

Feminist Film Theory

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Feminist film theory came into being in the early 1970s with the aim of understanding cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity. Theoretical approaches were developed to critically discuss the sign and image of woman in film as well as open up issues of female spectatorship. Feminist film theory criticized on the one hand classical cinema for its stereotyped representation of women, and discussed on the other hand possibilities for a women's cinema that allowed for representations of female subjectivity and female desire. The feminist wave in film studies was prompted by the emergence of women's film festivals. Feminist film studies in general had a wider, often more sociological approach in studying female audiences and the position of women in the film industry, ranging from actresses, producers, and technicians to directors.

Informed by a (post)structuralist perspective, feminist film theory moved beyond reading the meaning of a film to analyzing the deep structures of how meaning is constructed. The main argument is that sexual difference – or gender – is paramount to creating meaning in film. Using insights from a Marxist critique of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, feminist film theory claims that cinema is more than just a reflection of social relations: film actively constructs meanings of sexual difference and sexuality. Into the late 1980s psychoanalysis was to be the dominant

paradigm in feminist film theory, producing pertinent readings of many Hollywood genres like melodrama, film noir, horror, science fiction, and the action movie. In the 1990s feminist film theory moved away from a binary understanding of sexual difference to multiple perspectives, hybrid identities, and possible spectatorships. This resulted in an increasing concern with questions of ethnicity, masculinity, and queer sexualities. In the first decade of 2000 feminist film theory made room for new theoretical approaches, ranging from performance studies and phenomenology to Deleuzian studies. Feminist film theory was highly influential in the 1970s and 1980s, making a lasting impact on the wider fields of visual culture and cultural studies, especially with the study of woman-as-image and the male gaze.

Early feminist criticism in the 1960s was directed at sexist images of women in classical Hollywood films. Women were portrayed as passive sex objects or fixed in stereotypes oscillating between the mother (“Maria”) and the whore (“Eve”). Such endlessly repeated images of women were considered to be objectionable distortions of reality, which would have a negative impact on the female spectator. Feminists called for positive images of women in cinema and a reversal of sexist schemes. With the advent of (post)structuralism, the insight dawned that positive images of women were not enough to change underlying structures in cinema. Hollywood cinema with its history of sexualized stereotypes of women and violence against women demanded a deeper understanding of its pernicious structures. Theoretical frameworks drawing on critiques of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction proved more productive in

analyzing the ways in which sexual difference is encoded in the visual and narrative structure of the film.

From semiotics, feminist film theory drew the insight that Hollywood cinema veils its ideological construction by hiding its means of production. Cinema film passes off the sign “woman” as natural or realistic, while it is in fact a structure, code, or convention carrying an ideological meaning. In patriarchal ideology the image of woman can only signify anything in relation to men. The sign “woman” is thus negatively represented as “not-man,” which means that the “woman-as-woman” is absent from the film.

While semiotics moved feminist film theory away from a naïve understanding of stereotypes of women to the structures of gendered representation in visual culture, it was psychoanalysis that introduced the famous notion of the male gaze. In her groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975/1989), Laura Mulvey takes from Freud the notion of scopophilia, the pleasure of looking, to explain the fascination of Hollywood cinema. Films stimulate visual pleasure by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image. Voyeuristic visual pleasure is produced by looking at another, whereas narcissistic visual pleasure can be derived from self-identification with the figure in the image. Mulvey’s analysis shows how both voyeurism and narcissism are gendered. Within the narrative of classical film male characters direct their gaze toward female characters. The spectator in the theater is made to identify with the male look, because the camera films from the optical, as well as libidinal, point of view of the male character. There are thus three levels of the cinematic gaze – camera, character, and spectator – objectifying the female character and turning her into a spectacle. Narcissistic visual pleasure works through identification:

the spectator identifies with the perfected image of a human figure on the screen, usually the male hero. Both the voyeuristic gaze and narcissistic identification depend for their meaning upon the controlling power of the male character as well as on the objectified representation of the female character.

The account of “the male gaze” as a structuring logic in Western visual culture became controversial in the early 1980s, as it made no room for the female spectator or for a female gaze. Within the dichotomous categories of psychoanalytic theory it was virtually impossible to address female spectatorship; the female viewer could only identify with the male gaze. Hollywood’s women’s movies of the 1970s and 1980s allowed the female character to make the male character the object of her gaze, but her desire carried no power. Such films involved a mere reversal of roles in which the underlying structures of dominance and submission are still intact (Kaplan 1983). Some alternatives to identifying with a male gaze were theorized. The female spectator could adopt the masochism of overidentification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire. In this view, both the female character and the female spectator had to turn their active desire into a passive desire to be the desired object (Doane 1987).

The question of female spectatorship and the female look circles around the issue of subjectivity and desire. Subjectivity is understood as a constant process of self-production rather than as a fixed entity. Cinema, or visual culture at large, is considered an important means of constructing certain positions for female subjectivity by inscribing desire into the codes and conventions of the imagery and the narrative. In the 1980s feminist film theory considered the female subject in cinema an impossibility. In Hollywood movies “woman” functioned as a sign within an Oedipal narrative in which she could not

be the subject of desire; instead she could only be represented as representation (de Lauretis 1984). The female character and through identification the female spectator are “seduced” into femininity.

Feminist film theory in the 1980s is then built on the very paradox of the unrepresentability of woman as subject of desire. Several feminist film critics have tried to theorize possible paths to female desire, still within the psychoanalytic framework, by a bisexual identification with the mother as love object which would then function as a potential, yet masochistic, source of visual pleasure. The female spectator could enjoy identification with the image of female beauty on the screen, for example in the figure of the autonomous vamp or the powerful femme fatale. Kaja Silverman (1988) drew attention to the auditory register rather than the visual regime to make room for a cultural fantasy of maternal enclosure. The acoustic voice created an opening for female desire within discourse and the symbolic order.

From these accounts it becomes clear that feminist film theory was much dominated by the discourse of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Although feminists have not always agreed about the usefulness of psychoanalysis, there has been general agreement about the limitations of an exclusive focus on sexual difference. One such limitation is the reproduction of a dichotomy, male/female, that needs to be deconstructed. Another limitation is the failure to focus on other differences such as class, race, age, and sexual preference.

Lesbian feminists were among the first to raise objections to the heterosexual bias of psychoanalytic feminist film theory, which seemed initially unable to conceive of representation outside heterosexuality. The shift away from the restrictive binary oppositions of psychoanalytic feminist film theory resulted in a more historical and cultural

criticism of cinema by gay and lesbian critics. This involved re-readings of Hollywood cinema, for example of the implicit lesbianism of the female buddy film. The argument was advanced that the female spectator is quite likely to encompass erotic components in her desiring look, while at the same time identifying with the woman-as-spectacle. The homoerotic appeal of female Hollywood stars has been widely recognized.

Persistent critique of psychoanalytic film theory has also come from black feminism, which rebuked its exclusive focus on sexual difference and its failure to deal with racial difference. An inclusion of black feminist theory and of a historical approach into feminist film theory was necessary in order to understand how gender intersects with race and class in cinema (Gaines 1988; Young 1996). The influential feminist critic bell hooks (1992) argued that black viewers have always critically responded to Hollywood, allowing for an oppositional spectatorship for black women. Richard Dyer (1993) put forward that cinema constructs whiteness as the norm, by leaving it unmarked. The eerie property of whiteness to be nothing and everything at the same time is the source of its representational power.

In the 1990s masculinity studies addressed questions about the eroticization of the male body as erotic object. The image of the male body as the object of a – male or female – look is traditionally fraught with ambivalences, repressions, and denials. The notion of spectacle has such strong feminine connotations that for a male performer to be put on display threatens his very masculinity. In the last two decades other or new realms of visual culture, such as advertising and videoclips, have adopted objectification of the male body, which fed back into cinema. The eroticization of the male body is one of the profound changes in the visual culture of today.

Feminist film theory was not only concerned with a critique of Hollywood – or sometimes European – cinema, but was also interested in the question of a feminist cinema. In the wake of the revolutionary 1960s, feminists called initially for a counter-cinema that was rooted in avant-garde film practice. The idea was that only a deconstruction of classical visual and narrative codes and conventions could allow for an exploration of female subjectivity, gaze, and desire. Many films by women filmmakers were produced within an experimental mode, which received a lot of attention from feminist film theorists (Kuhn 1982). Gradually, women filmmakers started to develop women's films within the framework of popular cinema, trying to create new forms of visual and narrative pleasure (Smelik 1998).

The same development occurred for gay and lesbian cinema: from experimental films to more realist or romantic films for a more mainstream audience. Postmodernist cinema of the 1980s and 1990s brought campy strategies of gay subcultures into the mainstream. As of the 1990s, lesbians and gay men identify their oppositional reading strategies as “queer.” Away from the notions of oppression and liberation of earlier gay and lesbian criticism, queerness is associated with the playful self-definition of homosexuality in non-essentialist terms. Not unlike camp, but more self-assertive, queer readings are fully inflected with irony, transgressive gender parody, and deconstructed subjectivities.

Feminist film theory lived through its heyday in the 1980s, after which it became less of a coherent corpus of thought by opening up to adjacent fields such as television, new media, visual culture, performance studies, and fashion studies. While the semiotic and psychoanalytical frameworks have long inspired film studies, they no longer have the explanatory force of understanding

the complexity and paradoxes of contemporary visual culture, which has changed rapidly because of styles like postmodernism, developments in digital technology, and the advent of new media. New forms of cinematic aesthetics are breaking through the classic (“Oedipal”) structures of representation and narration. Changes in cinema and developments in cultural theory asked for a new focus on experience, body, and affect. Important new sources for revitalizing feminist film theory are performance studies, new media theory, phenomenology, and a Deleuzian body of thought. These are theoretical frameworks that move beyond the semiotic preoccupation with meaning, representation, and interpretation. The focus on the sensory and emotional experience of the audiovisual medium of cinema operates away from the purely visual that often exclusively determined the orientation of film theory (Marks 2000). A Deleuzian approach allows for a less negative outlook on desire, subjectivity, and identity, opening up readings of film as embodying many forms of desire and creating experiences of affirmation for the spectator (Lin Tay 2009). Deleuze and Guattari refer to this process as a radical “becoming.” In this way feminist film theory returns once again to the revolutionary attitude that started it all in the 1960s, creating space for the multiple becomings of the female character and the female spectator.

SEE ALSO: Camp; Feminism and Psychoanalysis; Gaze; Gender Stereotypes; Popular Culture and Gender; Visual Culture and Gender; Women as Producers of Culture

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