

Laura Mulvey's Redemptive Approach Against Cinema's Vengeful Narcissistic Scopophilia : A Tale Of Eternal Struggle And Identity

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Abstract

This paper will delve deep to dissect the theories propagated by Mulvey against “androgynous” ideology in narrative cinema. The research will provide sublime view to her reproaches and endeavours to create a mutual space for equal gender representation. Mulvey's insights have been overtly analysed in the below mentioned research with reference to Classic Hollywood films to contemporary cinema. Her revolutionary essay, *Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema*, had widened our purview and endows it with glaring hues of reality. The reality which has forever deluded the women audience, especially since the inception of cinema, has gradually started to take the back seat in the ride.

Keywords: Visual pleasure, narrative cinema, narcissistic scopophilia, mirror stage, psychoanalysis, phallocentrism, male ‘gaze’.

Introduction

Laura Mulvey in her trailblazing essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, spewed absolute repugnance and abhorrence against the chauvinist narcissism of the male sex involved in the production of cinema and repudiated the naked “scopophilia” of the sadistic onlookers. Mulvey's essay has been a long-standing denouncement against the established moral depravity of the general public and the tyrannical hypocrisy of the cinema producers and actors. She unapologetically protested against the “phallogentric” mind-set, where a film fundamentally credits “on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world”.

The term “phallogentricism” was coined by French philosopher and deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida, which clearly highlights the dichotomy between

“presence” and “absence”. This feeling of the “real absence of the penis” in women and the presence of it in men, make them a “superior” gender, above the pedestal of women. Women in society only embodies ‘lack’, ‘absence’ and ‘void’, which automatically makes the other half inherently powerful and gracious.

Jacques Lacan insinuated terms like “the symbolic order” and “the Name of the Father and the Law”, which unglamorously unfurls the ideological ideas rampant in the society. Men are undeniably considered as “the maker of meaning”, who unrepentantly use “language” as their paraphernalia to emphasize their overbearing and dominant position in a community. Women’s primary and pivotal function is to manifest “the castration threat”, which in turn passively intimidates the children to submit to “the Name of the Father and Law”.

Mulvey in her essay used that very ‘language’ as a “political weapon” to address “the importance of the representation of the female form”, which the men eternally used to build an empire of their own abode. Films further reinforces the dominant structures of patriarchy but Mulvey suggested feministic avant-garde form of narration, where the “women problem” would not be side-lined but rather given prominent shout-out in the screen.

Mulvey in her 1973 article voiced her unadulterated notion against “narcissistic scopophilia”, “narrative cinema” and “visual pleasure”. Following the cues of Freud’s “psychoanalysis” and Lacan’s “mirror stage” theory, she endeavoured to delineate how a child finds striking similarity with the image of his “perfect” self on the mirror, just like a passive audience in a dark cinema hall, who finds similar assimilation with the seemingly perfect actor on screen.

According to Mulvey, a young child identifies his own image on the mirror as “Ideal-I” or “Ideal ego”, who is abidingly flawless and exquisite. Following the same stream of consciousness, the male spectator’s blatant and unfiltered ‘gaze’, speaks volumes of their surreptitious erotic “pervertism”. The erotic gaze of the audience and their subsequent pleasure in witnessing the almost naked film actress, who are made to wear seductive clothes in order to entice male into the cinemas. This “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”.

As per Mulvey, men act as active gazers, where women are the recipient of passive “to be-looked-at-ness”. Women lack the power and strength to subvert the gaze they thoroughly receive and are positioned at a subordinate pedestal considering the male’s assertive masculinity and manliness. In the work, she ruthlessly criticised the unconscious patriarchal society which has structured film form and installed women for strong visual and erotic impact which reiteratedly titillates the libido of lecherous men.

Mulvey meticulously scrutinized the masterpieces of Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg in the films like *Vertigo* (1958), *Morocco* (1930) and *Marnie* (1964). In the film *Vertigo*, the camera closely catches the pure beauty of the female protagonist Madeleine, who later became, male protagonist police officer Scottie's fetish and obsession. Scottie was first endowed with the task of observing Madeleine, along with the spectators, who shared the same guilty pleasure of the actor and became entwined in the process of fetishism.

Sternberg's *Morocco* examined the "interchange of masculine and feminine characteristics" in a genuine interplay between male and female". Marlene Dietrich's seductive performance on a song, disguised in a man's tailcoat and kissed another woman, was the highlight of the film. Even in the film, *Dishonored*, Dietrich's perfected beauty, relegated the story from its mainstream focus in support of attracting the enthralled male gaze. Mulvey while surveying the movie, noted that "the most important absence is that of the controlling the male gaze within the screen scene". – which permits the audience to plunge in immanent "fetishistic scopophilia".

Similarly, in *Rear Window*, the male persona Jefferies donned as a photographer, who through the lens of his camera and room's window obsessively observed the woman activities on the other side of the lane. Hitchcock in the movies *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, assiduously created an ambience in an apparently flawless screen space where "the male protagonist does see precisely what the audience sees". Hence, the gaze of Jefferies became the gaze of the audience who very conveniently blended in the process of looking.

Hitchcock deliberately manipulated the concept of 'right' and 'wrong', by cohesively adhering to the strict moral justice by punishing the wrong-doer in the film. But that act of him, didn't get Mulvey's praise, who alleged that, Hitchcock's "true perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness". The women in Hitchcock and Sternberg's films and receptacle of double fetishism and scopophilia - one is the actors sharing the screen space and other is the audience, who stealthily watch the women antics, which outside the cinema hall go unheeded and unquestioned.

In her contemporary era, Marilyn Monroe was hailed the hallmark symbol of beauty, eroticism and sexuality. She was renowned internationally as a "sex symbol" and "show girl", where the actors and spectators satiate their desire for sexual gratification through "visual pleasure" under the compulsive influence of "narrative cinema". The sole task of the women characters in classic mainstream Hollywood films is to spur the movement of action of men and then they submerged into the thin horizon of recognition and facelessness.

In order to highlight the misrepresentation of female characters and their unalloyed body, Mulvey used exorbitantly decorative language to symbolically describe

the plight of a castrated woman, who is lurched in dark oblivion of her inevitable predicament of, “isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized”. She mentioned few leading starlets, whose body have ben sexualized, fetishized and objectified on screen – Marlene Dietrich’s legs, Greta Garbo’s face, Marilyn Monroe’s Breast and Grace Kelly’s buttocks.

In the movie, *Kill Bill* by Quentin Tarantino, the female protagonist Uma Thurman, decked up with least makeup and deliberately had unkempt hair to draw the male attention and to arouse them physically. Mulvey draws a sharp distinction between *Kill Bill* and other classic Hollywood films, where the role of women have not change much significantly, though she had a crucial role to play in the movie, yet the camera focused more on her feminine beauty and capacity to stimulate men.

The ‘camera’ in film production is the “human eye” or the “vision”. It acts as a thin line between the two worlds of ‘phantasy’ and ‘reality’, the camera is the ultimate medium through which the viewers gain experience of the covered desires and fantasies, which only came to the fore in the dark rooms of the hall. Camera’s close-up focuses on women’s bodies narrate the melancholic tale of sad reality and how the world of Hollywood view women as their “sex object”, who are used to grab the attention of the audience which in turn would jolt them from their stillness and engage them in the process of pleasure.

As per Mulvey’s opinion, ‘cinema’ has both a ‘dynamic’ and ‘symbolic’ role to play. It has multifarious purpose to perform, which is mostly used against women bodies in order to gratify the male ego. It is both a domestic and political space, where “gender imbalance” and “sexual discrimination” should be abated. Mulvey advocates for cinema to be treated as a free space, where the status quo of women should be maintained unarguably and enshrined as institution of reverence. Cinema should be only about beauty and sexuality, but rather about human potentiality to portray the reality as uniquely and uniformly as possible.

In the 1939 movie, Fleming’s *Gone With the Girl*, the female lead, Scarlet was shown as an object of desire by the other males in the film, which was impressively exhibited by her three marriages. In the beginning of the film, Rhett overhears a scandalous conversation behind the sofa, between Scarlet and Ashley and she ruthlessly mocked for her beauty and anger. *Gone With The Wind* is an iconic film during the Reconstruction age, which mercilessly depicted her turbulent and passionate dalliance with multiple men and how she sits at the apex of attention and affection. Her character trait was in quite similarity with the pandemonium of the age. The movie emphasized more on the sexual activities of Scarlett then highlighting the catastrophe caused in that age. The filmmaker compensated the audiences with sexual gratifying moments for the brutal aggression shown on screen.

The “male gaze” is abundantly witnessed in Marilyn Monroe’s 1954 film, *The River Of No Return*. The voyeuristic gaze on her sexualised outfit and her enticing lounging position, made room for sadistic pleasure in cinema. *Film 4* called the movie a “patchy drama which owes more to its gorgeous heroine and musical numbers than it does to anyone else...the plot doesn’t convince, but Monroe, at the peak of her career, is more than easy on the eye..”. coupled with Robert Mitchum, an ideal reincarnation of flawless perfection, had further side-lined the story to the periphery.

An iconoclastic and revolutionary feminist filmmaker Nina Menkes, published an article, *Sex and Power : the Visual Language Of Oppression*, articulated her voice against the deep-rooted culture of misogyny running rampant in Hollywood cinema over the ages. The Wenner Center further elucidated the disapproval of Menkes as, “Using film clips from the golden age of Hollywood to the present, she shows how ideas about women have become unconsciously embedded in our heads by the visual language of cinema – through lighting, framing, camera angles and movement – and these contribute to sexual intimidation and discrimination”.

Even after fifty years of publication of Mulvey’s seminal work, the objectification of women and sexual imbalance are permeated in unbridled fashion and are on rise like never before. In *Star Trek Into Darkness*, Alice Eve was made to wear underwear and was purposefully kept underdressed, which simply had no connection with the main plot of the film. After receiving adequate backlash and condemnation from the general public and from critics as well, the co-writer of the script apologised saying, “I copped to the fact that we should have done a better job of not being gratuitous in our representation of a barely clothed actress”.

Mulvey said that men are considered the “active” doers, where as women are expected to occupy a more “passive”, “docile” and “submissive” role. She quoted the famous Hollywood director, Budd Boetticher; “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”.

Even in women-centric or “gynocentric” movies like *Wonder Woman*, played by the Israeli actress Gal Gadot, in the movie, she had to wear revealing clothes, which was completely redundant according to the necessity of the plot. Her ultra-mini skirt and bust blouse were profoundly superfluous considering the demand of the structure. While talking on *Jimmy Kimmel Live Show*, Gadot confessed; “And I was so happy and so grateful for being there and doing this role that I didn’t say anything about the fact it was so tight, I literally couldn’t breathe”.

During a census in 2013, it was discovered that only three percent women characters had speaking part in films, which increased to fifteen percent in 2015. But

“there is a growing disconnect...between what we might perceive as being the current status of women in film and their actual status”, said Dr. Martha Lauzen, the Executive Director of the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. In most films, women’s status is relatively behind their male counterparts, but in the films like the *Hunger Games* and in the *Divergent*, where the characters like Katniss Everdeen and Tris, respectively, are treated equally like their compatriots.

According to Jacques Derrida’s ground breaking theory, *Deconstruction*, he has elaborately elucidated, the western world’s desire to have a ‘center’, as ‘presence’ or ‘being’ or ‘conscious’. If this center is ‘de-centered’ or shifted, the whole intellectual philosophy of the west would crumble down. Hence, they prefer a constant center that would dominate the world, which would conveniently deprive the presence of ‘void’ or ‘vacuum’. These centers are structured ideas formed or shaped by humans, like ‘God’, ‘human’, ‘self’, ‘being’, ‘conscious’, ‘religion’ etc., and de-centering of these would create an upsurge of new innovative ideas, which would obviously create much chaos and tension among humans.

Following the similar strain of thought, Mulvey expounds that in films, there is a need for an epistemological shift, where the limelight should be relocated and the women-centric issues and characters must come in the hindsight. Mulvey voiced for a revamp in cinematic pleasure, where women should have all the privilege that men receive, she talked about de-centering the concept and its offshoots of “masculinity” from its epicentre and replace it with “femininity” as a pivotal role. Mulvey’s admonition had created an uproar in the silver screen, which was only completely dominated by bigoted narcissistic men rather than realist of cinema.

The bigger screen has flared the already ignited flame of gender imbalance, under-representation of women and harmful stereotypes that have dominated and dictated films since ages. Female leaders are four times more likely to be shown naked or partially naked than male leads, after studying 56 top grossing films of 2018 in 20 countries, which included the progressive and advanced countries like United States, India, Sweden, Italy, France, Spain and so on.

Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, Chief Executive of Plan International said, “We need to stop the sexualisation and the objectification of women and girls on screen and everywhere else”. The Oscar-winning star of *Thelma and Louise*, Greena Davis said, "Girls need to see themselves reflected on screen and to see positive and authentic characters that can inspire generations to come.”

Conclusion

Mulvey’s essay has paved the way for more egalitarian theories , which would demystify and deconstruct the traditional thinking structure and will consequently lead

to greater iconoclastic perspectives and dimension. Women position has not deterred much, but her views have definitely shakened the already embedded sediments of conventional notions. She has successfully created a window which would allow to enter new rays of hope to dawn and replenish narrative cinema, which has gradually started to mould itself in a much more progressive manner.

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