Laura Mulvey’s Male Gaze Theory

Frequently quoted but often misunderstood, the work of Laura Mulvey on ‘the Gaze’ is at the heart of feminist film theory, and has been hugely influential since the mid-1970s.

Essentials

• Laura Mulvey is a Professor of Media and Film at Birkbeck, University of London. She is also a successful screenwriter, producer and director, and has written and edited many books and articles on the subject of contemporary film and feminist theory and practice.

• Her most famous work to date is her seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, written in 1973 and first published in 1975 in the British film theory journal Screen.

• At a simple level, this work, based on her own conceptual analysis of classical Hollywood film texts, rather than empirical audience research, argued the feminist position that the typical audience member is assumed to be male.

• Furthermore, the typical audience member becomes aligned with the film’s male protagonist, by identification, admiration or aspiration.

• According to the theory, which really assesses the representation of gender and the relationship between the text and the audience from a solely feminist perspective, women in film are simply objects for ‘the gaze’ of the protagonist/male audience.

Influences

Mulvey’s essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ borrowed from popular psychoanalytical frameworks of the time, specifically Sigmund Freud’s concept of scopophilia during child development, and Jaques Lacan’s reinterpretation of this by his explanation of the child’s ‘mirror stage’. (See glossary on page 67)

What is ‘feminist film theory’?

Feminist film theory studies the way films make meaning for their audiences from the perspective of feminist politics.

Studies may include, for example, the roles and functions of female characters in the context of narratives and genres, exploring how far representations reinforce dominant patriarchal ideology.
The theory:

FREUD AND SCOPOPHILIA

Put simply, scopophilia is the pleasure of watching. The concept as it is used by Mulvey is borrowed from the ‘anal stage’ of child development as suggested by Freud. Freud argued that an individual moves through the stages of oral and anal fixation before reaching the genital stage in adult maturity.

Whilst in the ‘oral stage’ the child is fixated on activities to do with the mouth: biting, sucking, feeding etc.; in the anal stage the child is toilet training, and learns how to keep itself clean, and that certain bodily functions should be kept private. Theoretically, these childhood obsessions can pass into adulthood to cause personality complexes.

Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960) has been widely associated with Freud’s theories. With respect to oral and anal fixation, it is often suggested that Norman Bates’ constant sucking on sweets is illustrative of his oral fixation, and Hitchcock’s decision to include a shot of a toilet bowl for the first time in fifty years in mainstream American films challenged the culture’s collective anal fixation.

Scopophilia then, refers to the mature adult’s desire to see things that are culturally forbidden or taboo.

JAQUES LACAN AND THE MIRROR STAGE

In essence, the Mirror Stage, according to Lacan, refers to the moment in early childhood when the child perceives itself as an independent being.

In early infancy, the child has an imaginary identity with the mother, and forms their only sense of self as part of her. At some stage, generally between six and eighteen months, the child looks in the mirror and recognises itself. It feels a sense of jubilation at its own independent existence, and this feeds into its ego and a sense of narcissistic pleasure.

When children first perceive themselves as independent of their mother by way of their mirror reflection, it is at a stage of frustration in their personal development; as their physical desires are greater than their physiological ability. They then consider their mirror reflection to be more able, more perfect, and more complete than they currently feel.

Mulvey believes that this stage leads into the process of film viewing in adulthood, as the mirror is replaced by the screen. The typical audience member gains a sense of narcissistic pleasure from identifying with the film’s protagonist, and following fascination with their filmic counterpart.
LAURA MULVEY AND THE GAZE

Applying these ideas to Hollywood film viewing, Mulvey suggested that women in film are represented as ‘objects’, images with visual and erotic impact, which she termed their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. Classical Hollywood films positioned the audience as male, and through identification with the male protagonist (Lacan) gave him an active role in viewing the female subject and gaining pleasure from doing so (Freud). This look, from audience to actress, is termed ‘the look’ or ‘the gaze’. According to Mulvey the look could be ‘voyeuristic’ (women are viewed as virtuous and beautiful) or ‘fetishistic’ (women are viewed as excessively sexual beings).

DEVELOPMENTS OF THE GAZE

Throughout the decades following Mulvey’s essay, the concept of the gaze was developed to incorporate a number of different viewer-positions. For example:

• The spectator’s gaze: the audience looking at the subject on the screen.
• The male gaze: in keeping with Mulvey’s theory describes the male viewing the female, either voyeuristically or fetishistically.
• The female gaze: accepts that women can also gain voyeuristic pleasure from looking at a subject, and that film techniques can sometimes be used to position the female audience to do so.
• The intra-diegetic gaze: when one character in the text looks/gazes at another character in the text. Through the process of identification, this may lead to the spectator’s gaze also.
• The extra-diegetic gaze: when a character in the text looks out of the text at the audience, breaking the imaginary ‘fourth wall’.

The gaze is inextricably linked to power relationships – the bearer of the gaze has the power. In most cases, the subject of the gaze doesn’t even know they are being looked at (we assume); thus the bearer of the gaze has more knowledge than the subject, and therefore, more power. In Mulvey’s original essay, it is the male who holds this power, and the male film-maker who gives it to him. In developments of the theory, the bearer of the gaze may be female, and the subject may challenge the bearer’s power by gazing right back.

UPDATING THE GAZE

Mulvey’s essay was much discussed in the decades following its publication; she herself re-assessed it in 1981, when she pointed out that she had written the original essay as a starting point for further study and debate, rather than a reasoned academic study.

• The original essay assumes that the film audience is a heterosexual male. This denies the possibility that women can enjoy films as much as men and considerably dates her argument. We now consider that an individual makes their reading from a
highly subjective personal standpoint: male, female or transgender, straight, gay or bisexual, as well as influences from class and age and region.

- It also assumes the protagonist is male, which may be the case for much of the classical Hollywood output (1910s-1960s, approx.), but is no longer always the case.

- It is also generally accepted now that the male audience can enjoy, or even identify, with a female character’s point of view, and vice versa. Richard Dyer, for example, has written about the complex relationship created by many gay males with female stars.

**How it works – Y Tu Mamá También**

In practice, Mulvey’s work is often misunderstood or at least grossly over-simplified. Vaguely referring to ‘the gaze’ as the way every male audience member objectifies every female character into a sexual entity fails fully to explain how this process takes place, and ignores the all-important issue of identification with the protagonist.

Mulvey originally used texts from around the 30s to the 60s to illustrate her argument. But since her theories have been updated by various theorists to include different types of gaze and different gendered audience readings, it is interesting to apply the principles to a film outside her field of investigation.

*Y Tu Mamá También* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) is a Mexican film with Spanish dialogue. Translating into English as ‘And Your Mother Too’, the title refers to the point in the comedy/coming-of-age film when a teenage boy tells his friend he has had sex with his friend’s mother. This is typical for the themes of the film, which represent the interests of teenage boys as sex, drugs, alcohol and friendships.

The plot is simple and has been likened to other well-known examples of national cinema; Godard’s *Bande À Part* (1964) and Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962). Despite being a product of Mexico whilst the Godard and Truffaut’s productions were French, *Y Tu Mamá También* appears to be informed by the Nouvelle Vague (French New Wave) politics of the former films. Rejecting established conventions such as classical narrative in favour of experimental camera technique, editing and storytelling, *Y Tu Mamá También* features a constantly fluid and shaky camera, long takes with no edits and narrative asides and digressions provided by a narrator. However, in its use of the gaze, the film remains very conventional.

**THE NARRATIVE**

In *Y Tu Mamá También*, two teenage boys, Tenoch and Julio, go on a road trip taking along an older woman, Luisa, for the ride. Both are attracted to her, and rivalry arises between the boys not only in relation to Luisa, but also incorporating most other aspects of their lives.
THE OPENING

The film is sexually explicit, and opens with a sex scene involving full nudity of both the characters, Tenoch and his girlfriend Ana. The camera work positions the audience as a voyeur, almost in a point-of-view shot, beginning with half the frame hidden by a door, and then moving fluidly with a hand-held shake onto the bed with the characters, and then moving back out again. This scene is juxtaposed with shots of Julio and his girlfriend, Cecilia, having sex, the first of a number of juxtapositions that represent the boys’ rivalry. It is an unusual opening for a film as it is particularly graphic, and the audience may receive scopophilic pleasure from viewing such a private and intimate act. The film emphasises the process of looking throughout: the audience looking at the characters, characters looking at each other, characters looking at passing scenery of Mexico in long takes of the characters’ POV from the car. The constantly fluid and hand-held camera positions the audience as voyeur. The spectator’s gaze puts the audience in a position of power; we are watching the scenes unfold by seeing but not being seen.

Whilst the film doesn’t assume that the audience is male, the opening of the film is constructed to encourage identification with one of the male protagonists. The audience may employ the male gaze or the female gaze in their reading of the scene; both characters are represented as sexual objects, both have similar amounts of nudity. However, the male voiceover is all-knowing, and makes references to what has happened in the past to these characters, and what will happen in the future. In his telling of the story, he anchors meaning that sex is the male, rather than the female, endeavour, although the female characters are sexually proactive. He refers to what the male characters ‘do to’ their girlfriends, and how the girls’ parents feel about it. Having served their narrative purpose, the girls are flown off abroad as part of the narrative.

THE POWER OF THE GAZE

The boys lack power in their lives, as most teenagers do, and this may help us identify with the male protagonists. Both have to follow instructions from their parents, live by their parents rules, and are put down by a successful relative. What the boys do have is their sexuality, and this is signified in the film by their use of the intra-diegetic gaze. Their ability, and ‘right’, to look is their power. The first time we see Luisa, the boys are at a family wedding. Whilst the audience are focused on a figure in an extra long deep focus shot, Luisa ambushes the audience’s gaze by walking through the foreground of the shot in shallow focus. She is then a recognisable visual sign when Julio first sees her. He stares at her for a full five seconds, and the camera, still fluid, moves closer to his face to emphasise his gaze, suggesting his objectification of her. As much of the story has been told from the male protagonist’s point of view, the audience then objectifies Luisa similarly. But this process is not necessarily solely male; the female audience is literate enough to be able to occupy the position of a male character. The voiceover reinforces this objectification, encouraging initially a voyeuristic gaze, rather than fetishistic, by representing her in relation to her domestic role, a wife. Her dialogue supports this, as she suggests that salt will take a stain out of her husband’s shirt.
When Tenoch approaches Luisa and makes conversation, he offers her a cigarette, which she accepts. A psychoanalytic interpretation would see this as a phallic symbol of masculinity, and her acceptance of the cigarette is Tenoch’s first penetration of Luisa’s life, if not her body. The ensuing conversation takes place in a medium long 3-shot, of Tenoch and Julio closing Luisa in to the far left of the frame.

The boys’ fetishistic attraction to Luisa is however confirmed by a following scene, in which the two boys masturbate and both ejaculate at the mention of Luisa’s name. However, their attraction to Luisa gives her no real power over the boys; her role remains functional to their story. The transience of their affections is illustrated by the dialogue when Tenoch tells Julio Luisa wants to come on the trip, and Julio asks, ‘Luisa who?’ Shots of the boys from different forms of gaze are usually set up in terms of their rivalry, either by juxtaposing their sex lives, by their teasing assessments of each others’ bodies, or when they competitively swim naked. The masturbation scene is immediately followed by a shot of Luisa; her bare legs occupying at least three quarters of the frame, and thus inviting a fetishistic gaze. She discovers her husband is cheating; with her sobs, her body rises and falls slightly, in a classic sexual pose. Until now she has lacked any overt sexuality. But her husband’s infidelity serves to ‘allow’ her to express sexuality in terms of the film’s moral code, and following scenes represent Luisa as bearer of the intra-diegetic gaze, and sometimes, a willing receiver.

At a hotel on the trip, Luisa bears the intra-diegetic female gaze, as she asks Tenoch to take off his towel and he complies. Tenoch has his back to the camera and deep in the frame, Luisa moves around so that she can get a better look. The audience see her seeing, rather than seeing what she sees. But, when the boys look, the audience tend to see what they see, such as when they spy on Luisa crying in her room, encouraging the audience to identify with the male protagonists. Mulvey may argue that this assumes that the audience is male, especially as the ensuing scene of them having sex plays on the typical male fantasy of having sex with an older, experienced woman. However, the scene is about much more than sex, and when the audience sees Julio watching Tenoch and Luisa having sex, they may identify with Julia’s feelings about his friendship with Tenoch. He feels betrayed by Tenoch, rather than Luisa; these are feelings that a female audience can relate to as well as a male. Equally when Luisa tries to restore the balance between the boys by having sex with Julio, Tenoch tries to climb a tree to watch, but fails. Both boys experience the feeling of wanting to see what is culturally taboo, but then wishing they hadn’t.

Towards the end of the film, the three get drunk together, tell each other secrets, and eventually dance. The scene is shot in an extra-long take with very little technical direction. Luisa looks into the camera as she dances, almost ‘seeing’ the audience with an extra-diegetic gaze. Breaking the convention of the ‘fourth wall’, it is as if she knows she is being watched, and she regains a certain amount of power. Following this scene, she chooses to stay at the beach and not return with the boys, and the audience never see her cry again but only hear about her strengths.

Different audiences may make different readings of these scenes, based on their own gender, sexuality and experience. I don’t think the film assumes the audience is male, or even heterosexual, and a great number of readings of the film question the boys’, especially Julio’s heterosexuality, basing their arguments on Julio’s intra-diegetic
gaze of Tenoch in the closing shots of the film. However, the film does make use of
the gaze to make meaning throughout. The final scenes of the film include an extra
long take of Luisa’s point of view, as she watches the boys clear up the beach. It
becomes clear at this point that the film is not about sex, or nudity, or male
objectification of women, but about friendship, and coming-of-age. Luisa’s intra-
diegetic gaze, for me, anchors the meaning of the film.

**Glossary of Terms**

**Mirror Stage**: Lacan’s term used to describe the stage at which a child realises they
are a person independent of their mother.

**Narcissism**: excessive or erotic interest in the self.

**Scopophilia**: the pleasure of watching what shouldn’t be seen.

Voyeuristic gaze: a gaze which objectifies the recipient of the gaze in a non-sexual
manner, rather through admiration.

**Fetishistic gaze**: a gaze which objectifies the recipient of the gaze in a sexual manner.

**To-be-looked-at-ness**: the way in which a character is constructed, using media
language (through the framing of shots and position of the camera) to be objectified
by another character or the audience’s gaze.

**Intra-diegetic gaze**: the gaze of one character of another within the narrative world of
the film.

**Extra-diegetic gaze**: the gaze of a character out of the narrative to the audience,
generally making eye contact and connoting their awareness of being watched.

**Nouvelle Vague**: French New Wave. A movement in French national cinema which
rejected the established way of doing things by employing experimental film making
techniques.

**Quotable Quote!**

‘The paradox of phallocentrism in all of its manifestations is that it depends on the
image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world.’

Simplified: ‘Isn’t it funny that a culture obsessed with masculinity needs images of
women, and their absence of masculine characteristics, to give it meaning?’

**Worth a visit to the library...**
• Laura Mulvey, 1989: Visual and Other Pleasures: Collected Writings
  A collection of essays collated over a period of time, exploring film from a
  feminist perspective.
• Laura Mulvey, 1996: Fetishism and Curiosity
  Investigations into Hollywood cinema of the studio system, in the contexts of
  work by Marx and Freud.
• Lucy Scott-Galloway teaches Media Studies at Newham Sixth Form Centre.
• from MediaMagazine 21, September 2008.