and Laura Mulvey. The theoretical material will be illustrated with reference to case studies. Explanations of key terminology are included. Each chapter begins with key definitions and explanations of the concepts to be studied, including some historical background, where relevant. A list of practice questions is provided at the end of the book and these could be used for essays or tests.

Cinematic entertainment is often understood as being neutral with respect to values. As studio boss Sam Goldwyn famously said, 'If you want to send a message, call Western Union.' Many students (and teachers) may feel that cinematic entertainment is generic with respect to gender and values. The trouble with this view is that it prevents us from questioning cinematic practices themselves, under the presumption that any sexist problems lie not in specific institutional practices, but in the uses we make of them, or in the way viewers interpret them. It is rare to find discussions of cinema institutions that pay serious attention to the ideological framework underlying them. But viewers can only interpret or use what is there in the first place.

In the 1980s and '90s media scholarship interrogated why some kinds of media representations persist and others are absent. It asked how corporate-owned media created markets and shaped its products, thus contributing to how consumers perceive gender, race or class. Media scholarship attended to the ideologies of media forms. By contrast, the more recent paradigm shift in neoliberal academia has been towards viewing media consumption patterns as indicative of the consumer's intrinsic interests. The belief that consumers are ultra-resilient, unimpregnable and completely free and active in their viewing choices has supplanted the focus on the industrial supply side of the relationship.

Limiting the focus of film studies to formal codes and techniques for producing them directs our attention to means and away from an evaluation of ends. I realise that some might see gendered film studies as a controversial attempt to change

an industry that already exists and works very well. Perhaps some pedagogues would prefer film and media studies to be evaluated within their own spheres, acknowledging their economically-proven potential to contribute to public entertainment. Arguments about ends may not seem relevant, but such criticism begs the question because it presupposes that a decontextualised evaluation of cinema is an adequate one. When we attempt to analyse cinematic meanings 'in their own sphere' what we are doing is tacitly and uncritically sanctioning the values' status quo. This seems to fall short of the pedagogue's traditional role of encouraging questioning and critical reflection. Those who control the questions control the answers, and educators should not preclude attempts to frame the issues in alternative and enlightening ways.

A culture is more than its institutions, laws or religious beliefs. It consists in the unspoken assumptions and values of its members. Despite claims to objectivity and value neutrality, the Hollywood film industry has an identifiable 'language' with customs, codes and conventions that have developed over time. Many of these conventions developed historically in the absence, or partial absence, of women as creators. Over time, the cultural habits, norms and values produced through this industry have contributed to fostering a culture of opposition to women's equal participation. Media products come from a culture and reflect its moral norms and values. On the other hand, media products also speak to that culture, either reinforcing and legitimising its norms and customs, or subverting and interrogating them. Movies have the potential to spark the audience's imagination, to arouse or sway its emotions, or to provoke new thoughts and ways of seeing the world.

Film-makers who attempt to increase women's participation (both in the production process and within media products) might be seen as aspiring to reform the cultural institutions. These efforts range from understanding subtle gender biases in hiring practices, for example, to restructuring the conventional language and codes through which films communicate. This is not to suggest that there is an intrinsic 'male' way of seeing because of some biological perceptual difference in all people of the male sex, or vice versa. The point is not to reify the male way of doing cinema (i.e. proclaim a natural or biological cause for it). This would imply that there is an intrinsically masculine way of 'seeing' or 'representing' the world. Rather it is to interrogate how we arrived at so many assumptions about 'masculinity' or 'femininity' in the first place and to point to a certain bias that *any* human being has in seeing the world through the prism of their own experiences and their own culture.

If cinema (and television) have been complicit in constructing gender stereotypes, then we can begin to ask by what particular mechanisms it has succeeded in doing so.

Pluralists generally do not attend to the ways in which huge multi-national conglomerates control the flow of ideas. They focus instead on the consumer and the audience, emphasising the ability of the consumer to select media products according to their own gratifications and needs. They stress the active role of audiences and reject the idea that audiences might be passively manipulated by media messages. Postmodernists argue that there is a wide proliferation of media products not exclusively under the control of the major conglomerates. They argue that there has been a dissemination of power and ideas due to improved access to technology by ordinary citizens.

However, much evidence supports the (not outlandish) theory that what people are taught by their cultural institutions has enormous effects on the way they see the world. There is now a consensus that exposure to media violence is a risk factor for actual violent behaviour. In 2005, the *Lancet* published a comprehensive review of the literature on media violence to date. The weight of evidence from dozens of studies supported the view that exposure to media violence leads to aggression, desensitisation towards violence and lack of sympathy for victims of violence, particularly in children. The United States surgeon general, the National Institute of Mental Health and multiple professional organisations – incuding the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association – all consider media violence exposure a risk factor for actual violence.

The remote Himalayan nation of Bhutan makes an interesting case study. Bhutanese life, which is steeped in Himalayan Buddhism, was transformed dramatically when television was introduced for the first time to this nation in June 1999. A cable service provided 46 channels of round-the-clock entertainment. By April 2002 Bhutan began to see for the first time a crime wave including burglaries and violence, broken families, school dropouts, and other youth crimes like shoplifting. Many Bhutanese citizens began writing in to the national newspaper, *Kuensel*, complaining that TV is very bad for the country and attributed these social changes to television.

Despite the evidence, current media scholarship has almost completely absolved the film industry of any role in shaping culture. Discontent with the simplicity of the 'hypodermic' model of media effects, a cluster of academics in the mid-'90s ditched media effects altogether and instead of pointing out particular flaws in the theory, opted for a wholesale rejection of the model. This effectively put an end to theoretical analysis of how media representations (e.g. of human sexuality, masculinity, femininity, race or age) work within a global economic system that often serves to define the nature of the content produced. Consequently, media studies academics now start from the premise that media texts are 'polysemic' (open to multiple meanings). As such, there is literally no 'thing' to study. But as professor Gail Dines has pointed out, this is like saying there is no such thing as a

car industry because there are lots of different types of cars on the road.

Media scholars seem to have substituted biological determinism in place of cultural determinism, thus conceptually transforming cultural products into 'unmediated' reflections of 'intrinsic' human nature. This has fed into the common belief that the film industry is totally democratic and therefore its products are an objective reflection of what human beings are like.

But if you feed kids on a steady diet of sugar, advertise sweets all over the place to encourage them to buy more, distribute free samples, open candy stores on every corner, and then claim that kids 'naturally' prefer sweets to healthy nutritious food, you're insulting my intelligence. And just as the huge variety of sweets all contain very generous helpings of sugar and artificial ingredients and very little nutritional value, likewise the many varieties of films in the world (particularly those produced by Hollywood) seem to stick faithfully to remarkably common leitmotifs and conventions.

American graphic novelist Alison Bechdel's famous test (unsurprisingly known as 'The Bechdel Test' or the 'Mo Movie Test') first appeared in her 1985 comic 'Dykes to Watch Out For' under the title 'The Rule'. This test provides a very simple means of measuring whether females are meaningfully represented in a film. It sets a very low bar, because to 'pass' the test, a film needs only to meet three very minimal criteria:

1. It must have at least two (named) female characters
2. Who talk to one another
3. About something other than a man.

The test does not even require that the women in the film are non-stereotypical characters. They could talk about doing laundry or recipes. The test only measures whether women are meaningfully present in a film at *all*; it does not require that the film is feminist or that it in any way presents women positively. The only requirement is that there are women in the film who have some kind of an interior life independent of men. It is astonishing how many major Hollywood films do not pass the test, including many Oscar-nominated films.

But things are almost as bad when females are represented in films, since the ways in which they are depicted do not go very far towards suggesting that they have interior lives or minds. Almost a quarter of all female characters in family films are undressed or partially nude, compared to 4% of male characters.[1]

In their analysis of 200 top grossing films of 2014 and 2015, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that in 2014 only 11% of them featured a female lead and in 2015 only 17% of the top grossing films had a female lead. Male characters were twice as likely to speak as female characters in the top grossing

films. Overall, male characters spoke 31.8% of the time in films compared to 14.5% of the time for female characters. On average, the top 100 grossing non-animated films of 2015 earned $90,660,000 each. Films with female leads made considerably more on average than films with male leads: $89,941,176 for female leads compared to $75,738,095 for male leads. Films led by women grossed 15.8% more on average than films led by men. Even though women played leading roles in action blockbusters such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Daisy Ridley), *The Hunger Games Series: Mockingjay Part 2* (Jennifer Lawrence), and *The Divergent Series: Insurgent* (Shailene Woodley), overall, male characters appeared and spoke on screen three times more often than female characters in action films.

The sheer scale of the film industry has important cultural implications. The entertainment industries constitute our hegemonic culture and our norms of acceptable behaviour. The hegemonic Marxist approach to cinema suggests that media industries operate within a structure that reinforces the dominant ideology. Cinema has grown into a major industry with sophisticated marketing, technologies and global distribution networks, as well as cross-media promotion and production available to conglomerates such as Disney. Like other major industries that generate potentially harmful social impacts, the film industry creates a discourse that nurtures public confidence in its products and practices. The role of the media scholar is to interrogate the presuppositions latent in this discourse, and to unpack the relationships of power implicit in it.

Most film studies and media studies students are familiar with the formal codes of film language – editing, framing, camera movement, lighting, sound, etc. These formal aspects of cinema work together to make meaning in ways that are familiar, or conventional, to media consumers. Consequently, it makes sense to speak of the cinema as having its own 'language'. Paradoxically, media and film studies courses involve a process of helping students to recognise (and talk about) the codes and conventions that they already know. Most students know how to 'read' the conventional codes from which a cinematic text is constructed, which is why they can enjoy these texts prior to studying them. In similar fashion, most English-speaking children can understand and tell stories in English long before they have ever heard of a preposition, a pronoun, an epithet or a metaphor. To study film form without engaging in critical analysis of its messages and values is analogous to studying English grammar without ever studying English literature. The former is about understanding the structure of the language, the latter is about the various uses to which this language is deployed within social or political contexts.

No dichotomy between form and content need be presupposed. It is common to conceive of form as a container and content as something more substantial contained within it. This distinction is questionable, however, when we consider how the formal components work together as a 'meaning system' to create the whole pattern that is perceived. Subject matter and abstract ideas are an integral part

of the total system of the text. They may influence our expectations or cue us to draw certain inferences. The subject matter and abstract ideas take on a meaning that is specific to the work. For example, a historical subject such as 'the Vietnam war' is not content-neutral but is placed in relationships with other elements. *Platoon* (1986) is a story about two regiments of American soldiers. It addresses moral questions about individual conscience versus group loyalty and patriotism; it questions the legitimacy of authority, racism, xenophobia and the American soldiers' experience of disillusionment. All of these issues are woven into the fabric of the film's formal codes of meaning. *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or *The Deer Hunter* (1978) may have the same subject matter, and yet be shaped quite differently by the film's formal construction and our perceptions of it.

Since films are human artifacts, film-makers cannot avoid relating their works to the social, political, historical and visual culture in which they are situated. Existing works, or aspects of existing works, influence the development of new ones. Traditions, popular forms, trends and styles develop through the imitation and repetition of certain elements. These common modes of representation become conventional or generic. The relationship between the artwork and the world in which it is situated is a reciprocal one. Conventions and genres may influence the artist's output, but likewise the artwork produced from this matrix of meaning becomes a part of the matrix that will influence other artists, and our perception of 'reality' itself.

Cinematic texts do not give us direct access to the world. Although cinema generally attempts to imitate 'real life', it presents us with a constructed world, fabricated through a carefully selected set of representations. Students might be asked: what version of 'normality' is offered in the film? What threatens this normality? What oppositions are established? The answers to these questions shape our ways of thinking, and so our very perception of the world. Often it is unclear whether art imitates life, or life imitates art. Films may reflect or inject values, myths and ideologies. Students should be encouraged to interrogate the social functions of our stories and myths.

Gendered film studies looks at cinematic codes and narratives not just as a language but as ***discourse***. Ideas about discourse can be traced to the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84). Foucault introduced the idea that language, far from being neutral, creates meaning by the ways in which it is used and, in particular, the ways that it is used to wield power. Discourse analysis allows students to recognise film language as a medium through which relationships of power between different groups are maintained, reinforced, exposed, subverted or re-negotiated. Such analysis encourages students to question how ideas are represented systematically. It also sheds light on the struggle over ideas represented by competing discourses.

This book will help teachers explore the various ways in which ideas about gender have been represented in the predominant Hollywood narrative tradition. This tradition represents a **hegemonic** system of meaning. The notion of **hegemony** can be traced to the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Gramsci argued that control by one minority social/political group or ideological system over its rivals need not involve force, since people can just as easily be lulled into compliance by a powerful set of messages, to which they consent in the belief that they are 'better off'. The idea of hegemony allows for flexibility in ideas over time, although always with the same group in power. According to Gramsci, the dominant groups constantly adapt their messages in order to inject them with fresh appeal in order to maintain the consent of those they dominate. The major Hollywood studios have been described as hegemonic because of the power they exert through their overseas trade organisation, the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America). No one literally coerces audiences to consume Hollywood films. However, in reality we have little choice since Hollywood dominates the market. Even if we may disagree with, say, the pro-American (perhaps even xenophobic) subtext of many Hollywood action films, we nevertheless feel that we are 'better off' consuming the box office hits than missing out on the hyped films that command public attention (and box office takings).

Since the sexual revolution (and global visual media explosion) of the 1960s, sex is more than what we do in private to make babies. Sex is not just a biological fact; it is an idea, or set of ideas, about men, women, biology, the 'natural', the 'normal', the 'perverse', etc. It is a public concept, constructed and consumed in a proliferation of contexts. It is no longer just a biological category, but a constructed category of experience that functions within historical, political, religious and cultural contexts. This does not mean that there is no biological dimension to human sexuality. However, the biological dimension is open to multiple interpretations. This book examines the role of institutional practices and discourses in the formation of ideas about sexuality.

Feminism, strictly speaking, is a doctrine or movement that advocates equal rights for women. This is what the word denotes. **Denotation** is the 'common sense' definition or meaning of a word. **Connotations**, by contrast, are implicit or suggested meanings that are not a part of the literal meaning of a word.

- A father and son were in a car accident. The father died and the son was rushed to hospital. Upon seeing the boy, the surgeon proclaimed, 'I can't operate on this boy, he's my son!' Was the surgeon lying?

If this riddle stumps students, then the point is clear – the word 'surgeon' must carry the secondary connotation 'male'. The solution, of course, is that the surgeon is the boy's mother. But often people get hung up trying to figure out how the boy could have two fathers because they automatically assume that surgeons are male.

Connotations are associations or ideas that are somehow conjured up by a word in the minds of people who interact with it, even when that word or sign bears no literal relationship to those ideas. For example, the word 'maiden' connotes modesty, but that is not part of the word's definition. Red roses conjure up ideas about romance, despite there being nothing in the definition of a red rose that automatically makes it 'romantic'. When you hear the word 'feminist', what comes to mind? It is rather strange that the word 'feminism' has become loaded with negative connotations.

You might begin discussing feminism by asking your students how many of them are comfortable being identified with the 'feminist' label. The opposite of feminism is male sexism. Sexism is discrimination on the basis of sex, especially the oppression of women by men. Sexism may also mean the oppression of men by women, though this use of the word is relatively uncommon. Being a feminist simply means being against male sexism. It seems rather odd, then, that the word has come to carry negative associations.

As feminist Tom Digby has noted, 'while there are important differences between sexism and racism, I could not help wondering why, if antiracists aren't presumed to hate whites as a group, why should antisexists be presumed to hate men as a group?' (Digby 1998: 15). One has to wonder whether the demonising of 'feminism' is symptomatic of male sexism within academic and media institutions. If not, then how did feminism come to be so misrepresented? In assessing the claim that feminists hate men, Digby says:

> Considering the absence of supporting evidence or argument, it is hard to take the substance of the assertion that feminists hate men seriously; nonetheless, because it has been such a weapon of choice among anti-feminist polemicists, its rhetorical context is worth examining. (Digby 1998: 16)

Firstly, the idea that feminism is an exclusively female movement is a gross misrepresentation. Not all females are feminists and not all feminists are female. Some of the key feminists have been men. Nor is it true that all male sexism is perpetrated by men. Scores of women collude in the oppression of women by men. Many women have contributed to public perceptions that feminism is a marginal and unnecessary 'man-hating' doctrine. It is crucial to be clear from the start that, just as not all females are feminists, not all feminists are female. And just as not all males are sexist, not all sexists are male.

Feminist film studies, or 'gendered film studies', is intended to explore the ways in which women (and men) are *represented* by visual media, and film in particular. When we speak of film as a medium of representation we mean that it does not merely record reality, but constructs an image of reality through the use of codes, myths, conventions and signs. Media re-presents information to its audience, who are encouraged to see its output as a 'window on the world'. This is misleading, as

the process of representing information is highly selective.

Feminists argue that media representations of gender perpetuate and reinforce the values of patriarchal society. Men tend to be cast in strong, active roles while women are shown as passive and merely 'pretty'. Film, like any discursive medium, generates meaning on two levels. The ***explicit*** message or interpretation is that which is consciously intended. For example, John Singleton, in describing his film *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) said, 'My main message is that African American men need to take more responsibility for raising their children, especially boys.'

A film's ***implicit*** meanings are less stable, and may involve contested interpretations that go beyond the intention of the film-maker. For example, many critics and commentators see the film noir movies of the 1940s as evidence of a movement within American social history and culture. More specifically, they see film noir as a reflection of post-war feelings of disillusionment and despair. They describe the 'femme fatale' as a masculine construction of femininity at a time when the social place of women was being challenged by the women who had gone to work outside the home during the war. Similarly, the social ideology of the typical Western constructs a positive image of the white population as the custodians of 'progress' and 'civility' while representing the indigenous Native American culture as 'savage' or 'primitive'. These meanings are not literally written into the script, but they can be read out of its subtext. The subtext refers to the unstated message conveyed through the form of a book, film or picture.

Sexuality has to do with anatomical differences between women and men. Most of us are born with a determined set of reproductive organs (penis and testes, or ovaries and vagina), although a fraction of the population are born with both male and female genitalia. In any case, whether male, female or inter-sex, an individual's sex is a given. It is something with which we are born. Sexuality may, however, be changed through surgical procedures. Gender, by contrast, refers to those socially constructed ideas about 'boys' and 'girls', and the ways in which society perceives the differences between the sexes. We could almost say that 'sex' refers to what's between our legs while 'gender' refers to what is between our ears. Gender refers to the set of beliefs about characteristically 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours, traits, mannerisms and attitudes.

Gendered film studies looks at the social purpose(s) of our stories and myths. Ideas and images of 'the masculine' or 'the feminine' are social constructions, and so we must attend to them as such, and ask who is creating these images. Whom do they benefit? Language is not a neutral medium of communication. Discourse/language is the medium through which social power relations between different groups are reinforced or re-negotiated. We need to ask what kind of world the film constructs and whose values and ideas are being expressed through it. Do the film's representations challenge or affirm our own experiences of the world? Do

they construct a world of appearances that does not reflect our experiences? What purpose do the film's representations serve? Whose interests are best served by it? The key here is to remember that films (and other media) do not merely record the world as it is. They construct an image of the world, a *mediated* version of the world.

Following theorists such as Sarah Gilligan, it should be fairly clear that women have historically functioned within mainstream cinema as the following:

- Victim.
- Girlfriend.
- Damsel in distress.
- Angelic mother.
- Whore.
- Sexual object.
- Erotic distraction.
- Femme fatale/monster.
- Castrating mother.

Looking at the list above, we see that the stereotypical role of the female in the traditional Hollywood film has not been that of an agent. She does not drive the narrative action, nor is she involved in changing the storyline. As Sarah Gilligan says, 'her role within the film is to look good and to make the male protagonist look even better. Women are rarely cast in positions of power, and when they are, they are punished for their power. . . Woman's traditional role is to be helpless, need rescuing or agree with the actions and decisions of the male protagonist' (Gilligan 2003: 18).

> There should be a woman, but not much of one. A good horse is much more important. (Max Brand in Avni 2005)

Feminist critics point out that these cinematic representations are mediated through the eyes and desires of the male director. The crucial point to remember is that woman exists as both a construction and a reality. 'Woman' is both a category, defined in opposition to men, and an individual physical person. We need only look around us at a few real women to understand that the image 'woman' does not always reflect the reality, and vice versa. Real individual women can, and do, perform 'womanhood' (as an image) but this image is not one that women have traditionally had a role in constructing. She is imitating an idealised and eroticised male construction of what women 'should' be. 'Woman' comes to represent not one person of the female sex, but a **stereotype**, a category defined by men and in

opposition to men. Stereotyping is not always negative, but it tends to preserve and perpetuate power relations in society. It is in the interests of those in power to continue to stereotype those with lower status in a negative or expedient light, thus preserving the status quo (Nelmes 2003: 227).

Even today, women have a relatively small role in constructing public images of 'womanhood'. A recent survey carried out by the UK Film Council and Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries, found that women in the British film industry are paid less than men even though they are better qualified. The survey found that women made up a third of the industry but 35% of women earn less than £20,000 a year, compared with 18% of men. At the same time, the number of men earning more than £50,000 nearly doubles the female figure. Women in the film industry were more likely to be graduates than men (60% compared with 39%), and while 17% of men have no qualifications, the same is true for just 5% of women. A June 2015 report by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills showed that in 2012 only 26% of employees in the digital and creative industries were female, substantially lower than the national average of 47%, and down from 33% in 2002.[2]

In her study of employment figures for behind-the-scenes women working on the top 250 domestic grossing films in 2004, Dr Martha M. Lauzen of San Diego State University found that 21% of the films employed no women directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers or editors. Yet not a single one of the top 250 domestic grossing films in 2004 failed to employ a man in at least one of these roles. The study also found that women comprised only 5% of all directors working on the top 250 films of 2004. This represents a decline of 6 percentage points since 2000 when women accounted for 11% of all directors. Women accounted for only 12% of writers working on the top 250 films of 2004. In addition, female actors generally earn less than male actors.

> The majority of directors in Hollywood are male and the majority of producers are male. This probably holds true in cinemas around the world. The movies that get the publicity budgets are made within male genres–blockbusters, war, science fiction or thrillers. These films seem to feature a central male character who is facing a male villain, and has a male best friend (who often gets killed by the villain in the penultimate reel, justifying the hero's killing of the villain). The female characters are there to titillate, to be in distress and rescued, and occasionally to guarantee the heterosexuality of the hero. (Butler 2002: 42)

Lauzen's figures for 2011 were equally grim, with women comprising only 18% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers and editors working on the US top 250 domestic grossing films. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 1998. Women accounted for 5% of directors, which is half as many as were directing films in 1998. Ninety-four per cent (94%) of all the films

in the study had no female directors. Of the 1,200 top-grossing films from 2007 to 2018, only 4.3% were directed by women, according to a study released by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

In addition, female actors generally earn less than male actors for equivalent sized roles, with Angelina Jolie (the highest paid female actor) making $33 million per film on average, roughly the same amount as the two lowest-ranked leading men Liam Neeson and Denzel Washington. Of the 16 biggest paychecks earned by actors per film in 2013, not a single one was earned by a female actor.[3] In 2015 a hack of Sony Pictures emails revealed that Jennifer Lawrence was paid only 7% of the profits of *American Hustle*'s (2013), whereas both of her male co-stars (Christian Bale and Bradley Cooper) were paid 9%, as was director David O. Russell.

Like other ideological constructions, representations of a society or of gender are not stable; their political and cultural importance are such that they are sites of considerable competition. As Graeme Turner has noted, 'To gain control of the representational agenda for the nation is to gain considerable power over individuals' view of themselves and each other' (Turner 1988: 136–7).

There appears to be an unspoken belief in the Hollywood film industry that somehow male-centred narratives are universally entertaining, or inherently more valuable and/or more lucrative than female-centred narratives which are seen as peculiar or of limited interest to the broad majority of viewers. This claim, of course, presupposes that certain types of narrative are inherently 'masculine' while others are 'feminine'. For example, action adventure is thought of as an essentially male genre, while romantic comedies are often described as 'chick flicks'. Tom Digby suggests that romantic comedies arise as social means of reinforcing gender oppositionality, which in turn serves the social function of reinforcing heterosexuality. The same gender oppositionality that ensures we are attracted to the opposite sex, by exaggerating the differences between men and women (and then eroticising them), also produces inter-gender mystification, which, says Digby, 'is sure to result in enough mutual aggravation between females and males to strongly reinforce oppositionality between them' (Digby 1998: 25). In other words, while romantic comedies appear only to comment upon pre-existing gender oppositionality, they in fact help to create it.

The question for feminist film studies students is whether categorising films into 'male' and 'female' genres has to do with what real men and women enjoy, or whether different genres themselves represent stereotypes of men and women in ways that are flattering to one sex more than another. In other words, do the films create the gender-specific audiences (by appealing to, and reinforcing, social stereotypes), or are the films a mere reflection of the way nature has made us? Would male audiences still love science fiction films if the majority of them featured a central female heroine who (1) faces a threatening female/alien villain, and (2) has

a cute 'helpful' boyfriend on the side whom she rescues?

Would female audiences raised from childhood on strong, active, powerful images of women be different kinds of women? Would they have different expectations and tastes in the kind of 'entertainment' they consume? Would the target audience for Hollywood movies suddenly become 16–24-year-old females, who grow ever more confident in themselves and have ever more spending power? Would women suddenly be the main consumers of films in the science fiction genre? If females controlled Hollywood, is this what *most* science fiction films would look like? Would females actually have an opportunity to control Hollywood, because they (and their male peers) had been raised watching empowering images of females, and denigrating images of males? These are dangerous questions, because they hint at the social power interests that lie behind our myth-making industries.

Within the film industry, the 'target audience' for big budget films is generally 16–24 -year-old males. It is as though there is some unwritten rule that says stories of interest to this group are the ones with widest human appeal.

The paucity of female directors is such that the title 'director' has become a gendered term, associated with males in the same way that the word 'surgeon' or 'pilot' or 'millionaire' connotes masculinity, although 'male' is not part of the definition of any of these terms. We do not have to specify that a director is male by adding a prefix ('male director') because the director's masculinity has become normalised, or assumed. However, we do not find it unusual to speak of 'female directors'. Here the prefix is needed to set female directors apart from the norm. Feminist theorist Claire Johnston (1980: 34) has pointed out that the female within patriarchy is seen as the irrevocable 'other'. Masculinity is the tacit 'norm' from which all deviations are defined as 'other' or 'less'.

The film director works very closely with a whole team of specialists (screenwriters, set designers, production managers, casting agents, actors, stunt men and women, editors, composers, make-up artists, effects specialists, etc.) who together collaborate to produce the final product, but the director is seen as the creator, the mastermind behind the magical process that results in the cinematic event – the final movie. As Sarah Gilligan has pointed out, 'this magical process can be seen to be coded as male' (Gilligan 2003: 16).

John Berger

First published in 1972, John Berger's ***Ways of Seeing*** was one of the twentieth century's most influential books on art. Because it appears that Berger's insights provide much of the groundwork for later feminist theorists, including Laura Mulvey, I have decided to include some of his insights in this book. ***Ways of Seeing*** was based on the BBC television series of the same name, in which Berger began to start a

process of questioning art, and the constructed meanings that images convey.

For the teacher of feminist film studies the most important chapter in Berger's book is Chapter 3, dealing with the female nude. The chapter is made up of both text and images. It would be worthwhile to assign this chapter in its entirety. Alternatively, or to supplement this chapter, teachers could show a video of the BBC programme which treats this chapter as a discrete unit.

Berger examines the usage and conventions of the European oil painting from about the late fifteenth century, in which women were the principal and ever-recurring subject. What follows is a summary of Berger's essay.

He begins by noting that the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A man's presence depends upon the 'promise of power' which he embodies. This power may be:

- Moral.
- Physical.
- Temperamental.
- Economic.
- Social.
- Sexual.

The object of man's power is external to himself – a power which he exerts *on others*. A woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself and defines what can and cannot be done *to her*. Presence to a woman is so intrinsic to her person (as an object of men's actions) that men tend to equate it with her body. To be born a woman is to be born into the keeping of men. We can still see vestiges of this in the traditional Christian wedding ceremony, in which the father, having been asked by the groom for permission to marry his daughter, officially 'gives her away' to the keeping of her husband.

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. From earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. The surveyor and the surveyed within her are the two constituent elements of her identity as a woman. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself *by* another. Men survey women before treating them. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. To recap:

- Men act and women appear.
- Men look at women.
- Women watch themselves being looked at.

The surveyor of women in herself is male – thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision, a sight. The mirror was often used in Renaissance paintings as a symbol of the vanity of woman. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her. You put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'vanity', thus morally condemning the woman for your own pleasure.

The real function of the painting was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.

Berger draws a distinction between nakedness and nudity in the European tradition. The nude, he says, is always conventionalised. These conventions derive from a particular tradition of art. What do these conventions mean? What does a nude signify?

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to *be seen* naked by others and yet *not* recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be nude is to have the surface of one's own skin turned into a disguise. Nudity is a form of dress.

In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. Consider the *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino (Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1

Venus is depicted kissing cupid. But the way their bodies are arranged has nothing to do with their kissing. Her body is arranged in this way to display it to the man looking at the picture. The picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality.

Sometimes a painting includes a male lover. How then, can we accept Berger's claim that the protagonist is not depicted? Berger argues that almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal – either literally or metaphorically –because the protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it. Quite often the female is depicted so as to be surveyed by both the man depicted in the painting and by the spectator/owner. The absurdity of this male flattery reached its height in the public art of the nineteenth century.

Berger does, however, acknowledge that there are a few exceptions to the conventions of the European tradition of oil painting. As an example, Berger suggests we examine Rembrandt's painting of Danäe (Fig. 1.2).

Fig. 1.2

The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and face. The image includes her agency, a promise of power that is usually relegated to the domain of the 'masculine'. Because of this, says Berger, the spectator cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked *for him*. He cannot turn her into a nude.

Today, the attitudes and values that informed that tradition are expressed through the conventions of other more widely diffused media:

- Advertising.
- Television.
- Movies.
- Music videos.
- Pornography.

Women are still depicted in quite a different way than men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male.

Laura Mulvey

Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (first published in 1975) appropriated psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Freud and Lacan, to demonstrate the ways in which unconscious forces in patriarchal society have structured film form. Drawing on Freud's descriptions of scopophilia, Mulvey argued that this impulse could explain one of the central pleasures of the cinema. **Scopophilia** had been isolated by Freud as one of the component instincts of sexuality. He associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Fetishistic scopophilia, says Mulvey, provides an avenue of escape for the male unconscious, which is threatened by the female figure insofar as it represents castration (the absence of a penis). By turning the female figure itself into a fetish, either through over-valuation or possessing her as an object of 'sight', her appearance becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. The other avenue of escape for the male unconscious, says Mulvey, is voyeurism – investigating the woman, penetrating her privacy, uncovering and demystifying her mystery. This investigation of the woman is counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object. This voyeuristic impulse has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjugating the guilty person to the controlling power of punishing or redeeming authorities.

Cinematic spectatorship, by its very nature, plays on voyeuristic fantasies. The audience are ensconced in darkness, enhancing their sense of separation from the magic world that unfolds in front of them, indifferent to their presence. The darkness also isolates the spectators from one another. The whole experience creates the illusion of a privileged perspective, from which the spectator can safely look in on a private world, *while no one looks back at him*.

Mulvey identifies three voyeuristic/scopophilic kinds of look associated with the cinema:

- The look of the camera and crew as they record the action.
- The look between the characters on screen.
  (Let's call this a *diegetic look*.)
- The look of the audience watching the film.
  (Let's call this the *extra-diegetic look*.)

All three kinds of look are predominantly masculine or associated with the male. Females are objectified by cinema as the object of desire. The audience identify with the male hero/protagonist's desire for the female (voyeuristically). In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, says Mulvey, pleasure in looking has been ordered along an active/male and passive/female divide. Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed. In an echo of Berger, Mulvey says that woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle, such that her very appearance is code for '*to-be-looked-at-ness*'. The female as spectacle both plays to and constitutes male desire. Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned as both erotic object for the characters within the film and as an erotic object for the spectator in the cinema.

But voyeurism is not the only pleasure that cinema offers. Cinematic stimulation also produces narcissistic pleasures – the spectator identifies with the object seen. The term 'narcissism' comes from Greek mythology. Narcissus was a beautiful youth who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool. He pined away, rooting himself to the spot, becoming the flower that bears his name. The film spectator can likewise become enthralled by a fantasy of his own omnipotence, attractiveness and/or prowess. Much of the pleasure of cinema revolves around the vicarious pleasure of living 'through' our heroes, whilst remaining oblivious to the realities of our real lives. Both voyeurism and narcissism pursue indifference to perceptual reality, creating the fantasised, eroticised concept of the world that assuages the neurotic needs of the male ego while rejecting empirical objectivity.

Females function within the classic film narrative as passive objects of the action. Just as pleasure in looking has been ordered along an active/male and passive/female divide, so too has the narrative structure been divided into active/male and passive/female roles. The man's role is the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man emerges in cinematic narrative as the representative of power. The story is typically structured around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify.

> 'What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.' (Budd Boetticher in Mulvey 1975: 3)

The spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, his screen surrogate, giving him a satisfying sense of omnipotence.

Viewers identify with the male's active resolution of the narrative (narcissistically). Women are seldom essential to the plot or represented as capable of resolving the narrative conflicts unaided. Traditionally there are few instances of female characters actively driving the narrative and thus competing for the audience's narcissistic identification. The result is that the male view is the only perspective from which the narcissistic pleasure of narrative can be derived. Female audiences experience phallocentric pleasure. Women have to psychologically 'cross dress' when they go to the cinema.

Linda Williams (in Turner 1988: 118) has argued that many films do represent females as powerful, only to then punish them for making use of their power. Her examples are *Psycho* (1960) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980), but *Thelma & Louise* (1991) also conforms to this rule. *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Vol. 2* (2004) exhibit extreme sadism towards the powerful female protagonist (as well as other powerful female characters), despite the fact that the female protagonist does eventually triumph over her male lover/rival. What is interesting here is the excessively high price she must pay in suffering to accomplish her victory. At one point she literally has to dig herself out of a grave, having been buried alive. But this is only one of the many unspeakable horrors inflicted on her body throughout the course of her ordeal. The message this sends to viewers, who narcissistically identify with the heroine, is that fighting against a man, if you are a woman, is a masochistic endeavour. In *Thelma & Louise* it is a fatal one.

Mulvey herself has acknowledged that the representation of women is far more complex than she had recognised in her early theory. Melodrama is one genre in which she says women *do* have key roles as subjects rather than objects. Mulvey may be correct, but, as Warren Buckland writes, 'melodrama can be said to turn its female character into a victim' (1998: 81). One problem with Mulvey's theory is that it draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, which does seem to presuppose some sort of essentialist model of gender. This suggests that a male gaze is inherent in male nature, rather than in the institutional power that men exert in having dominated the representational media. If this were the case then women, even with institutional power, would probably not represent men in similar ways. But the case studies we will examine in this book suggest that it *is* possible for both male and female directors to 'reverse' the allegedly 'male' look. What this suggests, of course, is that the use of a particular form of power (via the 'look') has less to do with the sex of the director than with the power of the director to represent the world according to his or her fantasies and desires, and these are not necessarily intrinsic in nature. They are just as likely to be products of upbringing and culture.

Conclusion

Neither of the above theoretical approaches can function as a thoroughgoing explanation of gender representation in art or cinema. In today's global film industry, new theoretical models might emerge that are better suited to aid our understanding of how gender representations work within and upon social and economic power relations. From today's perspective, we could probably find a handful of exceptions to the patriarchal modes of representation described above. Berger and Mulvey may seem a bit dated, but many of their insights still resonate with readers, and can be found and studied in the products of past eras, if not in our own. These are, of course, only theories, and summarised ones at that. But we will look in the following chapters at some of the ways in which the male gaze/male look and the power of patriarchal narratives have influenced cinema then and now.

Chapter Summary

- This book does not assume that a decontextualised evaluation of cinema is an adequate one. Sex is here examined not just as biological fact, but as a public concept, or set of ideas, about men, women, biology, the 'natural', the 'normal', the 'perverse', etc.
- Since films are human artifacts, film-makers cannot avoid relating their works to the social, political, historical and visual culture in which they are situated. Traditions, popular forms, trends and styles develop through the imitation and repetition of certain elements. These common modes of representation become conventional or generic.
- Although cinema generally attempts to imitate 'real life', it presents us with a constructed world, fabricated through a carefully selected set of representations. Students should be encouraged to interrogate the social functions of our stories and myths.
- **Discourse** – Foucault introduced the idea that language, far from being neutral, creates meaning by the ways in which it is used, and in particular the ways that it is used to wield power. **Discourse analysis** allows students to recognise film language as a medium through which relationships of power between different groups are maintained, reinforced, exposed, subverted or re-negotiated.
- **Hegemony** – Hegemonic discourses or ideologies are those that achieve ascendancy or domination within a global or international industry, economy or culture. Antonio Gramsci argued that control by one minority social/political group or ideological system over its rivals need not involve force, since people can just as easily be lulled into compliance by a powerful set of messages, to which they consent in the belief that they are 'better off'.

- **Denotation** is the 'common sense' definition or meaning of a word. **Connotations**, by contrast, are implicit or suggested meanings that are not a part of the literal meaning of a word. Students should be encouraged to reflect on the connotations of words like 'feminist' and 'director'. The word 'feminist' carries misleading connotations of womanhood, when this is not in fact part of the definition of the term. Similarly, the title 'director' has become a gendered term, associated with males. The film director's masculinity has become normalised or assumed.
- As a medium of *re*-presentation, film does not merely record reality, but constructs an image of reality through the use of codes, myths, conventions and signs. Feminists argue that media representations of gender perpetuate and reinforce the values of patriarchal society.
- The ***explicit message*** or interpretation is that which is consciously intended.
- A film's ***implicit meanings*** are less stable, and may involve contested interpretations that go beyond the intention of the film-maker. These meanings are not literally written into the script, but they can be read out of its **subtext**. The ***subtext*** refers to the unstated message conveyed through the form of a book, film or picture.
- **Sexuality** has to do with anatomical differences between women and men. Sex is a given. **Gender**, by contrast, refers to those socially constructed ideas about 'boys' and 'girls', and the ways in which society perceives the differences between the sexes.
- The stereotypical role of the female in the traditional Hollywood film has not been that of an agent. Women have played very little part in constructing public images of femininity. Women tend to imitate an idealised and eroticised male construction of what women 'should' be. 'Woman' comes to represent not one person of the female sex, but a **stereotype**, a category defined by men and in opposition to men. Feminist critics point out that cinematic representations of women are mediated through the eyes and desires of the male director.
- John Berger's ***Ways of Seeing*** was one of the twentieth century's most influential books on art. Berger's insights provide much of the groundwork for later feminist theorists.
- Berger began by noting that the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A woman is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. From earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself *by* another (male) spectator. The surveyor of women in herself is male.

- Berger looks closely at the visual conventions that inform the typical European oil painting, and in particular the female nude. Berger notes the ways in which the paintings were intended to flatter the male spectator-owner, for whom they were made, turning the female nudes into objects of sight for his pleasure. As in the conventional European oil painting, women are today depicted in quite a different way than men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male.
- Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' appropriated psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Freud and Lacan, to demonstrate the ways in which unconscious forces in patriarchal society have structured film form. Drawing on Freud's descriptions of **scopophilia**, Mulvey argued that this impulse could explain one of the central pleasures of the cinema.
- Fetishistic scopophilia, says Mulvey, provides an avenue of escape for the male unconscious, which is threatened by the female figure insofar as it represents castration (the absence of a penis). By turning the female figure itself into a fetish, either through over-valuation or possessing her as an object of 'sight,' her appearance becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.
- The other avenue of escape for the male unconscious, says Mulvey, is **voyeurism** – investigating the woman, penetrating her privacy, uncovering and demystifying her mystery. Cinematic spectatorship, by its very nature, plays on voyeuristic fantasies. The whole experience creates the illusion of a privileged perspective, from which the spectator can safely look in on a private world, *while no one looks back at him*.
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  a. The look of the camera and crew as they record the action.
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  c. The look of the audience watching the film.
- All three kinds of look are predominantly masculine or associated with the male.
- Mulvey claims that pleasure in looking has been ordered along an active/male and passive/female divide.
- Cinematic stimulation also produces **narcissistic pleasures** – the spectator identifies with the object seen. The spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, his screen surrogate, giving him a satisfying sense of omnipotence. Traditionally there are few instances of female characters actively driving the narrative and thus competing for the audience's

narcissistic identification. The result is that the male view is the only perspective from which the narcissistic pleasure of narrative can be derived.

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