

CULTURAL STUDIES

The Meta-Theory:

“Cultural Studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories. It is a whole set of formations; it has its own different conjunctures and moments in the past. It included many different kinds of work.... It always was a set of unstable formations.... It had many trajectories; many people had and have different theoretical positions, all of them in contention.” (Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies” In Grossberg, L. et. al., Cultural Studies, 1992)

The Object of Study:

“‘Culture’ in cultural studies is defined politically rather than aesthetically. The object of study in cultural studies is not culture defined in the narrow sense, as the objects of aesthetic excellence (‘high art’); nor culture defined in an equally narrow sense, as a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development; but culture understood as the texts and practices of everyday life.” (John Storey, Cultural Studies & The Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods [Athens: University of GA Press, 1996]: 2).

“Cultural studies also regards culture as political in a quite specific sense – as a terrain of conflict and contestation. It is seen as a key site for the production and reproduction of the social relations of everyday life.” (Storey, 1996, CSSPC: 2)

The Mediated Construction of Culture/The Cultural Construction of Media:

Hall: “what cultural studies helps me to understand is that the media [for example] play a part in the formation, in the constitution, of the things that they reflect. It is not that there is a world outside, ‘out there,’ which exists free of the discourses of representation. What is ‘out there’ is, in part, constituted by how it is represented.” (Stuart Hall, quoted in Storey, What is Cultural Studies: A Reader [London: Edward Arnold, 1996])

Cultural Studies on Media Production and Consumption:

“The cultural studies use of hegemony theory...at its best insists that there is a dialectic between the processes of production and the activities of consumption. The consumer always confronts a text or practice in its material existence as a result of determinate conditions of production. But in the same way, the text or practice is confronted by a consumer who in effect produces in use the range of possible meaning(s), which cannot just be read off from the materiality of the text or practice, or the means or relations of its production.” (Storey, 1996, CSSPC: 5)

“Cultural studies would also insist that making popular culture (‘production in use’) can be empowering to subordinate and resistant to dominant understandings of the world. But this is not to say that popular culture is always empowering and resistant (Storey, 1996, CSSPC: 5)

REPRESENTATION

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

Purpose:

To discover "where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him" (393)

"Mulvey's analysis explores the ways in which cinematic techniques interpellate the viewer as subject and articulate the spectator's 'look' at the screen with the intra-diegetic¹ 'looks' of a film." (Durham & Kellner, 387)

Starting Point:

"the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (393)

Theoretical Framework:

"Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form." (393)

"As an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions about the ways the **unconscious** (formed by the dominant order) **structures** ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (394)

- The viewer's interpretation "takes place unconsciously, thus providing the basis for ignorance to gender oppression and subordination"—Terje Steinulfsson Skjerdal, www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/2152/mulvey.htm

Political Project:

"However self-conscious and ironic **Hollywood** managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal *mise en scene*² reflecting the **dominant ideological concept of the cinema**. The **alternative cinema** provides a space for the birth of a **cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film**." (394)

"The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which feel within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying **manipulation of visual pleasure**. **Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order**." (395)

"It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article." (395)

¹ The **diegetic elements** of a representational text are those that seem to exist within the world being represented, or that seem to be a part of the story being told. The extra-diegetic, or non-diegetic elements are regarded as characteristics of the medium of representation and do not exist in the world represented in the text. The swooning violins in a classical Hollywood romance are not present in the world of the story; they are thus extra-diegetic. Similarly, the credits exist in a "conceptual space" unavailable to those inhabiting the "world of the screen." And camera motion is extra-diegetic; as the camera zooms in on a character's face, our view of that character changes, although the character herself does not change. These camera motions are part of the film's "narration"—that is, they are part of the *story-telling* rather than the story itself.

² "**Mise -en-scene**, in discussions of film, refers to the composition of the individual film- the relation of objects, people and masses; the interplay of light and dark; the pattern of color; the camera's position and angle of view- as well as the movement within the frame."—Ira Konigsberg

Mulvey calls for “**transcending outworn or oppressive forms**, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (395)

The Cinema’s Pleasures

1. **Scopophilia: pleasure in looking** (395-6)

- Circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, or in which there is pleasure in being looked at
- **Objectification:** Freud associated scopophilia with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (395)
 - “the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object”
- Extreme: can be fixated into a perversion
- Contrast btw darkness in theater and brilliance on screen “helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation” (396)
 - “the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (396)

2. **Ego Libido:** narcissistic scopophilia; the ego’s desire to identify with the ideal image on the screen; “a fascination with likeness and **recognition:** the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world” (396)

- The conventions of mainstream film—scale, space, stories—are all anthropomorphic.
- **Mirror Phase** (Lacan): the child recognizes its own image in the mirror, but imagines their mirror image to be “more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body” (396)
 - The reflected body is projected outside the self as an ideal ego, “the alienated subject which, reintegrated as an ego ideal, prepared the way for identification with others in the future” (396)
 - “constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity” (396)
- “it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience” (396)
- “the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it” (396)
 - “I forgot who I am and where I was” vs. production of ego ideas, through star system

Tension Between the Impulses: “one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like.” (397)

“...the cinema seems to have evolved a particular illusion of reality in which this contradiction between libido and ego has found a beautifully complementary phantasy world.” (397)

Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between **active/male and passive/female**. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said

to **connote *to-be-looked-at-ness***. **Women displayed as sexual object** is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle... (397)

“One part of a fragmented body (e.g., close-ups of legs or a face) destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cutout or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen.” (398)

“The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative.... Traditionally, the **women** displayed has functioned on two levels: as **erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium**, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.... **A woman performs within the narrative: the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude.**” (398)

“According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the **split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of advancing the story**, making things happen. **The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle.** This is made possible through the processes set in motion by **structuring the film around a main controlling figure (i.e., male protagonist) with whom the spectator can identify**” (398)

“As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that **the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.**” (398-9)

“In contrast to woman as icon, **the active male figure** (the ego ideal of the identification process) **demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror-recognition** in which the alienated subject internalized his own representation of this imaginary existence. He is a figure in the landscape. Here the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism) all tend to blur the limits of screen space.” (399)

Problem:

“Ultimately, **the meaning of woman is sexual difference**, the visually ascertainable **absence of the penis**, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (399)

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this **castration anxiety**:

1. **Voyeurism**: assigning **guilt** to the object and thus assuming power; “preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigation the woman, demystifying her mystery) counterbalanced by devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object”
2. **Fetishistic Scopophilia**: “complete **disavowal of castration** by the substitution of a **fetish object** or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence **overvaluation**, the **cult of the female star**” (400)

Looks of the Cinema

1. that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event
2. that of the audience as it watches the final product
3. that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion

“The conventions of narrative film **deny the first two and subordinate them to the third**, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth” (403)

- Caters to the male ego.

“The scopophilic instinct...and, in contradistinction, ego libido...act as formations, mechanisms, which this cinema (traditional narrative film) has played on. The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film. The argument returns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, including voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. **None of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on.** Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, **cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.** Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), **cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged**” (402-3)

It is paradoxical that the threat of castration is always implied by the pleasurable image of women.

“The female image as a castration threat **constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis** and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish” (403)

- “freezes the look, fixates the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him.”

Criticism

- Christine Gledhill: The psychoanalytic film approach is derived from a masculine perspective. Consequently, femininity is characterized as a “lack,” an “absence,” an “otherness.”
- Jackie Byers: Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis sees the masculine as normative and the feminine as deviant and therefore “cannot account for resistance and ideological struggle; they represent, instead, the psychic mechanisms for reinforcing dominant ideologies” (qtd. in Terje Steinulfsson Skjerdal, www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/2152/mulvey.htm)
- E. Ann Kaplan: “Is the gaze male?”
- Kaja Silverman: (Chandler’s paraphrase) the gaze could be adopted by both male and female subjects: the male is not always the controlling subject, nor is the female always the passive object. We can ‘read against the grain.’”
- Neale and Richard Dyer suggest that the male, too, is sexually objectified in mainstream cinema, and that sometimes the female can be in control of the gaze.
- Teresa de Laurentis: (Chandler’s paraphrase) “the female spectator does not simply adopt a masculine reading position but is always involved in ‘*double-identification*’ with both the passive and active subject positions.”
- Steve Neale: “The gaze of mainstream Hollywood cinema is not only male, but also *heterosexual*.”
- Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gammon offer an account of “*queer viewing*.”
- Jane Gaines proposes the idea of “*looking relations*,” which takes into account other factors, including race and class, that shape viewing practices.

Larry Gross, “Out of the Mainstream”

“...the contributions of the mass media (in representing “reality”) are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning; particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies.” (407)

“What options and opportunities (for media representation) are available to those groups whose concerns, values and even very existence are belittled, subverted, and denied by the mainstream? Can the power of the mass media’s central tendencies be resisted? Can one avoid being swept into the mainstream?” (408)

“...the opportunities for organized opposition are greatest when there is a visible and even organized group which can provide solidarity and institutional means for creating and disseminating alternative messages.” (408)

Homosexual: “...we are probably the least permitted (among all minorities) to speak for ourselves in the media. We are also the only group...whose enemies are generally uninhibited by the consensus of ‘good taste’ which protects most minorities from the more public displays of bigotry.” (410)

Response to Mainstream Media’s Treatment of Minorities: internalization, subversion (camp), succession, resistance

Camp: “a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed by the fact of one’s gayness” (qtd. In Gross, 417)

- marked by irony and a “theatrical perspective” on the world (cultivated by the need to “pass”)

- “offers a subversive response to mainstream culture, and provides both in-group solidarity and an opportunity to express distance from and disdain for the roles most gay people play most of the time” (418)

bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance”

“Exploring how the desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled.” (425)

Some cultural/critical historians situate the origin of “the Other” in Hegel’s Master/Slave Dialectic:

“Men meet on the battlefield in a struggle to the death. The victor in such an encounter is the one who risks death. For him honour is more valuable than mere animal subsistence. His selfhood is emerging as something higher, an ideal, realised in his new status as Master. The vanquished has preferred survival to honour and pays by being reduced to a slave, little more than a beast of burden.

“Thus far, the clash has only produced Slave and Master in opposition. But Hegel intends to show how this relationship transforms its two terms. In the first instance the slave is the Other to the master, the Self. The slave makes himself the corporeal body of the master's will - 'your wish is my command'. However, the relationship is unsatisfactory for the master. He has domination over the slave. What he wanted, though, was honour, or recognition of his mastery. The love owed him by his slaves will never satisfy him, because it is not freely given. Furthermore, the master, having made himself master through action has become lazy. Superficially it appears that he calls the shots. But already the slaves are, without realising it, the active parties. Their labour creates all the possibilities available to the court. If they would but realise the fact that they make everything happen, they would shake off the mantle of slave. Then they would cease merely to be the Other, and attain the character of Selves.” (James Heartfield, “Hegel Despirited” http://www.static-ops.org/archive_june/essay_3.htm)

“It is within the commercial realm of advertising that the drama of Otherness finds expression. Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger. In the cultural marketplace the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive, as holding the secret that will allow those who venture and dare to break with the cultural anhedonia (the insensitivity to pleasure, the incapacity for experiencing happiness) and experience sensual and spiritual renewal.” (428)

Distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes”

“Universal images of ‘the third world woman’ (the veiled woman, the chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ‘third world difference’ to ‘sexual difference,’ are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that Western women *are* secular, liberated, and in control of their own lives. I am referring to a *discursive* self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality.” (481)

“Without the ‘third world woman,’ the particular self-presentation of Western women mentioned above would be problematical. I am suggesting, then, that the one enables and sustains the other. This is not to say that the signature of Western feminist writings on the third world has the same

authority as the project of Western humanism. However, in the context of the hegemony of the Western scholarly establishment in the production and dissemination of texts, and in the context of the legitimating imperative of humanistic and scientific discourse, the definition of 'the third world woman' as a monolith might well tie into the larger economic and ideological praxis of 'disinterested' scientific inquiry and pluralism which are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the 'non-Western' world. It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." (481-2)

Nestor Garcia Canclini: "Hybrid Cultures, Oblique Powers"

"The aggregate of works and messages that used to structure visual culture and provide the grammar of reading the city diminished their efficacy in the urban space as well. There is no homogeneous architectural system and the distinguishing profiles of neighborhoods are being lost. The lack of urban regulation, and the cultural hybridity of buildings and users intermix styles from various eras in a single street."

"Cultures are no longer grouped in fixed and stable wholes, and therefore the possibility disappears of being cultured by knowing the repertory of 'the great works,' or of being popular because one manages the meaning of the objects and messages produced by a more or less closed community. Now these collections renew their composition and their hierarchy with the fashions.... The technologies of reproduction permit each person to set up a repertory of records and cassettes in his or her home..." (495)

"...there is a proliferation of reproduction devices the we cannot define as either cultured or popular. In them collections are lost, and images and contexts – along with the semantic and historical references that used to bind together their meanings – are destructed." (495)

- photocopiers, VCRs, videos, video games

"New technologies and new markets have impacts that are not simply oppressive, they argue, but rather make say for local and regional cultural production that has progressive potential." (Durham & Kellner, 389-90)