

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

To Marvel At, and Destroy

By Toby Miller | DECEMBER 13, 2015

Laura Mulvey's *Screen* essay, reprinted many times (including by Robert Stam and myself) has been read and argued over by hundreds of thousands of both stimulated and skeptical undergrads in the four decades since its original publication.

Her ideas have been gratefully hoovered up by faculty setting M.A. comprehensive-exam questions, and lovingly (sometimes laughingly) latched onto by students seeking to write something about psychoanalysis that they and their professors could confidently comprehend.

Why has Mulvey's impact been so great, given her indebtedness to Jacques Lacan, who is of little moment to scholarly or clinical psychology and psychiatry and is a byword for tendentious prolixity? And why should a theory and treatment of mental illness be the basis for thinking about film?

The Male Gaze in Retrospect



In 1975, Laura Mulvey brought a new perspective to cinema studies. Susan Bordo, Jack Halberstam, Toby Miller, Sharon Marcus, and Mulvey herself consider its impact. Read their essays.

Even within Mulvey's own field, the arcane, obscurantist language that characterizes the humanities academy's amateur uptake of psychoanalysis profoundly alienates many students and faculty — and even several board members of *Screen* who resigned over the direction the journal was taking back in the '70s.

Undergrads are often equally bemused by the daily, almost hourly, obsession with sexuality demonstrated by literature and film professors. Several have asked me, "Do middle-aged profs think about

anything apart from sex?"

But Mulvey's fundamental insight — that film cameras, characters, and spectators focus on women's looks in a distorting way — speaks to many of us, even if we don't understand or concur with Freud, Lacan, and their dutiful, dissident followers (no fan is more devoted than a critical chorister). For example, the essay presages contemporary concerns of the actor Geena Davis and others about on- and off-screen roles for women in Hollywood and violence against women across societies. Both these tendencies relate to a cultural pattern of representing women sexually — not just in the minds of film obsessives.

And Mulvey captured a cosmic ambivalence of her era that remains with us today.

The year 1975 was a big one for the left and film theory: articles by Edward Buscombe on Hollywood historiography and Christian Metz on semiotics and psychoanalysis appeared in the same volume as "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

These authors faced a fundamental dilemma: how to understand and challenge the things they loved but thought they should abjure. As good Marxists and feminists, the appeal of the master (the studios, the patriarchs, the capitalists, the United States) was something they yearned both to comprehend and undo, to marvel at but destroy, to cherish yet displace.

For while Mulvey and others were notable avant-garde practitioners, they were also skilled analysts of what they adored, namely classical Hollywood cinema; she recently named Alfred Hitchcock "a co-author of the article."

What was left out of this earnest desire to question one's own enjoyment?

It is often said that psychoanalysis seeks to be a science but is inimical to scientific investigation of its own methods and theories. Bravura readings of particular movies claim that a collective unconscious weaves its way across not only a given film, but all those made for the marketplace.

The research paradigm that emerged (unbidden) from Mulvey's work has been a succession of such interpretations. Often elegantly theorized, these assertions are problematic because they lack: a representative sample of movies; systematic analysis of stories, locations, clothing, movement, lighting, sounds, shots, and edits; interviews with filmmakers; and engagement with audiences. Such work would prove or disprove some of the tendencies she describes.

Otherwise, the critic in question is a privileged observer who magically knows how others go about their craft, what they produce, and its impact on audiences.

That said, we should recognize the specific formation within which Mulvey, Buscombe, and others worked. They were mostly not academics, did not have Ph.D.s, and weren't seeking grad-student

acolytes, publishing honors, or research grants. Mulvey has referred to this as a "period of a film intelligentsia rather than a film academia."

These critics were part of a film culture that wanted to understand and transform a crucial part of the capitalist world. They were trying to comprehend their own pleasure and that of viewers, and then take the next step toward a feminist avant-garde, where stories would be antirealist, and women more than objects of the gaze. "Cinema should return to zero," as she recently put it.

So when I criticize the paradigm that followed, I am doing a certain interpretive violence to the original essay's genre, namely the manifesto, which is meant to express its author's position, provoke readers, and inspire action. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" achieved just those things.

And I love Mulvey's work. It is invigorating and smart and has proved meaningful for people across generations. I should write such an article.

That said, I'd like to see her fans do harder work than the labor of loyal, if occasionally dissenting, emulation.

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