

TAKING A GOOD LOOK

Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Macmillan, 1989); £40.00.

Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* collects together essays written over the last fifteen years, covering topics in film, art history and feminism. No justification is needed for their reprinting in collected form; Mulvey's work as film theorist and film maker has played an important part in the development of film studies in the last two decades. In her introduction to the collection, however, Mulvey writes that it was not originally her intention to give her written work a second life; her essays and articles were written as immediate interventions in specific debates or as texts to accompany art and photographic exhibitions. (Included here are catalogue texts from exhibitions of, among others, Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger and Victor Burgin.) The decision to bring the essays under one cover arose for a number of reasons. Firstly, Mulvey writes, they represent a history of the progress of feminist theory, from early 1970s Women's Liberation activism to 'respectable' academic feminism. Secondly, her purpose was to provide a context for her best-known (and much anthologized) essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', first published in 1975. This essay, she writes, 'has seemed, over the last decade, to take on a life of its own . . . I hope that publishing it here will not explode it, but bring it back to earth'. Finally, 'there is also a personal narrative running through the book, the story of a long and painful struggle with writing'.

We thus have the beginnings of three stories; a history of recent feminism and feminist theory, a narrative in which the themes and concerns of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' will be embedded rather than free-floating, and a 'personal story' of enablement through feminist theory and politics. Mulvey provides in her introduction a comprehensive network of connections interlinking all three stories and centred upon the Ur-narrative of psychoanalysis itself, the myth of Oedipus. 'The iconography of the Sphinx and her riddles draws together a series of motifs that have to do with femininity and curiosity'.

Along with a number of commentators on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey juggles anew with the categories male/female, active/passive, voyeurism/fetishism. In the article, Mulvey asserted that cinematic spectatorship involves only 'masculine' drives; she now writes that:

It is tempting to argue that curiosity is the opposite of fetishism and that it is as particularly (but not exclusively) feminine as fetishism is masculine. The fetishist becomes fixated on an object in order to avoid knowledge. . . . He has to block sexual curiosity or curiosity about female sexuality. The fetish is stable, an object, an artefact. It avoids the restless probing of curiosity to see what lies behind a mystery. I have come to consider that curiosity, as a drive, can offer some partial solution to the problem of the polarised distribution of drives in spectacle.

Feminist epistemophilia found/finds a suitable object of study in the male psyche. Where femininity was a 'dark continent' for Freud, masculinity for Mulvey is more akin to *film noir*. Psychoanalysis, she writes:

opened up a hitherto hidden world – that of the (male) psyche. Psychoanalytic theory provided this investigative gaze with the ability to see through the surface of cultural phenomena as with intellectual X-ray eyes. The images and received ideas of run of the mill (male) sexism were transformed into a series of clues for deciphering a nether world, seething with displaced drives and misrecognized desire.

In this account it is feminist/psychoanalytic theory which created the possibility of the 'good look', the 'investigative gaze', as opposed to the fixed, static gaze that characterizes fetishistic looking.

It is questionable whether this argument will satisfy recent critics seeking an account of female *pleasure* in looking, one answering to women's broader desires. On the other hand, the 'absences' in Mulvey's text, almost as much as what she actually says, have always attracted the attention of the many writers on film, feminism and spectatorship who have returned to 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. This emerges strikingly in the *Camera Obscura* collective's introduction to their special issue 'The Spectatrix'.<sup>1</sup> They state not only that '[Mulvey's] essay produced a stunning recognition effect which thereafter determined the terms of the discussion [of sexual difference and spectatorship]', but that:

If we insist upon situating Mulvey's essay as the inaugural moment – the condition of possibility – of an extended theorisation of the female spectator, it must also be remembered that this 'origin' is constituted by an absence. In 'Visual Pleasure', there is no trace of the female spectator.

This sub-Derridean account allows the editors to problematize their own linear history of feminist film criticism, in yet another use of Mulvey's article.

The editors of *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*<sup>2</sup> also state that the question(s) for which they seek answer(s) – in summary, what is a female gaze? – arose from Mulvey's article but were absent not only from her discussion but also, for the most part, from the feminist film criticism that followed upon it. In summarizing Mulvey's arguments, the contributors to *The Female Gaze* focus on the thesis/aphorism that visual pleasure in

mainstream cinema derives from and reproduces a structure of male looking/female 'to-be looked-at-ness'. The question then becomes 'where is the place of the feminine subject in this scenario?' Jackie Stacey, in her essay 'Desperately Seeking Difference', calls attention to two lacunae in Mulvey's arguments: the question of the male figure as erotic object and 'that of the female subject in the narrative and women's active desire and the sexual aims of women in the audience in relationship to the female protagonist on the screen'. Lorraine Gamman criticizes Mulvey for assuming a heterosexual male protagonist and spectator and states that 'the Freudian/Lacanian framework of Mulvey's research not only fails to conceptualize female sexuality adequately, but also doesn't allow conceptualizations of how other dynamics of identity – such as race, class and generation – may well affect how viewers of the visual media identify with protagonists'. Moreover, Gamman notes, Mulvey's arguments 'force discussion on to Mary Whitehouse's ground: certain pleasures are to be repressed in favour of (feminist) morality'. Suzanne Moore's essay 'Here's Looking at You, Kid' discusses the issue of women looking at images of men:

The finest hour of what has become known as Screen theory can't really explain the production or the consumption of the kind of images that I have mentioned . . . such theory has also contributed to the repression of the female gaze. . . . If a female gaze exists it does not simply replicate a monolithic and masculinized stare, but instead involves a whole variety of looks and glances – an interplay of possibilities.

The essays in *The Female Gaze* for the most part celebrate kinds of female looking at popular cultural images, and women looking at men and at women as objects of lesbian desire, in ways which were/are not possible for Mulvey, for whom 'looking', unless it be the investigative gaze of the theorist/analyst, is always problematic. The argument here is fought out over the terrain of female sexuality and sexual desire. Implicitly casting Mulvey in the role of a puritan heterosexist, Moore *et al.* describe female spectatorship in the terms of a seduction scene made familiar precisely by Hollywood cinema and romantic fiction – 'a whole variety of looks and glances – an interplay of possibilities'.

In opening up the variety of gazes, it could be argued, the contributors to *The Female Gaze* produce an oversimplified model of identification with visual images, which at its crudest seems to imply that we simply 'fancy' the person represented. Psychoanalytic film theory at least offers a more complex account of the processes of identification. Without such an account, one is arguably far *more* likely to produce the Mary Whitehouse effect, as in discussions of pornography which make a direct link between representation and implementation. At another level the argument demonstrates the shift in feminist theory from psychoanalytically informed theorizations of 'sexual difference' to concepts of 'difference' as real differences of class, race and gender. The feminist recognition of these differences is long overdue, but this process need not be accompanied by a return to a simplistic 'images of women' theory and criticism.

Commentators on Mulvey's article have tended to ignore the emphasis on *narrative* in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', an emphasis that becomes increasingly marked in her writing. The distinction Mulvey formulated in the article between fetishism and voyeurism drew on a distinction between seeing and knowing; voyeurism, as in Hitchcock's films, is linked to story and narrative through the idea of 'investigation'. Recent attempts to define a 'female gaze' against Mulvey's account have overlooked the implied distinction between perception and epistemology, reducing a rather complex process of appropriation to a mere monolithic look.

Mulvey's earlier essays were written in the context of 'suture theory', 'a cinematic adventure in which plenitude is fractured by difference and lack, only to be sealed over again',<sup>3</sup> and of a fusion between semiotic and psychoanalytic theories. Barthes is as significant an influence in *Visual Pleasure* as Freud or Lacan. Claire Johnston, in an article also written in the mid-1970s, referred to Barthes' description in *Le Plaisir du Texte* of how the very process of story-telling itself, the construction of the narrative, is rooted in the myth of Oedipus. Linking narrative theory and psychoanalytic theory in the critique of literary and cinematic 'realism', structuralist theories sought to show, Johnston stated, 'how the mechanisms of story-telling parallel those of the child perceiving the fact of sexual difference in the mother's lack of a penis'.<sup>4</sup> The mechanism of disavowal (in the theory of fetishism – 'I know, but nevertheless') was related – in my view, uneasily – to the reader/viewer's subordination to 'the reality effect', the illusion that the text/film mirrors an intelligible external world.

In her introduction, Mulvey links the rejection of literary/cinematic realism with feminist theorists turning away from 'the real':

Feminist aesthetic theory became, itself, fascinated by the image and by analysing the image, turning away from the problems of the real, influenced both by the impact of semiotics on contemporary culture and the revulsion against realism that characterized the late 1960's and 1970's.

Mulvey's more recent work does not attempt to re-evaluate a realist aesthetic as such, but it is arguably more concerned with issues of narrative than with visual culture *per se*. As I noted above, Mulvey offers 'curiosity' as a feminine drive in opposition to masculine fetishism, suggesting that she is more concerned to re-gender the narrative drive and function than the 'gaze'. In support of this, I would point to Mulvey's essay on Mary Kelly's *Corpus*. Her analysis, although perceptive, focuses almost exclusively on the narrative elements of the work, particularly as they relate to traditions of story-telling and the conventional narratives of women's lives. Only in the last part of the essay – written as the catalogue text for 'Corpus' – does Mulvey refer to the visual images Kelly depicts:

'*Corpus* achieves a very fine balance between the iconoclastic repression of the body during the 1970's which led to women becoming unrepresentable and a recognition that such a reaction against the exploitation of women in

images could lead to a repression of the discourse of the body and sexuality altogether . . . [the work] speaks to the future, to the common need to redefine women's relation to the image . . . to discover a feminine desire and understand female sexuality'.

Although this passage emphasizes the importance of the image in giving form to this desire, Mulvey does not entertain the possibility, proposed by Elizabeth Cowie in a discussion of *Corpus*,<sup>5</sup> that Mary Kelly is exploring the concept of female fetishism. One might argue that this is because Mulvey does not wish to return to the 'binary thinking' of the earlier article by balancing a male gaze with a female – although arguably she does create another such pairing by offering 'curiosity' as a feminine drive in opposition to masculine fetishism. It seems more probable that Mulvey's 'affirmative' feminist politics mean that she has found it necessary to make a total separation between the feminine and the structures of 'perversion' associated with looking. Similarly, in 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey, in the move that has characterized much of her work, shifted from discussion of visual representation to narrative pattern and narrative discourse, and to 'traditions of story-telling . . . with attendant fascinations other than those of the look'. The presence of a female protagonist as narrative centre in *Duel in the Sun* allows for a *generic* shift, from Western to melodrama. Answering the criticism that 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' 'masculinises' the spectator, Mulvey refers to the 'female spectator's fantasy of masculinisation at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes'. The argument here was intended to link structures of looking and narrative structures in a specific context, 'films in which a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity', but has been read, perhaps correctly, as a denial of the possibility of the 'active' female look.

The last two essays in the collection are, fittingly, analyses of the Oedipus myth. As I have attempted to show, there is a tendency throughout Mulvey's work to move from visual to narrative issues, and from 'psychoanalytic' to 'cultural' readings when confronted with theoretical difficulties. The emphasis in 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience' and 'The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx' on 'narratological' readings of the Oedipus story, however, raises a number of significant issues.

Looking back to Mulvey's film 'Riddles of the Sphinx', made with Peter Wollen in the mid-1970s, we find the following passages in the film-script:

When we were planning the central section of this film, about a mother and child, we decided to use the voice of the Sphinx as an imaginary narrator – because the Sphinx represents, not the voice of truth, not an answering voice, but its opposite: a questioning voice, a voice asking a riddle. The Oedipus myth associates the voice of the Sphinx with motherhood as mystery and with resistance to patriarchy.

In some ways the Sphinx is the forgotten character in the story of Oedipus. . . . It's as if Oedipus stands for the conscious mind and the

Sphinx for the unconscious. . . . But reading between the lines the myth confirms women's sense of exclusion and suppression. . . .

To the patriarchy, the Sphinx as woman is a threat and a riddle, but women within patriarchy are faced with a never-ending series of threats and riddles – dilemmas which are hard for women to solve. . . . We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed. Motherhood and how to live it, or how not to live it, lies at the roots of the dilemma. And meanwhile the Sphinx can only speak with a voice apart, a voice off.<sup>6</sup>

In *Riddles of the Sphinx* the Oedipus myth, and more particularly the legend of the Sphinx, framed a 'contemporary' drama about women, work, mothering and the family. Dreams and fantasies in the film, however, lead back to a 'forgotten history' and, as in Freud's work, psychoanalysis and classical mythology are closed linked. Mulvey, like Freud, is captured by a myth of origins, which she locates in a 'pre-Oedipal' realm. The 'riddle of the Sphinx' for Mulvey is, I would suggest, the enigma of women's oppression, and the fantasy underlying her approach is that the Oedipus legend, if interrogated for long enough, and from enough different angles, will yield up the buried story of femininity, the riddle of the lost matriarchy, and an alternative origin, history and narrative.

In 'The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx', Mulvey continues to investigate the myth, while distancing herself from the 'Utopian dreams' of the 1970s:

Both the history of the Oedipus Complex and the history of antiquity suggest a movement from an earlier 'material' stage to a later 'paternal' or 'patriarchal' order. For me, as someone whose interest in psychoanalytic theory was a direct off-shoot of fascination with the origins of women's oppression, this dual temporality was exciting . . . the idea of a founding moment of civilisation, repeated in consciousness, suggested that it might be possible to modify or change the terms on which civilisation is founded within the psyche and thus challenge the origins of patriarchal power through psychoanalytic politics and theory.

While Mulvey is very aware, in a way that many of her critics are not, of the temporalities of feminist theory and the women's movement, she also writes that 'some primitive attraction to the fantasy of origins . . . persisted for me'. The 'return' to the Oedipus story via narrative theories allowed for a consideration of the story as a passage through time and narrative. Her essay is a complex and often illuminating account of the legend read through formalist, structuralist and psychoanalytic filters. Mulvey shows how the Oedipal narrative inflects Freud's essays 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' and 'Family Romances' and the ways in which the legend condenses family relations and property relations. In Vladimir Propp's reading, Mulvey writes, the myth encodes transformations and rites of passage, the narrative as jour-

ney. And, despite Mulvey's claim that her 'Utopian dreams' belong to a previous decade, she still notes of the Proppian reading:

There is a residual, suggestive link with forms of social organization in which patriarchy was not supremely in command. The misty, forgotten epochs of time and mythology in which things might have been other for women return as a ghostly presence.

Mulvey, however, clearly decided not to pursue matriarchy down this particular road and instead shifts her analysis to a reading which emphasizes the detective-story aspects of the Sophocles/Freud version of the myth, 'highlight[ing] the importance of clues, riddles and enigmas that link Oedipus figuratively with the clues, riddles and enigmas of the unconscious that psychoanalysis deciphers'. Using Shoshana Felman's reading of *Oedipus at Colonus*,<sup>7</sup> she describes the move from a Freudian to a Lacanian reading of the Oedipus story, in which the focus is not on the Oedipus complex as such but on history, narrative and narration as a process of recognition through language. Referring to the work of literary theorists such as Felman, Peter Brooks and Terence Turner, Mulvey explores what she describes as 'the politics of narrative closure':

Narrative is outside history but related to it. Terence Turner's emphasis on change through disorder in narrative raises the problem of change in lived political narrative. The potential for change in the disordered middle is in dialectical opposition to the timeless stasis of the beginning and end. There is a similar 'political poetics' inherence in Peter Brooks's return to, 'return of' and 'the end is before the beginning'; and also in Shoshana Felman's perception of the compulsion to repeat and (what she calls) the 'uncertainty principle' as safeguards against new movements, such as psychoanalysis, fossilising into the timeless stasis of institutional authority.

If it is not immediately obvious why the death-drive and repetition-compulsion should be seen as liberating structures, Mulvey's broader purpose is clear. Narrative theories are being invoked here to reaffirm many of the tenets of 'Screen theory' anti-realism, particularly in relation to the rejection of 'closure'. While Mulvey supports Teresa de Lauretis's claim that the Oedipus legend is a boy's own story<sup>8</sup> and acknowledges that desire for the mother could be understood merely as a symptom of father/son rivalry, Mulvey maintains that:

the story's narrative structure and the importance of investigation and telling in the story itself offers a Utopian promise, a pointer towards the transformative power of telling one's own story and the social function of popular culture as the narrativisation of collective fantasy. Recently, feminism through critical and analytical work has been attempting to inflect the way in which our society narrativises itself. In the process, feminist consciousness can affect the discourse of patriarchy and upset the polaris-

ation between masculinity and femininity that keeps its order in place . . . the story is still in the making. The Sphinx and her riddle are still waiting for a 'beyond'.

Mulvey's faith in the power of narratives and narrative structures to influence political life is revealed even more clearly in her essay 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience'. Here she refers to a 'history' of recent feminism and her own involvements in the women's movement. With the end of the 1970s, she states:

My formative experiences, desires and failures that had to do with cultural struggle seemed gradually to be relegated to a closed epoch. . . It was tempting to accept a kind of natural entropy: that eras just did come to an end. But then, the sense of *historical* closure recalled the distrust of *narrative* closure that had always been a point of principle for the feminist avant-garde. Once a movement can be reviewed retrospectively its story can be told, but *how* it should be told could still be considered. It seemed as though narrative patterns and expectations of endings had become inextricably intertwined in history as in fiction.

The essay explores the substitution of a 'tripartite' model of narrative for the dualisms that characterized her earlier work. The tension between 'binary modes of thought' and the desire for change, Mulvey writes, is epitomized for her by the place that 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' came to occupy in 'film theoretical orthodoxy'. Written in the early stages of the women's movement, 'there is a sense in which this argument [that the spectator's position, active and voyeuristic, is inscribed as 'masculine' and . . . the woman's body exists as the erotic, spectacular and exhibitionistic 'other'] important as it is for analysing the existing state of things, hinders the possibility of change and remains caught ultimately within its own dualistic terms'.

'Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience' returns not to the question of gaze or spectatorship but to the issue of 'conceptual topology'. Looking back at 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' after some time, Mulvey writes, she realized that 'the spatial patterning of ideas' may have contributed in some way to blocking advance in feminist theory. Similarly, Lacanian thought 'leaves women in a negative resolution' and turns temporal processes into spatial oppositions 'structured around mother/father – a mythic condensation with mother as past and father as future. . .'. The solution explored by Mulvey is again to move from the 'spatial' structures of myth to the 'temporal' and linear structures of narrative. Turning to Bakhtin's theories, amongst others, Mulvey produces a 'new' version of a static/active model, with a first and a third stage of order and a 'disruptive' middle. Models of transition and 'liminality' celebrate the possibility of change.

Although Mulvey's arguments are a little unclear in this essay, a number of important points underlie them. Firstly, she seems to be suggesting that psychoanalytic models have led to a certain stasis for women and, while



feeling a certain unease with psychoanalytic feminism, can see no alternative to it. From a slightly different perspective, Mulvey is deeply reluctant to give up the founding metaphor of her work, the Oedipal narrative. She thus suggests at the close of the essay:

A feminist perspective should insist on the possibility of change without closure, drawing by analogy on the female Oedipus complex, the crucible out of which sexual identity does not emerge as pure gold.

The way out – and into ‘history’ for Mulvey – is to turn ‘space’ into ‘temporality’ and to find a ‘feminist narrative structure’. Whatever one’s view of the efficacy of this as a political strategy, Mulvey’s arguments relate interestingly to recent work on feminist theory and histories of feminism. I began with an account of Mulvey’s text as offering a ‘history’ of recent feminism and feminist theory. To this should be added Mulvey’s historiographical concern with how this ‘history’ is to be told. Accounts of the Women’s Movement as productive of a progressive history of women’s liberation co-exist with an unease about linear histories which recall superseded nineteenth-century models of historical narrative. Similarly, feminist perspectives which point towards the ‘end’ of patriarchy as the feminist goal might be seen as opposed to an avant-garde politics deeply resistant to the concept of ‘ends’ and ‘closure’. It is in this context that Mulvey’s account of a ‘disruptive’ middle between a fixed origin and end is to be understood.

Like most recent histories of the post-1960s Women’s Movement, Mulvey’s collection opens with an account of the demonstration against Miss World 1970, deploying the category of ‘active’ female spectatorship in terms of the disruption of the spectacle. In later essays Mulvey demonstrates, as I have suggested, a concern with the origins of *cultures* and an equivalent disappointment with their destinations. It might be argued that the failure of the ‘future perfect’, to which Mulvey points, is an aspect of her own tendency to overlook the possibility of different narratives and political agendas. Or perhaps the point is that Mulvey finds it difficult to envisage forms of understanding and engagement outside legendary narrative structures. Her ambitions are too totalizing when she aims to locate ‘universal’ structures, narratives and metaphors. Other essays and articles in *Visual and Other Pleasures* which I have not discussed at length are the work of an outstanding film and art critic who continues to open up our understanding of visual problems and pleasures.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Camera Obscura*, 20–21 (May–September 1989).
- 2 *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* ed. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (London: The Women’s Press, 1988).
- 3 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 224.
- 4 C. Johnston, ‘Femininity and the Masquerade: *Anne of the Indies*’, E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1990), 64.
- 5 E. Cowie, ‘Invisible Bodies: Mary Kelly’s *Interim*’, *New Formations*, 2 (Summer 1987), 20–9.

6 *Screen* (Summer 1977), 61–2.

7 S. Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

8 T. de Lauretis, 'Desire in Narrative', in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

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