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14.1 Female Spectators by E. Deidre Pribram

This introduction to Female Spectators gives a concise account of the major feminist debates in film studies and argues for more work to be done in incorporating filmmaking practice, spectatorship and textual analysis. All the contributors to this book share a concern to emphasize women's presence in, rather than absence from, the "cinematic experience"¹.

How have we come to perceive all forms of filmic gaze as male when women have always taken up their proportionate share of seats in the cinema? How have we come to understand cinematic pleasure (narrative, erotic, and so on) as pleasurable to the male viewer, but not the female? Why have we failed to see our own presence in the audience when women have always watched - and loved - film? Questions of pleasure and spectatorship, as they relate to women, arise out of recent work in feminist film theory. Or rather, they arise as omissions in these theoretical analyses. All too frequently, women's participation in the 'cinematic experience' has been neglected or entirely overlooked.

In the early and mid 1970s, many feminist film-makers and film theorists began to discuss women's historical and cultural position as one of absence from, or marginalization to, dominant cultural forms. Using psychoanalytic and semiotic models, * they theorized that women have been defined in masculine culture as lack and as Other. Woman is not a subject in her own right but the object by which the patriarchal subject can define himself. Mainstream cinema's contradictory/complementary representations of women as either idealized objects of desire or as threatening forces to be 'tamed' are not attempts to establish female subjectivity but rather reflect the search for male self-definition. Popular forms of filmic discourse, therefore, are said to 'belong' to the patriarchy; women are silent, without language or voice. Filmic gaze, in terms of both gender representation and gender address, also 'belongs' to the male, leaving the female audience to identify with either the male-as-subject or the female-as-object. In this analysis women are left with no active spectatorial position at all. Any pleasure the female spectator derives from classic realist cinema is false because it is based on woman as object of someone else's desire.

In the 1970s and into the early 1980s, feminist film-makers and theorists, seeking to create new forms outside and beyond those historically known to us, worked towards denying traditional pleasure in film. The resulting work was an attempt to create an alternative cinema in which women were

engendered as subjects, and which thus made possible a female spectatorial position. While still indebted to the work of this feminist avant-garde, however, more recent feminist analysis and production have found that these earlier models pose considerable problems.

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories have been central to cinema studies in recent years because they have helped forge a link between cultural forms of representation, such as film, and the acquisition of subject identity in social beings.² Feminist appropriations of these psychoanalytic models, which connect dominant ideology with bourgeois patriarchy — the individualized male subject formed and reaffirmed through the playing out of the Oedipal drama - have aided our understanding of the existing cultural order. However, they have proven less helpful in subverting, or creating alternatives to, that order. One weakness lies in the fact that many versions of psychoanalysis hypothesize a development pattern for language and subject identity which occurs across all time and across all cultural groups, a pattern established initially in infancy within the nuclear family unit. That is to say, 'self-image' is regarded as acquired in uniform manner for members of each gender based upon their respective roles in the Oedipal struggle. Thus while psychoanalytic theories may succeed in recognizing gender as a primary cause of subject formation and social division, they simultaneously fail to address the formation and operation of other variables or differences amongst individuals, such as race and class.

In addition, the transhistorical nature of psychoanalytic models - the presumption that they apply equally across all time and instances - leaves them open to justifiable charges of inaccuracy and inflexibility. When psychoanalysis is applied to film, the potential for theorizing alternative readings or interpretations within any given text is inhibited by a denial of viewing *contexts*: no place is allowed for shifts in textual meaning related to shifts in viewing situation. As a result, varying social groups — white women or women of colour, lower-, middle- or upper-class women - are readily assumed to have the same viewing experience. At the same time, audiences of differing historical periods and circumstances - a contemporary audience viewing a contemporary work, a contemporary audience viewing a past work, a past audience viewing a work of its own time — are all assumed to be positioned by, and therefore to interpret, a text in the same manner.

Following the psychoanalytic-semiotic argument, then, classic realist cinema — by addressing woman as non-subject - eliminates the possibility of an 'authentic' female spectator. And further, by repressing the fact that women are historically and socially constituted (and therefore differing) subjects, the argument also precludes the possibility of diversity *among* women as female spectators.

Feminist appropriations of psychoanalytic models are useful, however, to the extent that their application is in keeping with the goals of a feminist agenda. In a society which has formalized, as its centrepiece, the white bourgeois male, feminist efforts have focused on the need to open up sociocultural spaces to include previously excluded or marginalized subgroups. The concept of sexual difference which describes a binary structure of subject/object, in which object function produces subject validation, has seemed an accurate model of what is - for those excluded from it - a dysfunctional system. And it has also pointed the way to the necessity for a more flexible system to which a multiplicity of subjects can operate in a simultaneous and mutually satisfactory manner. But while the concept of sexual difference seems to account for what has appeared to be, throughout historical memory, the systematic exclusion of women (amongst others) from the political, economic and cultural life of Western society, the theories within which the concept is formulated restrict the means to envision alternatives. For if, as some psychoanalytic theories appear to suggest, social subjects are determined, through family relations and language acquisition, *prior* to the introduction of other considerations, including race, class, personal background or historical moment, the social construct thus described is a closed system unamenable to other subject formations. And indeed, feminist applications of psychoanalytic theory have described the ideology of bourgeois patriarchy as not only dominant, but 'monolithic'. A notion of ideology which implies dominance to, and therefore co-existence with, other ideologies leaves open the possibility of inroads by alternative or minority groups: but the concept of monolithic ideology suggests a unified and unyielding structure. The meanings of a filmic text, which can be said to reflect/remake the ideologies of the culture from which it springs, are also seen as closed, fixed in the playing out of the Oedipal drama over all time and in all instances, unavailable to alternative, variable or multiple readings.

While feminist theory generally accepted the notion of a 'monolithic' ideology, no distinction was made between the social constructs described by the theory and the theoretical constructs which were doing the

describing; and doing so in such a way as to preclude the possibility of cultural debate or change. Psychoanalysis, which seemed able to explain existing social - or at least psychic - structures, could do so only in terms that implied their very inevitability. No matter what the specifics, women are relegated to playing out 'the same old story', living out the same gender relations.

This may have been a factor in the decision by many feminist film-makers not to participate in dominant cultural forms. The closed system/closed text formulated by theoretical arguments based in psychoanalytic theory left few points of entry for alternative representations of women. The ability to critique was not met by an equal ability to create. The logical extension of arguments surrounding women's exclusion from popular cinema was that filmic gaze, discourse and pleasure belonged inevitably to the male. The only answer was to establish an alternative to this patriarchal cinema.

But women's participation in popular culture on the basis of these theoretical arguments embodies an impossible contradiction. For instance, women have long critiqued our exclusion from the centres of cultural production. Except in rare instances, women have not been involved as directors, producers, technicians, or in any other capacity of significant decision-making in the production of mainstream film. To define popular cultural activity as belonging to the patriarchy is to suggest therefore that women who do participate in mainstream production are being co-opted by dominant ideology. Yet, if women do not seek to be included at the centre of cultural production, we only reinforce our exclusion from it, in opposition to many of feminism's political aims.

Theoretical work of recent years has emphasized the crucial role played by cultural texts in subject formation: subjectivity is produced and affirmed, and ideology disseminated, through spectatorial identification with characters, narrative meaning and supporting aesthetic codes. The function of a text is to position the spectator to receive certain favoured - and restricted - meanings which the text 'manages' for the viewing subject in keeping with dominant ideology. In this model the spectator is not an active part of the production of textual meaning but the passive side of a unidirectional relationship in which the text disperses meanings while the spectator-subject receives them. The spectator can only interpret (be interpreted by) a text in terms preformulated by gender difference. There is no possibility of a mutually informing relationship between spectator and text, and therefore no accumulative building of textual meaning. As a result,

psychoanalytic-semiotic theories do not distinguish the subject formulated by the text from the spectator-subject viewing the text. The intention of the text and the reception of textual meaning are defined as one and the same.

The assumption that the text positions the spectator to receive its intended meanings has led to a foregrounding of textual analysis as a methodology for the study of film, since the text is regarded as both container and disseminator of ideology. Ideology, in turn, is mediated through a medium's aesthetic and technical codes. These codes, through repetition in time, cultural familiarity, context of use, and so on, are themselves presumed to be infused with ideology. If this is so, the question remains: how does one utilize the formal aspects of Wm to convey alternative ideologies without, in the process, conveying dominant ideology as well? For many feminist film-makers this has seemed an irreconcilable position, and has resulted in a rejection of aesthetic and technical practices associated with mainstream cinema. But again, this view needs to be measured against feminism's political agenda, its intent to alter public consciousness about gender roles and relations. Spectatorship in this sense also involves a consideration of film's widespread appeal and influence: its accessibility, and its availability, to large audiences. The aesthetic and technical codes of mainstream cinema have served traditionally as a common language and meeting ground between those who make and those who watch films. In an analysis which presumes that a text imposes ideology on a fixed spectatorship in a fixed manner, the aesthetic and technical codes of dominant ideology can impose only dominant ideology. But a method of analysis which argues that the viewing process includes the active participation of spectators means that film s codes can be implemented, by both producer and consumer, to allow for alternative usage.

Notes

1. These theories are too complex to be provided for in a brief summary. For an indepth examination, see E. A. Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both sides of the camera*, London and New York: Methuen, 1983; and A. Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, Boston, MA. and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
2. While references here are specifically to psychoanalytic theories, their application is inseparable from a semiotic methodology of textual analysis