

again to the psychoanalytic background: women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat. Although none of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.

To begin with (as an ending), the voyeuristic–scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down. There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth. Nevertheless, as this article has argued, the structure of looking in narrative fiction film contains a contradiction in its own premises: the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish. Thus the two looks materially present in time and space are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego. The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera's look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate can perform with verisimilitude. Simultaneously, the look of the audience is denied an intrinsic force: as soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator, the fact of fetishisation, concealing as it does castration fear, freezes the look, fixates the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him.

This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest', and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret.

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IS THE GAZE MALE?

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF the recent women's liberation movement, American feminists have been exploring the representation of female sexuality in the arts – literature, painting, film, and television.¹ The first wave of feminist critics adopted a broadly sociological approach, looking at sex roles women were seen to occupy in all kinds of imaginative works, from high art to mass entertainment. Roles were assessed as 'positive' or 'negative' according to some externally constructed criteria for the fully autonomous, independent woman.

Feminist film critics were the first to object to this prevailing critical approach, largely because of the general developments taking place in film theory at the beginning of the 1970s.² They noted the lack of awareness about the way images are constructed through the mechanism of whatever artistic practice is involved; representations, they pointed out, are mediations, embedded through the art form in the dominant ideology. Influenced by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Christian Metz, Julia Kristeva and others, women began to apply the tools of psychoanalysis, semiology and structuralism in analysing the representation of women in film.³ I will not duplicate the history of these theoretical developments here; let it suffice to note, by way of introduction, that increasing attention has been given first, to cinema as a signifying practice, to *how meaning is produced* in film rather than to something that used to be called its 'content'; and second, to the links between the processes of psychoanalysis and those of cinema.⁴ Feminists have been particularly concerned with how sexual difference is constructed psychoanalytically through the Oedipal process, especially as this is read by Lacan. For Lacan, woman cannot enter the world of the symbolic, of language, because at the very moment of the acquisition of language, she learns that she lacks the phallus, the symbol that sets language going through a recognition of difference; her relation to language is a negative one, a lack. In patriarchal structures, thus, woman is located as other (enigma, mystery), and is thereby viewed as outside (male) language.⁵

The implications of this for cinema are severe: dominant (Hollywood) cinema is seen as constructed according to the unconscious patriarchy, which means that film narratives are constituted through a phallogocentric language and discourse that parallels the language of the unconscious. Women in film, thus, do not function as signifiers for a signified (a real woman)

as sociological critics have assumed, but signifier and signified have been elided into a sign that represents something in the male unconscious.⁶

Two basic Freudian concepts – voyeurism and fetishism – have been used to explain what exactly woman represents and the mechanisms that come into play for the male spectator watching a female screen image. (Or, to put it rather differently, voyeurism and fetishism are mechanisms the dominant cinema uses to construct the male spectator in accordance with the needs of his unconscious.) The first, voyeurism, is linked to the scopophilic instinct (i.e. the male pleasure in his own sexual organ transferred to pleasure in watching other people having sex). Critics argue that the cinema relies on this instinct, making the spectator essentially a voyeur. The drive that causes little boys to peek through keyholes of parental bedrooms to learn about their sexual activities (or to get sexual gratification by thinking about these activities) comes into play when the male adult watches films, sitting in a dark room. The original eye of the camera, controlling and limiting what can be seen, is reproduced by the projector aperture that lights up one frame at a time; and both processes (camera and projector) duplicate the eye at the keyhole, whose gaze is confined by the keyhole 'frame'. The spectator is obviously in the voyeur position when there are sex scenes on the screen, but screen images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally, or what kind of plot may be involved.

According to Laura Mulvey (the British filmmaker and critic whose theories are central to new developments), this eroticization of women on the screen comes about through the way the cinema is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes: there is the look of the camera in the situation where events are being filmed (called the profilmic event) – while technically neutral, this look, as we have seen, is inherently voyeuristic and usually 'male' in the sense of a man doing the filming; there is the look of the men within the narrative, which is structured so as to make women objects of their gaze; and finally there is the look of the male spectator that imitates (or is necessarily in the same position as) the first two looks.⁷

But if women were simply eroticized and objectified, things might not be too bad, since objectification may be an inherent component of both male and female eroticism. (As I will show later on, however, things in this area are not symmetrical.) But two further elements enter in: to begin with, men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it. Second, the sexualization and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses. In her 1932 article 'The Dread of Woman', Karen Horney goes to literature to show that 'men have never tired of fashioning expressions for the violent force by which man feels himself drawn to the woman, and side by side with his longing, the dread that through her he might die and be undone'.⁸ Later on, Horney conjectures that even man's glorification of women 'has its source not only in his cravings for love, but also in his desire to conceal his dread. A similar relief, however, is also sought and found in the disparagement of women that men often display ostentatiously in their attitudes'.⁹ Horney goes on to explore the basis of the dread of women not only in castration (more related to the father), but in fear of the vagina.

But psychoanalysts agree that, for whatever reason – the fear of castration (Freud), or the attempt to deny the existence of the sinister female genital (Horney) – men endeavour to find the penis in women.¹⁰ Feminist film critics have seen this phenomenon (clinically known as fetishism) operating in the cinema; the camera (unconsciously) fetishizes the female form, rendering it phallus-like so as to mitigate woman's threat. Men, that is, turn 'the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous' (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star).¹¹

The apparently contradictory attitudes of glorification and disparagement pointed out by Horney thus turn out to be a reflection of the same ultimate need to annihilate the dread that woman inspires. In the cinema, the twin mechanisms of fetishism and voyeurism represent two different ways of handling this dread. As Mulvey points out, fetishism 'builds up the physical beauty of the object, turning it into something satisfying in itself', while voyeurism, linked to disparagement, has a sadistic side, and is involved with pleasure through control or domination, and with punishing the woman (guilty for being castrated).¹² For Claire Johnston, both mechanisms result in woman's not being presented qua woman at all. Extending the *Cahiers du cinéma* analysis of *Morocco*, Johnston argues that Sternberg represses 'the idea of woman as a social and sexual being', thus replacing the opposition man/woman with male/nonmale.¹³

With this brief look at feminist film theories as background, we can turn to the question of the gaze: as it stands, current work using psychoanalysis and semiology has demonstrated that the dominant cinematic apparatus is constructed by men for a male spectator. Women as women are absent from the screen and from the audience. Several questions now arise: first, is the gaze necessarily male (i.e. for reasons inherent in the structure of language, the unconscious, all symbolic systems, and thereby all social structures)? Or would it be possible to structure things so that women own the gaze? Second, would women want to own the gaze, if it were possible? Third, in either case, what does it mean to be a female spectator? Women are in fact present in audiences: what is happening to them as they watch a cinematic apparatus that constructs a male viewer? Does a woman spectator of female images have any choice other than either identifying as female object of desire, or if subject of desire, then appropriating the male position? Can there be such a thing as the female subject of desire? Finally, if a female subject is watching images of lesbians, what can this mean to her? How do such images inform women's actual, physical relations with other women?¹⁴

It is extremely important for feminist film critics to begin to address these questions. First, behind these questions, posed largely in structural terms, lie the larger questions concerning female desire and female subjectivity: Is it possible for there to be a female voice, a female discourse? What can a feminine specificity mean? Second, those of us working within the psychoanalytic system need to find a way out of an apparently overwhelming theoretical problem that has dramatic consequences for the way we are constituted, and constitute ourselves, not just in representation but also in our daily lives. Is there any escape from the overdetermined, phallogocentric sign? The whole focus on the materialization of the signifier has again brought daily experience and art close together. Now critics read daily life as structured according to signifying practices (like art, 'constructed', not naively experienced), rather than the earlier oversimplification of seeing art as a mere reflection/imitation of lived experience (mirroring it, or, better, presenting it as through a transparent pane of glass).

Finally, the growing interest in psychoanalytic and semiological approaches has begun to polarize the feminist film community,¹⁵ and I want to begin by addressing some objections to current theoretical work, since they will lead us back to the larger questions of the female gaze and female desire. In a roundtable discussion in 1979, some women voiced their displeasure with theories that were themselves originally devised by men, and with women's preoccupation with how we have been seen/placed/positioned by the dominant male order. Julia LeSage, for instance, argues that the use of Lacanian criticism has been destructive in reifying women 'in a childlike position that patriarchy has wanted to see them in'; for LeSage, the Lacanian framework establishes 'a discourse which is totally male'.¹⁶ And Ruby Rich objects to theories that rest with the apparent elimination of women from both screen and audience. She asks how we can move beyond our placing, rather than just analysing it.¹⁷

As if in response to Rich's request, some feminist film critics have begun to take up the

challenge of moving beyond the preoccupation with how women have been constructed in patriarchal cinema. In a recent paper on *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca attempt to appropriate for themselves some of the images hitherto defined as repressive. They begin by expressing their dissatisfaction not only with current feminist film theory as outlined above, but also with the new theoretical feminist films, which, they say, 'focus more on denying men their cathexis with women as erotic objects than in connecting women with each other'. In addition, these films, by 'destroying the narrative and the possibility for viewer identification with the characters, destroy both the male viewer's pleasure and our pleasure'.¹⁸ Asserting their need for identification with strong female screen images, they argue that Hollywood films offer many examples of pleasurable identification; in a clever analysis, the relationship between Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is offered as an example of strong women, who care for one another, providing a model we need.

However, looking at the construction of the film as a whole, rather than simply isolating certain shots, it is clear that Monroe and Russell are positioned, and position themselves, as objects for a specifically male gaze. The men's weakness does not mitigate their diegetic power, leaving to the women merely the limited control they can wield through their sexuality. The film constructs them as 'to-be-looked-at', and their manipulations end up merely comic, since 'capturing' the men involves their 'being captured'. The images of Monroe show her fetishized placement, aimed at reducing her sexual threat, while Russell's stance is a parody of the male position.¹⁹ The result is that the two women repeat, in exaggerated form, dominant gender stereotypes.

Yet Arbuthnot and Seneca begin from important points: first, the need for films that construct women as the spectator and yet do not offer repressive identifications (as, for example, Hollywood women's films do);²⁰ and second, the need for feminist films that satisfy our craving for pleasure. In introducing the notion of pleasure, Arbuthnot and Seneca pinpoint a central and little-discussed issue. Mulvey was aware of the way feminist films as counter-cinema would deny pleasure, but she argued that this denial was a necessary prerequisite for freedom, and did not go into the problems involved.²¹ Arbuthnot and Seneca locate the paradox in which feminist film critics have been caught without realizing it: namely, that we have been analysing Hollywood (rather than, say, avant-garde) films, largely because they bring us pleasure; but we have (rightly) been wary of admitting the degree to which the pleasure comes from identifying with our own objectification. Our positioning as 'to-be-looked-at', as object of the gaze, has, through our positioning, come to be sexually pleasurable.

However, it will not do to simply enjoy our oppression unproblematically; to appropriate Hollywood images to ourselves, taking them out of the context of the total structure in which they appear, will not get us very far. In order to fully understand *how it is* that women take pleasure in the objectification of women, one has to have recourse to psychoanalysis. Since criticisms like those voiced by LeSage, Rich, and Arbuthnot and Seneca are important, and reflect the deepening rift in the feminist film community, it is worth dwelling for a moment on why psychoanalysis is necessary as a feminist tool at this point in our history.

As Christian Metz, Stephen Heath and others have shown, the processes of cinema mimic in many ways those of the unconscious. The mechanisms Freud distinguishes in relation to dream and the unconscious have been likened to the mechanisms of film.²² In this analysis, film narratives, like dreams, symbolize a latent, repressed content, only now the 'content' refers not to an individual unconscious but to that of patriarchy in general. If psychoanalysis is a tool that will unlock the meaning of dreams, it should also unlock that of films.

But of course the question still remains as to the ideology of psychoanalysis: is it true, as Talking Lips argues at the start of the film *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, that psychoanalysis

is a discourse shot through with bourgeois ideology, functioning 'almost as an Ideological State Apparatus', with its focus on the individual, 'outside of real history and real struggle';²³ Or is psychoanalysis, although developed at a time when bourgeois capitalism was the dominant form, a theory that applies *across* history rather than being *embedded* in history?

Of these two possibilities, the first seems to me to be true. Psychoanalysis and cinema are inextricably linked both to each other and to capitalism, because both are products of a particular stage of capitalist society. The psychic patterns created by capitalist social and interpersonal structures (especially the nuclear family) required at once a machine for their unconscious release and an analytic tool for understanding and adjusting disturbances caused by the structures confining people. To this extent, both mechanisms support the status quo; but they are not eternal and unchanging, being rather inserted in history and linked to the particular social formation that produced them.

For this very reason, we have to begin by using psychoanalysis if we want to understand how we have been constituted, and the kind of linguistic and cultural universe we live in. Psychoanalysis may indeed have been used to oppress women, in the sense of forcing us to accept a positioning that is inherently antithetical to subjectivity and autonomy; but if that is the case, we need to know exactly *how* this has functioned to repress what we could potentially become. Given our positioning as women raised in a historical period dominated by Oedipal structuring and discourse, we must start by examining the psychoanalytic processes as they have worked to position us as other (enigma, mystery), and as eternal and unchanging, however paradoxical this may appear. For it is only in this way that we can begin to find the gaps and fissures through which we can reinsert woman in history, and begin to change ourselves as a first step toward changing society.

Let us now return to the question of women's pleasure in being objectified and see what we can learn about it through psychoanalysis. We saw earlier that the entry of the father as the third term disrupts the mother/child dyad, causing the child to understand the mother's castration and possession by the father. In the symbolic world the girl now enters she learns not only subject/object positions but the sexed pronouns 'he' and 'she'. Assigned the place of object (since she lacks the phallus, the symbol of the signifier), she is the recipient of male desire, the passive recipient of his gaze. If she is to have sexual pleasure, it can only be constructed around her objectification; it cannot be a pleasure that comes from desire for the other (a subject position) – that is, her desire is to be desired.

Given the male structuring around sadism that I have already discussed, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism.²⁴ In practice, this masochism is rarely reflected in more than a tendency for women to be passive in sexual relations; but in the realm of fantasy, masochism is often quite prominent. In an interesting paper, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', Mary Ann Doane has shown that in the one film genre that constructs a female spectator, that spectator is made to participate in what is essentially a masochistic fantasy. Doane notes that in the major classical genres, the female body *is* sexuality, providing the erotic object for the male spectator. In the woman's film, the gaze must be de-eroticized (since the spectator is now assumed to be female), but in doing this the films effectively disembodied their spectator. The repeated masochistic scenarios are designed to immobilize the female viewer, refuse her the imaginary identification that, in uniting body and identity, gives back to the male spectator his idealized (mirror) self, together with a sense of mastery and control.²⁵

Later on in her paper, Doane shows that Freud's 'A Child Is Being Beaten' is important in distinguishing the way a common masochistic fantasy works out for boys and for girls. In the male fantasy, 'sexuality remains on the surface' and the man 'retains his own role and his own gratification in the context of the scenario. The "I" of identity remains'. But the

female fantasy is, first, desexualized, and, second, 'necessitates the woman's assumption of the position of spectator, outside of the event'. In this way, the girl manages, as Freud says, 'to escape from the demands of the erotic side of her life altogether'.²⁶

Perhaps we can phrase this a little differently and say that in locating herself in fantasy in the erotic, the woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desire, or, at one remove, positions herself as *watching* a woman who is passive recipient of male desires and sexual actions. Although the evidence we have to go on is slim, it does seem that women's sexual fantasies would confirm the predominance of these positionings. Nancy Friday's volumes, for instance, provide discourses on the level of dream, and, however questionable as scientific evidence, show narratives in which the woman speaker largely arranges the scenario for her sexual pleasure so that things are done to her, or in which she is the object of men's lascivious gaze.²⁷ Often, there is pleasure in anonymity, or in a strange man approaching her when she is with her husband. Rarely does the dreamer initiate the sexual activity, and the man's large, erect penis usually is central in the fantasy. Nearly all the fantasies have the dominance-submission pattern, with the woman in the latter place.

It is significant that in the lesbian fantasies that Friday has collected women occupy *both* positions, the dreamer excited either by dominating another woman, forcing her to have sex, or enjoying being so dominated. These fantasies suggest either that the female positioning is not as monolithic as critics often imply, or that women occupy the 'male' position when they become dominant. Whichever the case may be, the prevalence of the dominance-submission pattern as a sexual turn-on is clear. At a discussion about pornography organized by Julia LeSage at the Northwestern Conference on Feminist Film Criticism, gay and straight women admitted their pleasure (in both fantasy and actuality) in being 'forced' or 'forcing' someone else. Some women claimed that this was a result of growing up in Victorian-style households where all sexuality was repressed, but others denied that it had anything to do with patriarchy. Women wanted, rightly, to accept themselves sexually, whatever the turn-on mechanism.²⁸ But to simply celebrate whatever gives us sexual pleasure seems to me both problematic and too easy: we need to analyse how it is that certain things turn us on, how sexuality has been constructed in patriarchy to produce pleasure in the dominance-submission forms, before we advocate these modes.

It was predictable that many of the male fantasies in Friday's book *Men in Love* would show the speaker constructing events so that he is in control: again, the 'I' of identity remains central, as it was not in the female narrations.²⁹ Many male fantasies focus on the man's excitement arranging for his woman to expose herself (or even give herself) to other men, while he watches. The difference between this male voyeurism and the previous female form is striking: the women do not own the desire, even when they watch; their watching is to place responsibility for sexuality at yet one more remove, to distance themselves from sex; the man, on the other hand, owns the desire and the woman, and gets pleasure from exchanging the woman, as in Lévi-Strauss' kinship system.

Yet some of the fantasies in Friday's book show men's wish to be taken over by an aggressive woman who would force them to become helpless, like the little boy in his mother's hands. The Women Against Pornography guided trip around Times Square corroborated this; after a slide show that focused totally on male sadism and violent sexual exploitation of women, we were taken on a tour that showed literature and film loops expressing as many fantasies of male as of female submission. The situations were the predictable ones, showing young boys (but sometimes men) seduced by women in a form of authority - governesses, nursemaids, nurses, schoolteachers, stepmothers. (Of course, it is significant that the corresponding dominance-submission female fantasies have men in authority positions that carry much more status - professors, doctors, policemen, executives: these men seduce the innocent girls, or young wives, who cross their paths.)

Two interesting things emerge from all this: one is that dominance-submission patterns are apparently a crucial part of both male and female sexuality as constructed in western capitalism. The other is that men have a far wider range of positions available: more readily both dominant and submissive, they vacillate between supreme control and supreme abandonment. Women, meanwhile, are more consistently submissive, but not excessively abandoned. In their own fantasies, women do not position themselves as exchanging men, although a man might find being exchanged an exciting fantasy.

But the important question remains: when women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position? Can we envisage a female dominant position that would differ qualitatively from the male form of dominance? Or is there merely the possibility for both sex genders to occupy the positions we now know as masculine and feminine?

The experience of recent films of the 1970s and 1980s would support the latter possibility, and explain why many feminists have not been excited by the so-called liberated woman on the screen, or by the fact that some male stars have recently been made to seem the object of the female gaze. Traditionally male stars did not necessarily (or even primarily) derive their glamour from their looks or their sexuality, but from the power they were able to wield within the filmic world in which they functioned (i.e. John Wayne); these men, as Laura Mulvey has shown, became ego ideals for the men in the audience, corresponding to the image in the mirror, who was more in control of motor coordination than the young child looking in. 'The male figure', Mulvey notes, 'is free to command the stage . . . of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action'.³⁰

Recent films have begun to change this pattern: a star like John Travolta (*Saturday Night Fever*, *Urban Cowboy*, *Moment by Moment*) has been rendered the object of woman's gaze and in some of the films (i.e. *Moment by Moment*) placed explicitly as a sexual object to a woman who controlled the film's action. Robert Redford likewise has begun to be used as the object of female desire (i.e. in *Electric Horseman*). But it is significant that in all these films, when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as a sex object, the woman then takes on the masculine role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing - not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped.

Even in a supposedly feminist film like *My Brilliant Career* the same processes are at work. The film is interesting because it places in the foreground the independent minded heroine's dilemma in a clearly patriarchal culture: in love with a wealthy neighbour, the heroine makes him the object of her gaze, but the problem is that, as female, her desire has no power. Men's desire naturally carries power with it, so when the hero finally concedes his love for her, he comes to get her. However, being able to conceive of 'love' only as 'submission', an end to autonomy and to her life as a creative writer, the heroine now refuses. The film thus plays with established positions, but is unable to work through them to something else.

What we can conclude from the discussion so far is that our culture is deeply committed to clearly demarcated sex differences, called masculine and feminine, that revolve on, first, a complex gaze-apparatus; and, second, dominance-submission patterns. This positioning of the two sex genders clearly privileges the male through the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, which are male operations, and because his desire carries power/action, where woman's usually does not. But as a result of the recent women's movement, women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defined as masculine, as long as the man then steps into *her* position, so as to keep the whole structure intact.

It is significant, of course, that while this substitution is made to happen relatively easily in the cinema, in real life any such 'swapping' is fraught with the immense psychological difficulties that only psychoanalysis can unravel. In any case, such 'exchanges' do not do much for either sex, since nothing has essentially changed: the roles remain locked into their static boundaries. Showing images of mere reversal may in fact provide a safety valve for the social tensions that the women's movement has created by demanding a more dominant role for women.

We have thus arrived at the point where we must question the necessity for the dominance-submission structure. The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position. It is for this reason that Julia Kristeva and others have said that it is impossible to know what the feminine might be; while we must reserve the category 'women' for social demands and publicity, Kristeva says that by 'woman' she means 'that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out of meanings and ideologies'.³¹ For similar reasons, Sandy Flitterman and Judith Barry have argued that feminist artists must avoid claiming a specific female power residing in the body of women that represents 'an inherent feminine artistic essence which could find expression if allowed to be explored freely'. The impulse toward this kind of art is understandable in a culture that denies satisfaction in being a woman, but it results in motherhood's being redefined as the seat of female creativity, while women 'are proposed as the bearers of culture, albeit an alternative one'.³²

Barry and Flitterman argue that this form of feminist art, along with some others that they outline, is dangerous in not taking into account 'the social contradictions involved in "femininity"'. They suggest that 'a radical feminist art would include an understanding of how women are constituted through social practices in culture', and argue for 'an aesthetics designed to subvert the production of "woman" as commodity', much as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey had earlier stated that to be feminist, a cinema had to be a counter-cinema.³³

The problem with all these arguments is that they leave women trapped in the position of negativity – subverting rather than positing. Although the feminists asserting this point of view are clearly right in placing in the foreground women's repression in representation and culture (and in seeing this work as a necessary first step), it is hard to see how women can move forward from these awarenesses. If certain feminist groups (i.e. Women Against Pornography) err on the side of eliding reality with fantasy (i.e. in treating an image's violating of women on the same level as a literal act of violation on the street), feminist critics err on the side of seeing a world constructed only of signifiers, of losing contact with the 'referred' world of the social formation.

The first error was in positing an unproblematic relationship between art and life in the sense that (1) art was seen as able simply to imitate life, as if through a transparent pane of glass; and (2) that representation was thought to affect social behaviour directly; but the second error is to see art and life as both equally 'constructed' by the signifying practices that define and limit each sphere. The signifier is here made material, in the sense that it is all there is to know. Discussing semiology in relation to Marxism, Terry Eagleton points out the dangers of this way of seeing for a Marxist view of history. History evaporates in the new scheme; since the signified can never be grasped, we cannot talk about our reality as human subjects. But, as he goes on to show, more than the signified (which in Saussure's scheme obediently followed the signifier, despite its being arbitrary) is at stake: 'It is also', he says, 'a question of the referent, which we all long ago bracketed out of being. In re-materializing the sign, we are in imminent danger of de-materializing its referent; a linguistic materialism gradually reverts itself into a linguistic idealism'.³⁴

Eagleton no doubt overstates the case when he talks about 'sliding away from the referent', since neither Saussure nor Althusser denied that there *was* a referent. But it is true

that while semiologists talk about the eruption of 'the real' (i.e. accidents, death, revolution), on a daily basis they tend to be preoccupied with life as dominated by the prevailing signifying practices of a culture. It may be true that all lived experience is mediated through signifying practices, but we should not therefore pay exclusive attention to this level of things. In attempting to get rid of an unwelcome dualism, inherent in western thought at least since Plato, and rearticulated by Kant on the brink of the modern period, some semiologists run the danger of collapsing levels of things that need to remain distinct if we are to work effectively in the political arena to bring about change.

Thus while it is essential for feminist film critics to examine signifying processes carefully in order to fully understand the way women have been constructed in language and the non-verbal arts, it is equally important not to lose sight of the need to find strategies for changing discourse, since these changes would, in turn, affect the structuring of the social formation.

Some feminist film critics have begun to face this challenge. The directors of *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, for example, suggest that raising questions is the first step toward establishing a female discourse, or, perhaps, that asking questions is the only discourse available to women as a resistance to patriarchal domination. Since questions lead to more questions, a kind of movement is in fact taking place, although it is in a nontraditional mode. Sally Potter structured her film *Thriller* around this very notion, and allowed her heroine's investigation of herself as heroine to lead to some (tentative) conclusions. And Laura Mulvey has suggested that even if one accepts the psychoanalytic positioning of women, all is not lost, since the Oedipus complex is not completed in women; she notes that 'there is some way in which women aren't colonized', having been 'so specifically excluded from culture and language'.³⁵

From this position, psychoanalytic theory allows us to see that there is more possibility for women to change themselves (and perhaps to bring about social change) just because they have not been processed, as have little boys, through a clearly defined, and ultimately simple, set of psychic stages. The girl's relationship to her mother remains forever unresolved, incomplete; in heterosexuality, she is forced to turn away from her primary love object, destined never to return to it, while the boy, through marrying someone like his mother, can regain his original plenitude in another form. The girl must transfer her need for love to the father, who, as Nancy Chodorow has shown, never completely satisfies.³⁶

Mulvey thus suggests that patriarchal culture is not monolithic, not cleanly sealed. There are gaps, fissures through which women can begin to ask questions and introduce change. The directors of *Sigmund Freud's Dora* end their film with a series of letters from a daughter (who is sometimes called Dora) read out by her mother, some of which deal with the place of the mother in psychoanalysis. The daughter's comments illuminate the fact that Freud dismisses Dora's mother (in his famous account of the case history), instead of talking about her 'as the site of the intersection of many representations' (of which the historical mother is just one). She suggests that Freud's omission was not merely an oversight, but, given his system, a necessity.

Mulvey and Wollen's earlier film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, confronted the repression of mothering in patriarchal culture directly; the film argued that women 'live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is repressed. Motherhood, and how to live it or not to live it, lies at the root of the dilemma'.³⁷ In an interview, Mulvey noted the influence of psychoanalysis on her conception of the mother-child exchange ('the identification between the two, and the implications that has for narcissism and recognition of the self in the "other"'), but she went on to say that this is an area rarely read from the mother's point of view.³⁸

Motherhood thus becomes one place from which to begin to reformulate our position as women, just because men have not dealt with it theoretically or in the social realm (i.e. by

providing free child care, free abortions, maternal leave, after-school child programs, etc.). Motherhood has been repressed on all levels except that of hypostatization, romanticization and idealization.³⁹ Yet women have been struggling with lives as mothers – silently, quietly, often in agony, often in bliss, but always on the periphery of a society that tries to make us all, men and women, forget our mothers.

But motherhood, and the fact that we were all mothered, will not be repressed; or, if the attempt is made, there will be effects signalling 'the return of the repressed'. The entire construction of woman in patriarchy as a lack could be viewed as emerging from the need to repress mothering and the painful memory traces it has left in the man. The phallus as signified can be set in motion only given the other with a lack, and this has resulted in the male focus on castration. But is it possible that this focus was designed to mask an even greater threat that mothering poses? And if we look from the position of women, need this lack in reality have the dire implications men would have us believe? The focus on women as (simply) sex object, or (more complexly) as fetishized (narcissistic male desire) that we have been tracing through Hollywood films, may be part of the apparatus that represses mothering. The insistence on rigidly defined sex roles, and the dominance–submission, voyeurism–fetishism mechanisms may be constructed to this end.

In placing the problem of mothering in the foreground in this way one is not necessarily falling into the trap of essentialism. First, I am not denying that motherhood has been constructed in patriarchy by its very place as repressed; nor, second, am I saying that women are inherently mothers; nor, third, that the only ideal relationship that can express female specificity is mothering. I am saying, rather, that motherhood is one of the areas that has been left vague, allowing us to reformulate the position as given, rather than discovering a specificity outside the system we are in.⁴⁰ It is a place to start rethinking sex-difference, not an end.

Let me review briefly some of the main ways in which motherhood can be thought of within psychoanalysis. First, and most conservatively, motherhood has been analysed as an essentially narcissistic relationship, and as involved with the problem of castration. In this way, it parallels male fetishism; just as men fetishize women in order to reduce their threat (finding themselves thus in the other), so women fetishize the child, looking in the child for the phallus to 'make up' for castration; second, motherhood can be seen as narcissistic, not in the sense of finding the phallus in the child, but of finding *the self* in the child (this parallels male fetishizing of women in another way); women here do not relate to the child as other, but as an extension of their own egos; third, and most radically (but this is also the position that can lead to essentialism), one could argue that since the law represses mothering, a gap is left through which it may be possible to subvert patriarchy.

The problem with this latter (and most hopeful) position, however, is that of how to express motherhood after the period of the imaginary. One could argue that women are fêted with an impossible dilemma: to remain in blissful unity with the child in the imaginary (or to try to hold onto this realm as long as possible), or to enter the symbolic in which mothering is repressed, cannot be 'spoken', cannot represent a position of power. Here the only resistance is silence.⁴¹

But is this not one of those places where a rigid adherence to the theoretical formulation of imaginary and symbolic betrays the inadequacy of the theory? Is not mothering, in fact, now being 'spoken', even through patriarchal discourse? Both Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow 'speak' a discourse about mothering that, while remaining within psychoanalysis, breaks new ground.⁴² And the feminist films about mothering now appearing begin to investigate and move beyond patriarchal representations.⁴³

On the social/historical level, in addition, we are living in a period in which mothers are increasingly living alone with their children, offering the possibility for new psychic

patterns to emerge; fathers are increasingly becoming involved with childrearing, and also living alone with their children. Freud's own kind of science (which involved studying the people brought up in strict Victorian, bourgeois households) applied rigorously to people today results in very different conclusions. Single mothers are forced to make themselves subject in relation to their children; they are forced to invent new symbolic roles, which combine positions previously assigned to fathers with traditional female ones. The child cannot position the mother as object to the father's law, since in single-parent households *her* desire sets things in motion.

A methodology is often not *per se* either revolutionary or reactionary, but open to appropriation for a variety of usages. At this point, feminists may have to use psychoanalysis, but in a manner opposite to the traditional one. Other kinds of psychic processes obviously can exist and may stand as models for when we have worked our way through the morass that confronts us as people having grown up in western capitalist culture. Julia Kristeva, for example, suggests that desire functions in a very different manner in China, and urges us to explore Chinese culture, from a very careful psychoanalytic point of view, to see what is possible.⁴⁴

Many of the mechanisms we have found in Hollywood films which echo deeply embedded myths in western capitalist culture are thus not inviolable, eternal, unchanging or inherently necessary. They rather reflect the unconscious of patriarchy, including a fear of the pre-Oedipal plenitude with the mother. The domination of women by the male gaze is part of men's strategy to contain the threat that the mother embodies, and to control the positive and negative impulses that memory traces of being mothered have left in the male unconscious. Women, in turn, have learned to associate their sexuality with domination by the male gaze, a position involving a degree of masochism in finding their objectification erotic. We have participated in and perpetuated our domination by following the pleasure principle, which leaves us no options, given our positioning.

Everything, thus, revolves around the issue of pleasure, and it is here that patriarchal repression has been most negative. For things have been structured to make us forget the mutual, pleasurable bonding that we all, male and female, enjoyed with our mothers. Some recent experimental (as against psychoanalytic) studies have shown that the gaze is first set in motion in the mother–child relationship.⁴⁵ But this is a *mutual* gazing, rather than the subject–object kind that reduces one of the parties to the place of submission. Patriarchy has worked hard to prevent the eruption of a (mythically) feared return of the matriarchy that might take place were the close mother–child bonding returned to dominance, or allowed to stand in place of the law of the father.

This is by no means to argue that a return to matriarchy would be either possible or desirable. What rather has to happen is that we move beyond long-held cultural and linguistic patterns of oppositions: male/female (as these terms currently signify); dominant/submissive; active/passive; nature/civilization; order/chaos; matriarchal/patriarchal. If rigidly defined sex differences have been constructed around fear of the other, we need to think about ways of transcending a polarity that has only brought us all pain.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 See works by Kate Millett, Linda Nochlin, Molly Haskell, articles in the few issues of *Women in Film* (1972–75), and articles in *Screen and Screen Education* throughout the 1970s. For a summary of early developments across the arts, see Lucy Arbutnot's PhD diss., New York University, 1982.
- 2 See especially work by Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Comolli, Raymond Bellour, Roland Barthes and essays in *Cahiers du cinéma* in France; in England, the work by Stephen Heath, Colin McCabe, Paul Willemen and others in *Screen* and elsewhere.

- 3 See especially the work of Claire Johnston, Pam Cook and Laura Mulvey from England, and subsequent work by the *Camera Obscura* group.
- 4 Christine Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 3: 4 (1978), 458-93; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Aspects of British Feminist Film Criticism', *Jump Cut*, nos. 12-13 (Dec. 1976), 52-56; and Kaplan, 'Integrating Marxist and Psychoanalytic Concepts in Feminist Film Criticism', *Millennium Film Journal*, April 1980, 8-17.
- 5 Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the "I"' (1949), in *New Left Review*, 51 (Sept.-Oct. 1968), 71-77. See also essays on Lacan in Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).
- 6 For a background to semiological concepts, see work by Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Umberto Eco, among others. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiology* (London: Methuen, 1977), and Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), provide useful summaries of relevant material.
- 7 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16: 3 (Autumn 1975), 16-18.
- 8 Karen Horney, 'The Dread of Woman' (1932), in *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 134.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 10 For a useful discussion of fetishism, see Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1945), 341-45.
- 11 Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', 14.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Claire Johnston, 'Woman's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: Screen Pamphlet, 1973), 26.
- 14 Some of these questions are raised in the letters read by a mother toward the end of the film *Sigmund Freud's Dora*, made by Anthony McCall, Andrew Tyndall, Claire Pajackowska and Jane Weinstock.
- 15 This has been evident in feminist film sessions at various conferences, but was particularly clear at the Lolita Rodgers Memorial Conference on Feminist Film Criticism, held at Northwestern University, 14-16 Nov. 1980. For a report of some differences, see Barbara Klinger, 'Conference Report', *Camera Obscura*, 7 (Spring 1981), 137-43.
- 16 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', *New German Critique*, 13 (Winter 1978), 93.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 18 Lucy Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, 'Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*', paper delivered at the Conference on Feminist Film Criticism, Northwestern University, Nov. 1980.
- 19 See Maureen Turim, 'Gentlemen Consume Blondes', in *Wideangle*, 1: 1 (1979), 52-59. Carol Rowe also (if somewhat mockingly) shows Monroe's phallicism in her film *Grand Delusion*.
- 20 See Mary-Anne Doane, 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address', paper delivered at the Conference on Cinema History, Asilomar, Monterey, May 1981.
- 21 Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', 7-8, 18.
- 22 See the essays in *Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (1977), by Coward, Metz, Heath and Johnston. Also the issue of *Screen*, 16: 2 (Summer 1975), on 'Psychoanalysis and Cinema', especially the piece by Metz.
- 23 See E. Ann Kaplan, 'Feminist Approaches to History, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema in *Sigmund Freud's Dora*', *Millennium Film Journal*, 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1979), 173-85.
- 24 Charles Brenner offers perhaps the most accessible account of Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex in his *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), 108-41.
- 25 Freud's work is central to any discussion of sadism and masochism. Since I wrote this paper, these issues have been discussed by Kaja Silverman in 'Masochism and Subjectivity', *Framework*, 12 (1981), 2-9, and by Joel Kovel, *The Age of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).
- 26 Doane, 'The Woman's Film', 3-8.
- 27 Nancy Friday, *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies* (New York: Pocket Books, 1981).
- 28 Unpublished transcript of a discussion, organized by Julia LeSage, at the Conference on Feminist Criticism, Northwestern University, Nov. 1980. See also, for discussion of dominance-submission patterns, Pat Califa, 'Feminism and Sadosochism', *Heresies* 12, 32ff.
- 29 Nancy Friday, *Men in Love* (New York: Dell, 1980).
- 30 Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', 12-13.
- 31 Julia Kristeva, 'La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça', trans. Marilyn A. August, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Marks and I. de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 37.
- 32 Sandy Flitterman and Judith Barry, 'Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making', *Screen*, 2: 3 (Summer 1980), 37.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 34 Terry Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics', *New Left Review* (1978).
- 35 'Women and Representation: A Discussion with Laura Mulvey' (collective project by Jane Clarke, Sue Clayton, Joanna Clelland, Rosie Elliott and Mandy Merck), *Wedge* (London), 2 (Spring 1979), 49.
- 36 Nancy Chodorow, 'Psychodynamics of the Family', in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 191-209.
- 37 'Riddles of the Sphinx: A Film by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen; Script', *Screen*, 18: 2 (Summer 1977), 62.
- 38 Jacquelyn Suter and Sandy Flitterman, 'Textual Riddles: Woman as Enigma or Site of Social Meanings? An Interview with Laura Mulvey', *Discourse*, 1 (Fall 1979), 107.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 109-20.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 116-19.
- 41 Mulvey, 'Women and Representation', 49.
- 42 Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*.
- 43 See for example, films by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Michelle Citron, Marjorie Keller and Helke Sander.
- 44 Kristeva, 'Les Chinoises à "contre-courant"', *New French Feminisms*, 240.
- 45 Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin, 'Parent-Child Interaction', in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, ed. E. M. Hetherington (New York: John Wiley & Sons: in press). One has obviously to be careful here about introducing discourses that work on an entirely different level than the theoretical, psychoanalytic discourse that I have mainly been considering. It may be, however, that the confronting of the psychoanalytic discourse with more empirically based kinds of discourse could lead to an opening up of the theory, to suggestions for a way out of the theoretical impasse in which psychoanalytic frameworks place women.
- 46 See the important essay by Jessica Benjamin, 'Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination', in Ann Snitow (ed.), *Powers of Desire* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).