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The Global Gaze: Analysing Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)'

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Abstract:

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' published in 1975 remains a cornerstone in feminist film theory, offering a critical framework to analyse cinema's patriarchal structures through psychoanalytic theory. Laura Mulvey's seminal work on the "male gaze" critically examines how classical Hollywood cinema perpetuates gendered power imbalances by positioning women as passive objects of visual pleasure, drawing from Freudian and Lacanian frameworks. Her argument extends beyond film studies, offering a critical lens for scholars of literature analysing gendered representations in literary and visual narratives. Despite its initial publication five decades ago, Mulvey's critique remains relevant in contemporary discourse, informing analyses of gender dynamics in digital culture, literature, and media. As evolving storytelling forms continue to negotiate feminist and patriarchal tensions, her insights remain instrumental in deconstructing narrative structures that shape identity and agency. This study underscores Mulvey's enduring influence, highlighting how her work continues to engage with and challenge the persistent ideological frameworks governing representation and spectatorship in modern cultural production.

Keywords: Cinema, Feminism, Gaze, Gender, Identity, Patriarchy.

Introduction and Discussion:

Laura Mulvey, born on August 15, 1941, is a distinguished British feminist film theorist whose work has profoundly shaped feminist film studies. Her groundbreaking essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' written in 1973 and published in the prestigious British cinema theory journal *Screen* in 1975, remains a cornerstone in the critique of women's representation in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. Mulvey's essay, written over four decades ago, addressed pressing concerns surrounding the portrayal of gender in cinema during an era when female, feminist, or femme directors were still a rarity. Through this monumental work, Mulvey developed a critical framework to analyse the functioning of cinema, the ideological forces driving it, and the representation of both men and women on screen. Central to her argument is a political critique of cinema's patriarchal unconscious, which she examines through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. As Mulvey asserts, "Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriate here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (803). This critical insight underpins her broader exploration of the relationship between cinema and patriarchy.

Since Laura Mulvey is a feminist critic, it is important to pay attention to both the author's and the essay's position within the feminist school of thought. In general, *Feminism* refers to a movement that seeks to promote the equal political, social, and economic development of all the sexes. The goal of feminism is to examine and alter the power structures of patriarchal societies. Despite having its roots in the 18th century (such as with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792), the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to be known as the period defining the first wave of feminism. Feminist cinema theory, however, is thought to have emerged due to the 'Second Wave' of feminism, which began in the

1960s. The second wave, in contrast to the first, was a movement that aimed to criticise patriarchal, or male-dominated, institutions and cultural norms that pervaded society. Mary Holmes, for instance, in her 2000 essay titled, *Second Wave Feminism and The Politics of Relationships*, writes,

Second-wave feminists challenged liberal democratic conceptions of the political. Part of this challenge involved politicising relationships. Relationships between women and men were the major target and connected to debates about in what ways sexuality was political (235).

The second wave of feminism is often characterised by Carol Hanisch's phrase, 'the personal is political.' Institutions, particularly those in the entertainment and advertising industries, were viewed as emblems of restrictive patriarchal structures by the second-wave feminists. Thus, it is suggested that Laura Mulvey's essay is in line with the ideas of second-wave feminists since she examines how pleasure is associated with the image of the woman. The feminist movements that were, in fact, active at the time Laura Mulvey was growing up inspired her personally. In one of her interviews with *Another Gaze Journal*, she comments,

My shift in spectatorship came very specifically out of the influence of the Women's Movement. Instead of being an absorbed spectator; a voyeuristic spectator; a male spectator, as it were, I suddenly found I'd become a woman spectator, who watched the film from a distance, not with those absorbed eyes.

Mulvey argues that the form of mainstream films depends on two types of sources, both of which have their roots in the psychoanalytic theory: scopophilia, which is a concept from Freud, and identification with image on the screen, which is a concept from Lacan's mirror stage, Mulvey draws on from the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to investigate how this portrayal

reinforces male domination. Arif Rohman, for instance, in his essay, *A Critical Review of Laura Mulvey's Work: 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)'* writes,

Using Freudian and Lacanian works of psychoanalysis, she argues that Hollywood traditional cinema represented the ideas and values of patriarchy and oppressed women by 'male gaze'. Women were led to become erotic objects by 'fetishistic scopophilia' and 'voyeuristic sadism. (1)

In her essay, Mulvey discusses how Hollywood productions like those of Hitchcock influence the pleasure viewers derive from watching. The movies foster a culture of 'scopophilia,' which Freud described in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" as the pleasure experienced by the subject while looking. The subject's contribution to the meaning-making process in a movie is a further significant argument Mulvey's theory of representation makes. The subject actively indulges with the narrative and creates the meaning rather than simply being a passive consumer. She quotes, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive female." The process of active meaning construction remains reserved for the subject (typically a male) who uses it to demonstrate scopophilia in its active form. Dr Batobara, for instance, in his work, *The Image of Women and the Concept of Male Gaze (2021)*, writes,

Thus, it is the man who is institutionalised as the possessor of the —complete body who always gazes in curiosity at the —incomplete body of the powerless woman and derives visual pleasure out of this gaze. (445)

In the process, thus, the watcher subjects the female character to his domineering 'gaze,' reinforcing the unequal power dynamic where the male actively constructs meaning and derives visual pleasure; in contrast the female remains an object of curiosity and control.

However, to fully understand the concept of the male gaze, it is also important to acknowledge that John Berger coined this term in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*. He refers to an artistic practice where women are portrayed solely for the enjoyment of men. Berger quotes, “Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at.” Additionally, Berger also argued that on the one hand, female subjects are painted as if they are being watched without their knowledge, and on the other, masculine figures tend to be represented with awareness, frequently staring directly at the observer. Mulvey extends Berger's idea of the male gaze to narrative film by saying, “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look” which suggests that depictions of women on screen are likewise filtered through the perspective of male pleasure, either through a male protagonist or a male audience. She writes,

The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (810)

Thus, there are numerous ways, according to Mulvey, to categorise the type of gaze, including how males look at women, how women look at themselves, and ultimately, how women look at other women.

In her attempt to explain the gaze, Laura Mulvey also suggests that a similar process of ‘interpellation’ as developed by Louis Althusser takes place in the theatre, where viewers are compelled to participate in the gaze of the male protagonist and the gaze of the camera. Additionally, she argues that film reality merely depicts reality created through a complex process of controlling the available expressive resources. Mulvey links pleasure to the cinema, as the title also indicates. Her definition of pleasure, however, is connected to a detailed psychoanalytical

experience that is examined in light of an individual's desires and aspirations. In her essay, she also explores how films have had a profound influence on society, for which she bases her arguments on the idea that institutions like cinema act as an *advanced representation system* with ideological undertones, as discussed by Louis Althusser in his seminal work *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* (1970).

She also asserts that cinema manipulates an individual by forcing him to identify with the human figure on screen. The central idea of Mulvey's essay focuses on the self-identification question. Drawing on Lacan's ideas, she believes that the audience is in a similar situation to the child in Jacques Lacan's 'mirror stage,' who discovers himself as an independent entity separate from his mother through the image formed in the mirror. The viewer's position, enthralled by the visuals on the screen while watching a movie in a darkened theatre, is compared to that of an infant enthralled by the image in the mirror.

Mulvey also discusses how a woman's presence implies a threat of castration since she symbolises the 'lack' of a penis. It is, however, important to note that Laura uses the concept of *the phallus*, which in Lacan's work represents a position of wholeness and fullness sought by both sexes but is acquired by neither. Laura Mulvey justifies her male gaze stance by describing the 'lack' experienced by the male subject and its projection onto the female subject to maintain a perceived illusion that he is complete.

In her essay, Mulvey also tries to comprehend the situation of a female subject being observed. Mulvey states, by citing Budd Boetticher, that women in films serve merely to support the actions of men and are not given any significance in and of themselves. She writes,

As Budd Boetticher has put it: 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. (809)

Following centuries of objectification, it once again labels women as objects of sexuality and desire for both the male characters in the film and the male audience. She also contends that the female spectator must engage with the narrative secondly by identifying with the male character. The male spectator is thus granted the power of participating in *demonising the female character*. She also believes that women are portrayed in conventional films as objects of the gaze. The act of seeing is referred to by the abstraction of 'the gaze' by theorists. It presumes that men and women have a conventionally gendered relationship in which men have the dominant gaze.

One of the most popular examples that can be analysed by using Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory is by understanding the case of Disney princess cartoons. The women, as depicted, are either waiting to be saved by a man or loved by a man. Ellie Abbadessa and Derek Jenkins, for instance, in their work, *The Damsels in Distress*, comment,

Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, and Belle are all searching for their true love and waiting to be saved by a prince charming. Each of these Disney princesses are white, tall and thin, and of course have a small waist. Each princess is beautiful and unrealistically close to perfection. They are also well known for their beautiful singing voices. In fact, cleaning and singing are the only two skills we see in each of these princesses.

The narratives in production are male-centric, due to which a female's plot is either erased or sidelined. In these programs, a man's eye is always used as a criterion for assessing a woman's beauty. Furthermore, the presence of a man in a woman's life is always correlated with her happiness level.

Mulvey also incorporates a few notable symbols in her writing in order to support the essay's overall meaning. One central symbol used by Mulvey is that of a camera. The camera plays a crucial role in the making of the movie, and according to Mulvey, it is the camera that explicitly generates the cinematic environment. To put it in another way, the camera is used to influence the cinematic environment. In this way, the camera serves as a representative of the human eye and, in general, of an individual (usually a male) who operates it. She writes how,

a subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze. The audience is absorbed into a voyeuristic situation within the screen scene and diegesis which parodies his own in the cinema. (813)

Mulvey, therefore, suggests that the directors put masculine desire, voyeurism, imagination, and eroticization at the centre of their work by analysing Sternberg, Hitchcock, and their respective films.

In this regard, she claims that the director's position is influential and political. One of the primary arguments made by Mulvey, in order to understand the power dynamics of the cinema industry, is that the production businesses for these films are primarily governed by men simply because men dominate the film industry as a whole. The content is made by men, for men. In her essay, Mulvey further argues that the emergence of a feminist film genre in the future will liberate the camera from this distinctly male mode of observation. Mulvey's feminist sensibility can also be compared to that of one of her Belgian contemporaries, Chantal Akerman, who also wrote about building up a feminist film genre. Another significant symbol that appears throughout the text, in addition to the camera, is Marilyn Monroe. Filmmakers who worked with Marilyn Monroe tried to showcase her body in a way that fetched clusters of male audiences to the cinemas.

It is also significant to highlight that film theorists, including Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, before Mulvey, have incorporated psychoanalytic concepts into their theoretical analyses of cinema. However, they have neglected to discuss 'the importance of the representation of the female form' in narrative films, according to Mulvey. Mulvey's work thus marks the beginning of the fusion of *feminism, psychoanalysis, and film theory*. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' therefore contributes not only to the introduction of the phrase "male gaze" into the context of cinema criticism but ultimately into everyday speech.

Mulvey's theories on how women are portrayed in the media continue to make sense. The fact that very little to nothing has changed how women are portrayed on screen is one of the main reasons why this essay is still relevant today. It is essential for readers in the twenty-first century to understand the essay's universality because it applies to women across nations and everyday life. Several theorists claim that Mulvey's theory holds up even in advertisements where the marketed product has nothing to do with sex or sex-related images.

In order to fully understand the mechanics of the essay, it is also important to understand the waves of criticism layered with this piece of writing. The critic who condemned Laura Mulvey for promoting heterosexuality also criticised her for taking a passive stance while writing the essay. In her work *Is the Gaze Male*, E. Ann Kaplan, a critic, has also criticised Laura for relying on psychoanalysis to support her claims. E. Ann argues that psychoanalysis is a byproduct of capitalism and that feminists disapprove of its methods. It is, however, interesting to note that while Mulvey's work has received criticism, it has also been praised not only for the systematic way through which the ideas are conveyed but also for its direct, straightforward writing style.

Conclusion

Laura Mulvey developed the male gaze theory with ideas proposed by theorists like Lacan, Althusser, and Freud. The female subject is referred to as an object to be observed, whereas the male spectator is described as an active participant in the meaning-making process. While questioning Hollywood films for their depiction of women, she hopes for the development of the feminist film genre in the future. Her essay also received criticism for its treatment of men, even though it is considered a universally dominant piece representing the second wave of feminism.

Thus, Mulvey not only opens her essay by proposing psychoanalytic theory as a potential political instrument but also concludes by offering her own work as such a tool—one that continues to empower readers and scholars to critically interrogate the structures of cinema for decades to come.

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