



Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

Laura Mulvey in Conversation

Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

25 and Under: An Introduction to Laura Mulvey

Wed 29 Oct 19:15 Blue Room

Riddles of the Sphinx

Tue 4 Nov 20:45; Mon 17 Nov 20:30 (+ intro);

Fri 21 Nov 18:20

Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons

Thu 6 Nov 20:30 (+ intro by academic and writer

Nicolas Helm-Grovas); Sun 16 Nov 12:30

Crystal Gazing

Mon 10 Nov 18:15 (+ intro); Sun 23 Nov 15:10

AMY! + discussion with Laura Mulvey

+ Frida Kahlo & Tina Modotti

Tue 11 Nov 18:10

Zorn's Lemma + intro by Laura Mulvey

Mon 17 Nov 18:20

Laura Mulvey Symposium

Sat 22 Nov 11:00-17:00

The Bad Sister

Sat 22 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);

Wed 26 Nov 21:00

The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp

Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter

+ The Woman's Film

Sat 22 Nov 20:30

Le Vent d'est Wind from the East

Mon 24 Nov 18:15

Disgraced Monuments + discussion with

Laura Mulvey + **23rd August 2008**

Thu 27 Nov 18:10

Antonio das Mortes

O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro

Sat 29 Nov 15:10

See a selection of materials by Laura Mulvey in the BFI Reuben Library's window displays in November

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SIGHT AND SOUND

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A towering presence in debates surrounding independent cinema, gender and psychoanalysis in film, classical Hollywood, writing and filmmaking, the author of the seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' joins us for this special in-conversation event and the bestowal of her BFI Fellowship.

There are those filmmakers who can say their adventurous work enriched cinema, but how many can also say they transformed how we think about the artform? Film theorist, essayist and academic Laura Mulvey is one such figure. Over the years, her writing on film – not just her most potent and most cited essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) – has consistently interrogated spectatorship, while also exploring subjects such as cinema's relation to time and death. Her programming has brought neglected films and directors into the spotlight, while her teaching on film studies courses has moulded generations of students, many of whom have gone on to work across the film industry.

If there's a theme that unites much of Mulvey's work, it's a commitment to the marginal, whether that's championing avant-garde filmmaking; being part of the programming team behind one of the first festival programmes dedicated to women's filmmaking, in Edinburgh in 1972; or arguing for an end to Hollywood's gendered scopophilia in favour of an artisanal alternative cinema that challenged the conventions of mainstream narrative fiction film. This was the blueprint that Mulvey would go on to follow with her theorist husband Peter Wollen. After being given access to a cupboard of 16mm camera equipment during a university holiday, they made the first of six films together – *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974), exploring representations of the mythical warrior women the Amazons. Later they received funding through the BFI production board to make *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), examining the role of the mother through the myth of Oedipus and his encounter with the Sphinx.

'Visual Pleasure' drew on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud to critique Hollywood cinema, especially Josef von Sternberg (notably *Morocco*, 1930) and Alfred Hitchcock (mainly *Vertigo*, 1958). The essay, which launched the phrase 'the male gaze' into the world, was born of the intellectual ferment of the women's movement in the 1970s. It's interesting to consider how many moments of change Mulvey has responded to over the years. There's her film studies syllabus organised around seismic moments in cinema's past such as the final years of the silent era (in the 90s she curated a BFI season around the figure of the flapper); her portrait of Thatcherite London in the film *Crystal Gazing* (1982); and her study of the end of the Soviet Union through the lens of the country's felled statues (*Disgraced Monuments*, made with Mark Lewis in 1994). In her collection of essays *Death 24x a Second* (2005), the arrival of DVD and VHS made her reflect on the implications of watching film in a completely new way, with the ability to pause, rewind and replay the action.

Isabel Stevens, introduction to an interview with Laura Mulvey, *Sight and Sound*, December 2025 (issue out now and on sale in the BFI Shop).

Born in Oxford in 1941, Laura Mulvey spent her early years in the countryside, before her family returned to London in 1946 and she got her first chance to go to the cinema. She remembers her first film being *Nanook of the North*, of

Big Screen Classics: Laura Mulvey Selects

Imitation of Life

Mon 1 Dec 20:30; Sat 13 Dec 15:00;
Tue 30 Dec 20:40

People on Sunday Menschen am Sonntag

Tue 2 Dec 20:50; Sun 21 Dec 12:20

Morocco

Wed 3 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);
Fri 12 Dec 20:30

Notorious

Thu 4 Dec 14:30; Thu 18 Dec 20:45;
Sat 27 Dec 12:20

The Arbor

Fri 5 Dec 20:45; Sun 21 Dec 18:20

Man With a Movie Camera

Chelovek s kino-apparatom + (nostalgia)

Sat 6 Dec 15:30; Mon 15 Dec 20:45

Lives of Performers

Sun 7 Dec 18:30; Fri 19 Dec 18:20

Golden Eighties

Mon 8 Dec 20:50; Wed 17 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by
Laura Mulvey)

Daughters of the Dust

Tue 9 Dec 20:45; Sat 20 Dec 14:30

What Scoundrels Men Are!

Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!

Wed 10 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);
Tue 23 Dec 20:30

Under the Skin of the City Zir-e Pust-e Shahr

Wed 10 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey);
Tue 23 Dec 18:15

Xala

Thu 11 Dec 18:15; Sat 27 Dec 11:45

Through the Olive Trees Zir-e darakhtan-e zeyton

Sun 14 Dec 12:30; Mon 22 Dec 18:15

It

Tue 16 Dec 21:00; Sun 28 Dec 12:10

Pierrot le fou

Thu 18 Dec 20:50; Mon 29 Dec 18:00

25 & Under

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interest to her Canadian father, and that Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* made a deep impression on her when she saw it with her mother in the 1950s. Her parents were keen filmgoers, as was Laura herself in her teenage years. It was only after finishing a degree in History at St Hilda's College, Oxford, however, that she became, as she puts it, 'passionately cinephile'. An initial intense engagement with classic Hollywood cinema in the 1960s was transformed first by the political upheavals of 1968 and then by Laura's engagement with the women's movement. This was the period in which she was active in feminist groups, wrote for the ground-breaking feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and in which her intellectual thinking-together of feminism, film theory and psychoanalysis produced the essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', establishing feminist film studies as a legitimate discipline and Laura as its foremost proponent.

This is also the period in which she began her career as a filmmaker. Between 1974 and 1982 she co-wrote and co-directed six projects with her then partner, Peter Wollen, all of which bring together feminist theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis and leftist politics. They include *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which positions avant-garde film as a space for the expression of female experience. Later in her career she made two further films with Mark Lewis, *Disgraced Monuments* (1991), exploring the fate of communist monuments in the post-Soviet period, and *23 August 2008* (2013), a reflection on two brothers' contrasting experiences of Iraq.

Having previously taught at institutions including the University of East Anglia and the BFI, she took up the post of Professor of Film and Media Studies at Birkbeck, University of London in 1999. In 2012 she became the founding director of the Birkbeck Institute of the Moving Image, inaugurating the acclaimed Essay Film Festival in 2015 and she went on to set up a first-of-its-kind MA in Film Curating. As a PhD supervisor, she has nurtured generations of film theorists, academics, and practice-based researchers, many of whom teach and work at leading film institutions around the world.

Laura's intellectual reach in and beyond the world of film studies has been achieved through her many publications. Alongside numerous co-edited volumes, she is author of *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989); *Citizen Kane* (1992); *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996); and *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006) in which she explores the challenge to spectatorship of new visual technologies. On her 2019 collection of essays *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*, Madeleine Pollard writing in the *Financial Times* notes that Laura's feminism remains powerful and relevant in a post-me-too world and that her voice 'cuts through generational divides'.

Not surprisingly, the honours bestowed on Laura are legion. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2000. She has been a visiting professor at more than a dozen institutions and has been awarded various honorary degrees, including from the University of East Anglia, Concordia University; University College Dublin; and Yale. In a testament to her intellectual stature, she is included as only one of two living women in the 2016 Routledge volume, *Fifty-One Key Feminist Thinkers* where she appears alongside the likes of Sappho, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Birkbeck, University of London (bbk.ac.uk)