

OXFORD READINGS



IN FEMINISM

FEMINISM & FILM

E. ANN KAPLAN

OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

Feminism and Film

Edited by

E. Ann Kaplan

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FEMINISM AND FILM

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Preface

It was an all but impossible task to select which of the abundant excellent essays written on feminism and film since 1970 to put in this volume. Originally, I had chosen twice as many as appear here, only to be forced to cut drastically. Faced with that prospect, I decided to focus on one major strand of thought in the field produced by Laura Mulvey's polemical and influential 1975 essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Mulvey's work struck a cord so pertinent and provocative that it has remained to this day a site of both appreciation for the insights and contestation and debate about their validity or utility. Many of the major essays in the field responded in one way or another—including outright rejection—to Mulvey's theoretical positions, so I could produce a book of coherent essays by printing work that debated, argued against, or built out from 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'

But re-reading the entire book as I proofed it, I realized something else. A central set of concepts worked and reworked by scholars is that of *difference*: in the early days, it is male/female sexual difference; later on gay/straight difference—that is, the differences *within* female sexuality; still later the difference of *gender* (as distinct from 'sexuality'); and finally, differences between women produced by race and ethnicity. In reading our varying and complex theorizing about all these differences, I realized how feminist film research was very much at the forefront of questioning and analyzing differences across all these territories, across all these borders. On *gender*, I cannot think of any discipline that focussed so closely on difference. Anthropology, on which feminist film theory drew, is perhaps the exception, but in using psychoanalysis, feminist research went in other directions than did most Anthropology.

The question of difference is an important point as we think about the future. I would argue that the tools feminist film theorists have produced will prove extremely important as we move into the 21st century—perhaps the first truly global one because of digital communications technologies. Sexual and ethnic differences in many parts of the world remain entrenched—often in ways with long traditions and histories. It will be interesting to see how and if the tools for

analyzing difference that feminist film theorists developed may be useful elsewhere than in the west.

It seems to me that humans' incredibly sophisticated digital and other technologies throw into relief the limitations of human nature. Differences of all kinds remain a key stumbling block to humans' ability to bring about justice, equality, equal distribution of wealth, food, and consumer items. I hope that this volume will be viewed as providing essential background knowledge for understanding current debates, and also for moving feminist film studies forward into new terrain, such as joining hands with Queer Studies. Some premises of Queer Studies challenge positions—even those taken by lesbian film scholars included here—in feminist film theory. It is exciting to think of a companion volume to this one where we could bring together feminist film theorists' discussions of difference with Queer Studies' interest in questions of sexual indeterminacy, transvestism, and transsexuality. But above all, I hope this volume will be useful for thinking of how to move beyond difference to imagine new modes of being.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Teresa Brennan for her support and advice in the process of selecting essays for the volume. I would also like to thank the Humanities Institute staff assistants, Chris Nagle and Theo Cateforis, for their research help. Finally, thanks to the OUP staff, especially Lesley Wilson, for their patience with a taxing text.

E. Ann Kaplan

March 2000

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Contents

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
------------------------------	----

Introduction	1
E. ANN KAPLAN	

Phase I. Pioneers and Classics: The Modernist Mode

Introductory Notes	19
--------------------	----

1. Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema	22
CLAIRE JOHNSTON	

2. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema	34
LAURA MULVEY	

3. 'Woman as Sign'	48
ELIZABETH COWIE	

4. <i>Klute</i> 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism	66
CHRISTINE GLEDHILL	

5. Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body	86
MARY ANN DOANE	

6. Male Subjectivity and the Celestial Suture: <i>It's a Wonderful Life</i>	100
KAJA SILVERMAN	

7. Is the Gaze Male?	119
E. ANN KAPLAN	

8. Dorothy Arzner: Critical Strategies	139
CLAIRE JOHNSTON	

Phase II. Critiques of Phase I Theories: New Methods

Introductory Notes	151
--------------------	-----

9. Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship	159
JUDITH MAYNE	

10. The Difficulty of Difference	181
DAVID N. RODOWICK	

CONTENTS

11. Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema GAYLYN STUDLAR	203
12. Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship MIRIAM HANSEN	226
13. Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema STEVE NEALE	253
14. Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer TERESA DE LAURETIS	265
15. The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan JOAN COPJEC	287

Phase III. Race, Sexuality, and Postmodernism in Feminist Film Theory

Introductory Notes	309
16. Speaking Nearby TRINH T. MINH-HA AND NANCY N. CHEN	317
17. White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory JANE GAINES	336
18. Racism, Representation, Psychoanalysis CLAIRE PAJACZKOWSKA AND LOLA YOUNG	356
19. That Moment of Emergence PRATIBHA PARMAR	375
20. Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation TERESA DE LAURETIS	384

Phase IV. Spectatorship, Ethnicity, and Melodrama

Introductory Notes	409
21. Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator MARY ANN DOANE	418
22. Women's Genres ANNETTE KUHN	437

23. Desperately Seeking Difference JACKIE STACEY	450
24. The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's <i>Stella Dallas</i> E. ANN KAPLAN	466
25. 'Something Else Besides a Mother': <i>Stella Dallas</i> and the Maternal Melodrama LINDA WILLIAMS	479
26. Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema ANA M. LÓPEZ	505
27. Three Men and Baby M TANIA MODLESKI	521
28. The Carapace that Failed: Ousmane Sembene's <i>Xala</i> LAURA MULVEY	535
<i>Further Reading</i>	554
<i>Index</i>	561

Introduction

E. Ann Kaplan

Feminist perspectives on film developed in the context of the various womens' liberation movements that emerged in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As many historians have shown, women in different nations have periodically over the centuries resisted their social, political, and intellectual marginalizing, their silencing in patriarchal cultures,¹ and set about producing new knowledge. What differing kinds of knowledge about women's film study can offer is partly answered in the rest of this introduction, for the knowledge produced in feminist film study has varied with the goals, methods, and interests of different feminist film scholars. Knowledge produced varied also with the disciplinary basis of scholars taking up feminist film research. But studying images of women, from whatever perspective or within whatever research method, problematizes and raises questions about the relationship of aesthetics to politics and to cultures.

Film study is enhanced by feminist perspectives because the word 'feminist' implies a particular stance vis-à-vis women: it implies a concern with gender difference in general, but taking up the perspective of women specifically. It implies identification with women's concerns, even if, logically, such concerns cannot be dealt with without also considering men. Indeed, as reflected in selections in the volume, feminist film theory includes study of masculinity in cinema—an area first begun in the early 1980s in Britain and being pursued actively in America today.

A feminist perspective should not be confused with the literal gender of the scholar: males can write feminist criticism, and women can write criticism that is not feminist.² Looking at women in film pushes feminist theory to a different set of issues than those aspects of films that male scholars traditionally study. The feminist film theorist—whether implicitly or explicitly—asks: what is the relationship between images on film and the context for their production?

S/he may do this through asking: What is the relationship between images of women on film (their social and sexual roles) and what scholars can discover about women's lives in any particular context within which a film is produced? Included here may be questions such as: why are some groups (e.g. white women) featured more frequently than other groups in Hollywood film? Is the same predominance of white women found in other national cinemas? Why? Study of the material conditions for a film's production may serve to answer questions involving gender and race.

Or the scholar may ask how meanings about women are produced on film as these relate to meanings about women produced elsewhere, i.e. socially, politically, and culturally, in different national contexts. Humanities disciplines have traditionally focused on questions of how 'signs' (the materials and symbols used to make any art form) 'signify' (convey meanings). Since art is a deliberate construction by someone (or some groups of people) making art or entertainment for an imagined audience or receiver, what signs have been used to produce meanings about women? Why these signs rather than others? How have signifiers in relation to women changed over time? How do they differ from one Hollywood genre to another, or one kind of film to another?

A third question some feminist theorists ask is: what are the relationships between images of women on film and the level of fantasy, desire, unconscious wishes and fears that has both individual and social/historical formation? Whose desire is at work in a particular film? Whose unconscious is being addressed? How and why? *Film offers a meta-terrain where questions about women, the unconscious, the social imaginary and women's discursive construction can take on different valences than they may take in either the social or natural sciences, or in medicine.* In this way, film pushes feminist studies to develop new theories, or to challenge accepted male theories of aesthetics and entertainment. Film is an important object for feminist practice, since creating art or entertainment with feminist perspectives may help to change entrenched male stances towards women that can be found in commercial or avant-garde entertainment and art. *In so doing, feminist film study may change cultural attitudes towards women, and may deepen our understanding of meanings women have traditionally born in patriarchal cultures.*

Some of the earliest feminist academic work was done by women in history and literary studies: scholars began to investigate women's neglected roles in, and contributions to, various cultures and, in

literary studies, to explore neglected women writers and feminist themes in fiction and drama.³ They also studied how women have been represented in literature across the centuries. Pioneering research in literature was done in the 1970s by Kate Millett, Mary Ferguson, and Susan Koppelman-Cornillon in America; and by Germaine Greer in Britain. In literary studies, early feminist work basically followed New Critical research methods—that is, scholars studied formal aspects of texts, such as motifs, symbols, characters, narrative style, language. But feminists diverged in focusing specifically on images of female characters in fiction. Typically, scholars created categories of female social roles that they found in Western literature, and discussed their limiting of women to the conventional domestic sphere, or, in some cases, analysed the resistances of certain characters to social female constraints.⁴

In contrast to feminist literary perspectives—which emerged at the tail end of decades of academic literary studies—feminist approaches to film came about as Cinema Studies, as a disciplinary area, was in its foundational stage. In this way, feminist approaches gained a place in Cinema Studies more readily and earlier than in other fields. Since feminist perspectives on film developed in several places in the late 1960s and early 1970s, let me name the following founding texts as examples, without claiming to be exhaustive.⁵

- In the USA, the journal originally called *Women and Film* (later to become *Camera Obscura*) started in 1970 by a feminist collective on the West coast; Molly Haskell's 1973 *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*; another book, *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary in 1977; and the journal *Jump Cut*, started in the early 1970s and edited by Julia LeSage, Chuck Kleinhans, and John Hess.
- In Britain, the journals *Screen* (where Laura Mulvey's influential 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' was first printed) and *Screen Education*, together with *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (published by the Centre for Cultural Studies, Birmingham); Claire Johnston's 1973 edited *Notes on Women's Cinema*, together with her booklet on Dorothy Arzner edited with Pam Cook in 1974; Richard Dyer's 1977 edited volume on *Gays and Film*; and E. Ann Kaplan's 1978 edited volume, *Women in Film Noir*.
- In Germany, the periodical *Frauen und Film*, which started in 1974.