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## What meets the eye: feminist film studies

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## Introduction

*The Color Purple* is one of those films which never fails to carry me away: my handkerchief always gets wet while watching and the happy end is met by my sigh of relief. In spite of this Kleenex experience, I am also irritated by the way in which one of my favourite novels has been filmed. The film does away with many of the trenchant political questions of the novel and establishes prejudices about race and gender. This conflicting viewing experience indicates a tension which is characteristic for feminist film theory: the friction between pleasure and politics.

Two quotations from famous articles which heralded the beginning of feminist film criticism reproduce this contrast well. Laura Mulvey wants to break down the conventional pleasure of patriarchal cinema:

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. (Mulvey 1989/1975: 26)

In the same vein Claire Johnston writes that if a women's cinema is to emerge it should be 'paving the way for a radical break with conventions and forms' (1973: 4). Yet, such a revolutionary strategy can also embrace visual pleasure:

In order to counter our objectification in cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film. (Johnston 1973: 31)

The tension we see here between politics and pleasure has been particularly productive if we consider the stormy development of feminist film theory and film practice. This chapter aims at making the reader

familiar with the sometimes inaccessible labyrinth of feminist film theory; where possible I shall apply the theory to the film *The Color Purple*.

## Equality: images of women

Because of the feminist movement women started to look at films with different eyes. At women's film festivals women rediscovered forgotten women's films, women directors, women screenwriters and actresses. At the beginning of the 1970s this brought about a 're-vision' of film history (Haskell, 1973). This historical and sociological approach looked for equality and emancipation in cinema. The criticism of these first feminist film critics concerns classical or dominant cinema: the Hollywood dream factory. Hollywood movies do not show any 'real' women on the screen, but only a stereotyped image of women which gives the spectators no easy opportunity for identification. In this first phase one assumed an unmediated relationship between cinema and society, where film was understood to form a reflection of reality. This relationship between reality and film was also considered reversible: by showing reality in a film, society could be changed. Thus, the liberating purpose of a feminist film practice can be easily deduced: women directors only have to break through the enchantment of false images by showing 'real' lives of 'real' women on the silver screen. Against the glamour of the female star created by men, such as Marilyn Monroe, women film-makers should show the realistic lives of ordinary women with their everyday problems.

*The Color Purple* is a good example of this kind of movie which is filmed from the perspective of the ordinary woman. This is of great importance for a female audience, even though the film does not break with the tradition of racist stereotypes in the usually lily-white Hollywood movie – where black women are stereotyped in minor roles as female servant (the 'mammy', like Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*) or as sensual, exotic woman (often the Blues singer) (Alexander 1991). In *The Color Purple*, however, the main role is reserved for a black oppressed girl who, with the help of other black women, develops into an independent woman. This perhaps explains the contrast in its reception: the film has been received with much criticism in intellectual African-American circles (Wallace, 1990; hooks, 1990a), whereas non-professional black female spectators appear to experience *The Color Purple* rather positively and see Celie as a powerful heroine. As one black female spectator said of Celie, 'The lady was a strong lady, like I am. And she hung in there and she overcame' (Bobo, 1988: 102 and



93). In analogy to Culler, we can say that these spectators 'view-as-a-black-woman'.

### Difference

Until now the call for equality and recognition can still be heard, in the sense that the female spectator wants to be able to identify with lifelike film heroines without having to be annoyed by sexist clichés. At a theoretical level, however, the perspective of equality in feminist film criticism was soon replaced with the French (post)structuralist way of thinking as it was introduced in the second half of the 1970s. The emphasis then came to lie more on difference than on equality between the sexes. Because the idea of sexual difference has dominated feminist film theory for a long time, I will discuss several related aspects from the perspective of difference. I will first look at the gaze in cinema and then at the female spectator and visual pleasure.

### The gaze

Semiotics and psychoanalysis have provided a whole new impetus to a rapidly developing feminist film theory, which until well into the 1980s mainly restricted itself to the analysis of dominant Hollywood cinema. Marxist feminists shifted the attention to film production and to the importance of a film as a product which has to be sold ideologically and commercially. From a semiotic perspective, critics started to look at the crucial role of the film apparatus, such as camera work and editing. From a psychoanalytic perspective, film theorists started to introduce new concepts such as subjectivity, desire and visual pleasure. With these new theoretical approaches the project of feminist film theory changed fundamentally: the focus is no longer so much on the content of a film (what is the meaning of a film?), but on the process of signification (how does a film construct meanings?). In other words: a film is no longer seen as a reflection of a previously given meaning but as a construction of meaning.

Feminist film semioticians examine how sexual difference in a film produces meanings. Chapter 12, on semiotics, will deal more extensively with the impact of semiotics on women's studies; here I will discuss the semiotic analysis of Johnston (1973), which is concerned with the signification of 'woman' in classical cinema. She argues that the female character in cinema is a coded convention: a signifier. The signifier 'woman' only represents its ideological meaning for men. In cinema a woman signifies something in relation to men; in herself she signifies

nothing(ness). According to Johnston women are in fact negatively signified as non-men: 'woman as woman' is absent from the film text. This ideological representation of 'Woman' is concealed by the realistic conventions of classical cinema. The film presents the constructed images of femininity as being self-evident and natural. For Johnston this process of signification is a masquerade which excludes and oppresses women in cinema.

The semiotic analysis of the image of woman in cinema still does not explain why women are made into objects nor does it explain cinema's fascination. In order to understand this further, feminist film critics have turned to psychoanalysis. In her influential and much-quoted article, Mulvey (1989/1975) develops a psychoanalytical approach to cinema. The fascination of cinema has to do with what Freud calls *der Schautrieb*; scopophilia, or the desire to look. Traditional cinema stimulates the desire to look by constructing structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the narrative and the image. Looking at a figure as an object produces voyeuristic pleasure, while narcissistic pleasure is produced by identification with the image.

Mulvey reveals how sexual difference functions to structure these two forms of visual pleasure in classical cinema. The traditional narrative structure establishes the omnipotence of the male main character, who actively carries both the look and the action. Narrative, camera work and editing make voyeuristic pleasure exclusively masculine; through the lens of the 'phallic' camera, the spectator in the theatre is sutured to the eyes of the male character in the film. This triple gaze – of spectator, camera and character – controls the female character and makes her into a spectacle; 'to connote to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1989/1975: 19).

Narcissistic pleasure can be understood with the concept of the mirror stage from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Just as a child forms her or his ego by identifying with the perfect mirror image, the spectator's derives pleasure from identification with the more than perfect image of the male film hero; the spectator is eager to identify with that 'more perfect, more complete and more powerful ideal ego' rather than with the distorted image of woman. The complex structure of cinematic ways of looking is usually referred to by the shorthand term 'the (male) gaze'.

As the story progresses in *The Color Purple* the camera perspective lies more frequently with Celie. She captures, as it were, the gaze. At the beginning we often see her through the eyes of the father and of Mr. —; their male power is enhanced by filming from a relatively high camera angle, thus representing the women as small and defence-



less and the men as larger than life. This can be seen, for example, in the scenes of Celie's labour and of the separation of the two sisters. In both cases camera position and movement, lighting and editing are rather rough and exaggerated, producing an eerie or threatening feeling in which the men dominate the screen and the women are reduced to helpless victims. By contrast, in the kissing scene between Celie and Shug cinematic techniques take a more subtle form.

In the corresponding scene in the novel Shug helps Celie to discover her sexuality. She asks her to look at herself 'down there' in a mirror. Celie finds her 'wet rose' very pretty and excitedly explores her naked body in the mirror. Of course, this cannot be shown as graphically as that in a popular film: showing the genital organs would border on pornography. In the film an interesting displacement has taken place. Shug tells Celie to look at herself in the mirror fully dressed up in Shug's red sequined gown. Celie is too shy to look at herself, casting her eyes down and covering her mouth. Shug gently takes away Celie's hand and dares her to laugh at her own reflection in the mirror. Tentatively, Celie starts to smile. Looking at themselves and each other in the mirror, both women open their lips to smile and laugh, finally bursting into a loud and liberating laughter 'because they are beautiful'. Timidly they start kissing each other. The scene ends with the camera discreetly turning away to tinkling chimes, suggesting that the erotic encounter between the women continues. The scene has thus been made perfectly respectable, but it has also lost most of its subversive power. Nevertheless, the displacement from one pair of lips to another, from orgasm to laughter, is quite suggestive. We here see the power of narcissistic identification with the mirror image.

Mulvey develops her analysis of classical cinema still further. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the image of 'woman' produces a problem, because her negative meaning (non-man) constantly reminds the male subject of her lack of a penis, ergo, of castration anxiety. A film can dissolve this threat in two ways. The first way is to link sadism to voyeurism. In that case, the female character is found guilty because of her 'lack' and must be either forgiven or punished. For the female character the film then classically ends in either marriage or death. The second way is the fetishisation of the female character. Fetishism is a psychic structure which simultaneously denies and acknowledges the missing penis by replacing it with a fetish. The fetish is thus a substitute for the absent penis. Thus, fetishisation of the female subject denies sexual difference in disavowing her difference from men. In Hollywood, fetishism takes the shape of the cult of the white female star. The gross exaggeration of femininity distracts attention away from

her 'lack'. The threatening danger is converted into a satisfactory object with the help of physical, and fetishised, beauty.

This kind of fetishistic strategy is often seen in the representation of the sexually active female character, such as Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*. The way in which she is filmed in her sequined red dress during a performance at Harpo's place is a good example of the visual strategy of fetishisation; although she is often seen here from Celie's point of view. The scenes added in the film, in which Shug begs her father (a minister!) for forgiveness, are part of a narrative strategy which diminishes the threat of the sexually attractive woman by representing her as guilty. This question of guilt and paternal forgiveness is missing from the novel. Thus, Shug is tamed in the film; she is stripped of her sexual power and brought back into the patriarchal order.

### The resisting spectator

Semiotic and psychoanalytical interpretations reveal how classical cinema constructs its meanings through particular representations of sexual difference. It seems that there is very little for the female spectator to enjoy at the cinema. In fact, early feminist film critics saw no other way for feminist film-makers than to disregard those traditional techniques of the cinematic apparatus and to develop the specific aesthetics of feminist experimental film, the 'counter-cinema'. A rather dogmatic view of feminist film practice emerged: experimental cinema was extolled while the more popular narrative women's cinema was maligned. This resulted in a paradox concerning the pleasure of the female spectator: the avant-garde film destroyed traditional visual pleasure along with the narrative structure, while women have always been denied that pleasure in classical cinema. Both theory and practice thus got caught in a polarisation between politics and pleasure.

E. Ann Kaplan (1983) was one of the first to attempt to bridge this opposition in defending the pleasure of the feminist popular film. She argues that the narrative film is much more heterogeneous and more complex than theory would allow for. Feminist cinema should not place itself outside dominant culture, but should instead use traditional filmic means for its own ends. For the time being, most feminist film critics remain distrustful of contemporary popular cinema, while the stream of feminist analyses of classical Hollywood cinema still increases. These readings offer an insight into the veiled ideology of popular cinema.

That insight enables the critical spectator to resist the manipulative power of films. An analysis of the camera work and editing in the film *The Color Purple* reveals the problematic effects of particular scenes



(Diawara, 1988). Take, for example, the shaving sequence. In this long sequence three unrelated scenes are edited parallel with each other: Celie whetting the knife to shave Mr. —; Shug running through the fields to Celie's house; and a ritual ceremony in Africa. The three events are linked with each other by the sound track of drums and are cross-cut in increasing speed to the stirring rhythm of the African music. As Celie has just found and read Nettie's letters to her, which had been concealed by Mr. —, the spectator understands that she wants to attack him with the razor. Her gestures are filmed in exactly the same way as the 'barbaric' ritual in Africa, thus suggesting that black people all around the world are linked by the same sort of primitivism. This impression is further strengthened by linking the events with Shug's intuition and fear; she apparently understands Celie's intentions from the rustling of the wind in the trees and runs to the house to stop Celie from cutting Mr. —'s throat just in time. The film thus represents Africa as a source of evil, instead of emphasising the complex relationship between sexism and racism in the novel, as discussed in other chapters in this book.

### Visual pleasure

When the pioneer period of feminist film criticism ended, film theory and film practice were diverging more and more. In breaking down narrative structures and visual pleasure, the artists of experimental women's cinema were creating a deconstructive practice. While feminist film-makers were in fact deconstructionists, theorists continued to focus single-mindedly on classical cinema from the perspective of sexual difference (Penley, 1989). Many feminist analyses of Hollywood movies may, however, also be seen as deconstruction; in feminist film theory the perspectives of difference and deconstruction increasingly run alongside each other.

In the 1980s the question of female subjectivity became increasingly urgent. Because subjectivity is intimately connected with desire, in cinema often represented by ways of looking, the question arises whether the gaze is inherently male. Can women also have the gaze? How is the female character's desire represented? These questions gradually focused more on the visual pleasure of the female spectator.

The answers to these questions were, in the first instance, rather pessimistic. The standard scenario of classical cinema de-eroticises the female gaze. The female spectator over-identifies with a powerless female subject, whose subjectivity and desires are denied and destroyed over the course of the narrative (Doane, 1987). Therefore, the female

spectator is better off if she identifies with the male hero and assumes his gaze (Mulvey, 1989/1975). Even when the new Woman's film from Hollywood offers the gaze to the female character, this does not mean that she also has the power to act on her desire, because a reversal of the gaze between the sexes does not change the underlying power structures (Kaplan, 1983). The difficulties in theorising the female spectator have led Jackie Stacey (1987) to exclaim that feminist film critics have written the darkest scenario possible for the female look as being male, masochist or marginal.

Here we see how much feminist film theories have been caught up in the straitjacket of sexual difference; visual pleasure is exclusively understood in terms of sexual difference. Gertrud Koch (1989) is one of the few feminists who at an early stage recognised that women could also enjoy the image of female beauty on the screen, that is, the vamp, an image exported from Europe into Hollywood cinema. The vamp possesses a free look and provides the female spectator with an image of autonomous femininity. Koch argues that for women, too, their mother functions as a love object in their early childhood and that cinema can appeal to this pleasurable experience. The sexual ambivalence of the vamp, of for example Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich (and Shug ...), allows for a homo-erotic pleasure which is not exclusively negotiated through the eyes of men. The vamp's ambiguity refers to the mother as love object and can hence be a source of visual pleasure for the female spectator. The loss of the image of the vamp in cinema means a great loss of possible identifications and visual pleasure for the female audience.

### The desire to desire

In the 1980s feminists published many psychoanalytical and semiotic studies on cinema. In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis (1984) emphasises that subjectivity is not a fixed entity but a process through which the subject re-establishes itself continually. She builds her argument upon a Freudian rereading of narratology, making 'desire' her most important theoretical concept. Telling stories is one of the ways of reproducing subjectivity in any given culture. Each story derives its structure from the subject's desire ('the hero'). Narrative structures are defined by an 'Oedipal' desire: the desire to know origin and end. Sexual desire is intimately bound up with the desire for knowledge, that is, the quest for truth. The desire to solve riddles is a male desire *par excellence*, because the female subject is herself the riddle. 'Woman'



is the question ('what does woman want?') and can hence not ask the question nor make her desire intelligible.

According to de Lauretis, not only desire but the subject, too, is male by definition, because the obstacle to the realisation of desire is the feminine or because the object of desire is female. In distributing roles and differences, narrative distributes power and positions. Even if a female subject figures in a narrative she always serves male desire. If she survives at all, at the end of the story she appears to have been *his* promise and prize: the destiny of the female subject is to be given away in marriage and to attain motherhood. The (psychoanalytic) narrative of female subjectivity is so cruel as to raise the question of female desire. One of the functions of narrative, de Lauretis argues, is to 'seduce' women into femininity with or without their consent. The female subject is made to desire femininity. Here she comes back to Mulvey's observation on sadism as inherent to narrative. For de Lauretis, then, desire in narrative is intimately bound up with violence against women (see also Smelik, 1993).

According to de Lauretis's theory, traditional film narrative allots the female subject a poor life and an equally pathetic desire. She is in fact a non-subject. In many Woman's films we see that the female character develops from non-subject into a subject. Thus, Celie manages to withdraw herself from all violence inflicted upon her and establish her subjectivity against oppression. In the slow process of becoming an autonomous subject she explores her lesbian sexuality and she establishes her economic independence, although this is hardly emphasised in the film. The film *The Color Purple* represents the enormous change in Celie by one small semiotic sign: when Celie has left Mr. —, the following shot shows a close-up of a red glove. As the image zooms out we see Celie walking in an elegant black dress with a hat and red gloves. The glove refers to a better social status and the colour red to sexuality and femininity. In a single glance we understand that Celie has established her subjectivity.

Is de Lauretis more optimistic about the other female subject, the female spectator? As yet, hardly. Contrary to earlier feminist film theorists she does not assume that identification is single or simple. In Freudian psychoanalysis, femininity and masculinity are identifications that the subject takes up in a changing relation to desire. She distinguishes two sorts of identification in classical cinema: a visual (the gaze or the image) and a narrative one (narrative movement and closure). Film can thus activate a double identification for the female spectator, which yields her an excess of pleasure. However, de Lauretis interprets this surplus negatively: according to her this is the way in

which the female spectator is seduced into identifying with a film in which a female 'non-subject' figures.

In her book on the Hollywood Woman's film in the forties, Doane (1987) studies representations of the female subject in cinema from an orthodox psychoanalytic perspective. Analysing how this classical genre constructs the female gaze, Doane comes to the conclusion that female identification and subjectivity are negatively signified in emotional processes like masochism, paranoia, narcissism and hysteria. In spite of the focus that the Woman's film puts on a female main character, these processes confirm stereotypes about the female psyche. The emotional investments lead to over-identification, destroying the distance to the object of desire and turning the active desire of both the female character and the female spectator into the passive desire to be the desired object. 'The desire to be desired' seems to be, then, the only option for women. It is no wonder that the genre of the Woman's film is called a weepy or a tearjerker. My ever-wet handkerchief indicates that *The Color Purple* also belongs to this tradition, be it one with a happy end.

### A new voice

However fascinating feminist film theories may be, they do tell a gloomy story. Therefore, the question of the visual pleasure of the female spectator has become increasingly urgent.

To this end film critics are turning to films made by women. In feminist experimental films, including those by Laura Mulvey, Yvonne Rainer and Chantal Akerman, de Lauretis (1987) recognises ambiguity, heterogeneity, contradiction and paradox as strategies to do justice to the multiplicity of female subjectivity, without imprisoning it once more in the dualistic opposition of sexual difference. Experimental cinematic means produce different subject positions for the spectator. This plural perspective makes it possible to portray differences among women and within women.

When difference is no longer reduced to sexual difference but is also understood as difference among women, representation of an active female desire becomes possible, even in Hollywood films. Jackie Stacey argues (1987) that films like *All About Eve* or *Desperately Seeking Susan* produce narrative desire by the difference between two women; by women wanting to become the idealised other. Many films by women deal with conflicts and mutual fascination between women. The friendship may take on a lesbian aspect, as in the case of Celie and Shug.

The desire of women for each other acquires a theoretical basis in the work of Kaja Silverman. In her critical rereadings of psychoanalysis



in *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), she shifts the focus from the gaze to the voice, which allows for an original perspective on the female subject, awarding a privileged position to the mother. The voice is both physical and discursive, and hence the mother plays a frequently misunderstood but important role in both the pre-Oedipal stage (voice as body) and Oedipal stage (voice as language). The entry into language means the end of the unity between mother and child. Silverman argues that the loss and separation entailed by the acquisition of language lead both the male and female child to desire the mother. The girl then directs her desire to the mother in what is called the negative Oedipus complex. It is important to realise this can only happen after the pre-Oedipal stage, because distance from the mother is necessary for her to become an erotic object for the daughter. It is only after the event of the castration crisis, that is, the dramatic onset of sexual difference, that the girl enters the positive Oedipus complex and learns to direct her desire to the father (see, for a fuller discussion of the Oedipus complex, chapter 13). For the rest of her life the female subject remains split between the desire for the mother and for the father.

In situating the girl's desire for the mother in the negative Oedipus complex, Silverman recuperates female desire for the mother as fully Oedipal, that is to say as being within the symbolic order, within language and signification. This means that the female subject can also represent her desires. A lovely example can be found in one of the first intimate moments between Celie and Shug in the film. While Celie washes and combs Shug's hair in the bath, Shug begins to hum. Later, Shug will turn this melody into the Blues 'Celie's song'. The way in which the women treat each other in the bath scene is reminiscent of a mother-child relationship. However, they can shift positions: Celie mothers Shug in the bath while Shug wraps Celie in 'the acoustic blanket' of her voice. Thus, their contact does not begin with the aloof and objectifying gaze, but with the physical closeness of touch and voice. This intimacy is the beginning of a friendship which later becomes an erotic relationship.

### Re-visions

Towards the end of the 1970s there was considerable criticism of the exclusive hegemony of psychoanalysis and semiotics within Anglo-Saxon feminist film theory. One major point of criticism was the universal conception of the subject dictated by psychoanalysis: the tendency to essentialise and universalise categories of 'man' and 'woman' and 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. As long as the female subject cannot be

conceived outside the straitjacket of sexual difference it remains impossible to theorise female desire or pleasure. This leads to the paradoxical situation that in theory both the female subject and the pleasure of the female spectator are negatively understood as absence or passivity, while the experience of women in cinema may actually refute this. Moreover, such an ahistorical approach denies not only the practice and context of cinema, it also neglects differences among women – of ethnicity, class, age and sexuality.

Over the last few years we have seen a number of shifts within feminist film theory. Persistent criticism of psychoanalytic theory has come from black feminism for its failure to deal with racial difference. Jane Gaines (1988) is one of the first feminist film critics to point to the erasure of race in theories that are based on the psychoanalytic concept of sexual difference. She argues for an inclusion of black feminist theory and of a historical approach into feminist film theory in order to understand how in cinema gender intersects with race and class.

White film critics have universalised their theories of representations of women, although black women have been excluded from those forms of representation. The signification of the black female as non-human makes black female sexuality the great unknown in white patriarchy, that which is 'unfathomed and uncoded' and yet 'worked over again and again in mainstream culture because of its apparent elusiveness' (Gaines, 1988: 26). The eruptive point of resistance presents black women's sexuality as an even greater threat to the male unconscious than the fear of white female sexuality.

The category of race also problematises the paradigm of the male gaze directed at the female image. The male gaze is not a universal given but negotiated by whiteness: the black man's sexual gaze is socially prohibited. Racial hierarchies in ways of looking have created visual taboos, the neglect of which reflect back on film theory. The racial structures of looking also have repercussions for structures of narrative. Gaines discusses the construction of the black man as rapist, while in times of slavery and long after, it was the white man who raped black women. The historical scenario of interracial rape explains much of the penalty of sexual looking by the black man, who was actually (rather than symbolically) castrated or lynched by white men.

Interventions, such as by Gaines, show that the category of race reveals the untenability of many one-sided beliefs within feminist film theory, and points to the necessity of contextualising and historicising sexual difference. Intersecting theories of sexual difference with those of differences of race and sexual preference, along with ethnicity and class, will eventually make other forms of representation thinkable. As



the work of black feminist critics like bell hooks (1990b, 1992 and 1994a) and Michele Wallace (1990, 1993) shows, it will also engender a more diversified theory of female desires and subjectivities and of female spectatorship. For bell hooks, black female spectators do not necessarily identify with either the phallogentric gaze or white womanhood as lack, but they rather 'construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation' (1992: 126). For hooks this is a radical departure from the 'totalizing agenda' of feminist film criticism, and the beginning of an 'oppositional' spectatorship for black women. From the experience of black women as resistant spectators, Michele Wallace also seeks to expand the notion of spectatorship not only as potentially bisexual but also [as] multiracial and multiethnic' (1993: 264).

The primacy of sexual difference has gradually been broken down. Lesbian feminists were among the first to raise objections to the heterosexual bias of feminist film theory. As we have seen, differences between two women enable a play of identification and desire that specifically addresses homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship. In her most recent work, de Lauretis (1991, 1994) explores the possibilities for theorising the lesbian subject (see also chapter 10). She criticises both Stacey and Silverman for conceiving of desire between women as 'woman-identified female bonding' and failing to see it as sexual. To counter the impossibility of representing lesbian desire and lesbian subjectivity, conditions of representation in cinema have to be changed. Lesbian films that serve up positive images of lesbians in a conventional narrative keep the heterosexual structures intact, rendering lesbian desire invisible. Codes and conventions can be deconstructed by fantasy, dreams or hallucinations, a play of masquerade, or a play of visual images like a film within a film, a video screen or a camera. This creates a distance between reality and representation, and within this gap lesbian desire and subjectivity can be made visible.

### Post-modernism

It seems then that the issue of 'difference' has forced feminist film theory to open up to theories and disciplines beyond the paradigms of semiotics and psychoanalysis.

The exclusive focus on classical Hollywood cinema is giving way to more studies on films by women. Here we see a historicising trend in which films are situated in their social context. Lucy Fischer (1989), Judith Mayne (1990) and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (1990) place women's films in relation to film tradition. These studies shed a new light on

the ways in which female film-makers use aesthetic conventions for different ends. For example, many feminist directors self-consciously play on the tradition that has made women into a visual object. In their films they thematise the screen by using mirrors, pictures, painting or video images within the cinematic screen.

The issues of the female spectator and her viewing pleasure continue to dominate most of the agenda of feminist film theory, even though some major shifts in theoretical paradigms occurred towards the end of the eighties. Two collections that are very much dedicated to the pleasures of the female audience, *The Female Gaze* (Gamman and Marshment, 1988) and *Female Spectators* (Pribram, 1988), are indicative of the turn away from psychoanalysis and a turn towards cultural studies. Both books contest the dominance of psychoanalysis in feminist film theory for the same reasons as the lesbian and black critics that I discussed above: the neglect of differences among women.

These criticisms bring the tension between politics and pleasure back into full swing. The neglect of the female spectator either as individual or as a social group has resulted in a feminist endorsement of alternative cinema and simultaneous dismissal of mainstream cinema. Both Gamman & Marshment and Pribram argue that such somewhat dogmatic views reinforce women's exclusion from cultural production and reception and are therefore politically unproductive. Instead, they are interested in how feminists may intervene in mainstream culture and emphasise women's presence in popular culture. It is then to issues surrounding the female audience as historical participants in popular culture that these books address themselves. In other words, they take film and television seriously as a source of pleasure for women. Jacqueline Bobo's article on the reception of *The Color Purple* among black female spectators is a good example of an ethnographic study which foregrounds the possible pleasures of popular culture.

In this turn to cultural studies, increasing importance is also being given to post-modern culture. Sometimes this interest is directed towards avant-garde film and video (Mellencamp, 1990), but more often film critics take popular culture as the object of study: science fiction, for example, (Penley et al., 1991) or the video clip (Kaplan, 1987). According to Kaplan, the video clip is an expression of post-modern culture full of contradictions and ambivalences, not least concerning sexuality. Madonna is a prime example of a pop star who exploits and subverts images of femininity in a staggering succession of masquerades. Post-modern pop stars produce a visual culture which throws set ideas about femininity, masculinity, blackness and whiteness into considerable confusion.



But what exactly is this post-modernism? Post-modernism can be understood as a historical condition: it is the complex and often contradictory culture of post-industrial society. Kaplan (1988) argues that two post-modern cultural practices coexist: a utopian post-modernism developed from feminist and post-structuralist theory; and a commercial or annexed post-modernism, closely linked to hi-tech capitalism. What both post-modern practices have in common is a tendency to transcend the Western tradition of binary thought. They also share the lost ideal of the unified subject. The deconstruction of oppositions, and the deconstruction of a universal subject, i.e. the white middle-class heterosexual male, together form the utopian aspect of post-modernism for feminist and anti-racist theory.

Feminist film theory has provided an insight into the way in which femininity and masculinity, whiteness and blackness are represented in film and other visual media. These insights may assist the female spectator in the interpretation of these representations. Thus, she can see how the subversive power of the novel *The Color Purple* melts away in the film in the teardrops of the happy end, in the smoothing over of lesbian love and in the trivialisation of Celie's economic independence. Insights from feminist film theory also show how traditional representations of femininity (may) change. The female spectator thus learns to look at new representations of femininity in cinema and on television in a critical manner, but with political involvement and with pleasure.

Looking, the gaze of the female spectator, is also central to feminist theatre studies. For the deconstruction of femininity on the stage we will now put the spotlight on Clytemnestra, Antigone, Dora, Cecilia and many others.

### Literature for further study

- Bad Object Choices (ed.) (1991) *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. Theoretical and political reflections on lesbian and homosexual representation, with critical attention being paid to ethnicity.
- Carson, Diane, Linda Dittmarr, and Janice R. Welsch (eds) (1994) *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Anthology with focus on the practice of international feminist cinema, including black and 'third world' cinema. One part of the book is dedicated to thematic 'course files'.
- Erens, Patricia (ed.) (1990) *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Anthology of the most important articles by feminist film theorists. With many classics, including Johnston and Mulvey.
- Haskell, Molly (1987 revised edition; original 1973) *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Easy, readable classic. Illustrates the

- concept of equality in feminist film criticism. Sociological approach to women in cinema with many sweeping statements.
- hooks, bell (1990b) *Yearning*, (1992) *Black Looks*, and (1994a) *Outlaw Culture*. In short and readable essays the author discusses the representation of femininity and masculinity in relation to colour in cinema and popular culture.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (1983) *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. Accessible work of reference. Clear explanation of semiotics and psychoanalysis. Discusses the representation of women in both classical Hollywood cinema and feminist cinema.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (1987) *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*. Good introduction to the post-modern phenomenon of the video clip. Deals with the way in which different genres establish or subvert traditional representations of femininity and masculinity within the video clip.
- Kuhn, Annette (1982) *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. Like Kaplan (1983), a good introduction to feminist film theory. Clear explanation of semiotics, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Examines Hollywood and feminist cinema.
- Lauretis, Teresa de (1984) *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. A (difficult) work of reference, which lays a philosophical basis for feminist film theory.
- Lauretis, Teresa de (1987) *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Interdisciplinary study of feminist cultural criticism.
- Silverman, Kaja (1988) *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Theoretical work of reference. Revision of psychoanalysis in relation to cinema, with special attention to the mother-daughter relationship.

### Journals

The oldest and best-known feminist film journal is the German journal *Frauen und Film*. *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* features articles from semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives, and also post-modernism and cultural studies. Feminist articles on cinema, video and television appear regularly in the film journals *Jump Cut*, *Wide Angle* and the authoritative *Screen*.