

To What Extent Is Laura Mulvey's Argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) Still Relevant Today?

Tongtong Guo^{1,a,*}

¹The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

^a2509891796@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *The perspective in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) is epoch-making. It analyses gender relations from a fresh perspective through Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Lacan's image theory. It presents the dilemma faced by women's film theory at the time. However, with the emancipation of the female workforce and the widespread attention paid to minority groups, Laura Mulvey's theory no longer applies to modern society. Because of the limitations of the times, Laura Mulvey's argument only analyses gender relations from the angle of spiritual theory, but not from comprehensive social and other perspectives. It also neglects the female and same-sex gaze and only analyses the visual pleasure that men experience when they gaze at women.*

Keywords: *Feminist Film Theory, Laura Mulvey, Limitations, Degree of Influence*

1. Introduction

Boyle finds that Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" published in 1975, was released at the peak of feminism's second wave ^[1]. It implies that Laura Mulvey's theories have significant research worth and are typical of the feminist intellectual landscape at that time. This article analyses films from the classic Hollywood period through the lens of gender relations. Laura Mulvey's main argument is that women want to have a penis to alleviate castration anxiety because of a lack of penises. In contrast, men have castration anxiety because they fear losing their penises. Laura Mulvey considers the penis to be a symbol of power. Moreover, Laura Mulvey first introduces the concept of the male gaze, where women exist as objectified objects. This provides a solid theoretical foundation for feminist film studies. As society evolves and the influence of television gradually expands, the voices of women and minority groups such as LGBTQ are being heard by many ^[2]. And the implausibilities in the argument do not go far enough to explain the emergence of more film genres. This essay aims to argue the extent to which Laura Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is still relevant today. The essay is divided into three main sections, listing the importance and limitations of the essay. Specifically, it begins with a discussion of Laura Mulvey's argument that it is still highly relevant to modern cinema and textual analysis of the article. Secondly, it argues that Laura Mulvey's argument has many limitations and is no longer decisive for contemporary cinema. Finally, the paper supports the view that Laura Mulvey's argument is no longer too relevant to modern cinema.

2. The Importance of "VP&NC"'s Argument

On the one hand, it has been argued that Laura Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) is still highly relevant and influential today. This article is regarded as a seminal work in feminist film theory, as well as one of the most contentious ^[3]. Williams discovers that it was challenging to write anything in the early days of feminist film studies without mentioning Laura Mulvey's renowned manifesto, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" ^[4]. This essay by Laura Mulvey is divided into three main sections: the analysis and deconstruction of Psychoanalysis, the pleasure produced by scopophilia, and the relationship between gender and narrative. Firstly, there is an analysis and deconstruction of the theory of psychoanalysis. The theories of phallocentrism and castration threat mentioned here are both considered by Laura Mulvey to be "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" ^[2]. Although conventional, male-centric theories continue to rule the screen. For instance, movies from the classic Hollywood era tended to be heroic tales viewed chiefly

from the perspective of men, like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). With the development of Laura Mulvey's theory, women's films began to be shot more frequently and enter cinemas. For instance, *Thelma and Louise* [5] tells the story of Thelma (Geena Davis), a housewife with life is less than ideal, and her equally lonely girlfriend Louise (Susan Sarandon), who goes on a vacation for a break but escapes for murder. Traditionally, women enter the symbolic order as lacking or castrated forms. Just as Laura Mulvey demonstrates the desire of women to make up for the lack of phallic symbolism [2]. In this film, however, the figures of the males are flat and absent. This is a rebellion and a challenge to phallogocentrism in its original central position by creating a rupture in the mechanism of a male-dominated film, thus making the film a stage for feminist political struggle. However, Laura Mulvey also points here in psychoanalytic theory that "Woman's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" [2]. The meaning of this phrase is that even when women have this desire or power, they are still unable to achieve it through themselves, like at the end of the film *Thelma and Louise* (1991). *Thelma and Louise* keep trying to escape patriarchal oppression, but in the end, they find that the only way to break with patriarchal society once and for all is to die. The use of death as a powerful way to escape the oppression of patriarchy shows that women have been unable to resist fully.

Is the purpose of cinema only the pursuit of visual pleasure? Laura Mulvey answers that there should be more possibilities in cinema, which has influenced the development of current cinema. She shows that the alternative is to go past outmoded or suppressed forms or to dare to defy conventional notions of pleasure and try out a new language of desire [2]. In the part of the destruction of pleasure, the idea was to counter the patriarchal Hollywood paradigm with a new form of cinema. And after almost fifty years of development, more and more films have emerged that break the mould and are increasingly diverse in their subject matter. Williams finds that films have developed many different genres, focusing on different social issues, such as race, the subjectivity of LGBTQ and more [4]. Feminist films have been made on the theme of race, like *Hidden Figures* [6], which tells the story of several black women who bravely fought against racial prejudice and eventually took their places in NASA. In this film, women no longer appear as visual pleasure in the narrative but are presented as hard-working and talented people.

To this day, scopophilia continues to be the focus of attention for many filmmakers. From the earliest Hitchcock's *Rear Window* [7] to *The Voyeurs* [8], the subject of voyeurism has continued to thrive. In short, The concept of voyeurism is the practice of obtaining sexual satisfaction through the observation of others. Laura Mulvey says the vast majority of popular movies present a hermetically enclosed universe that is unconcerned with the audience's presence, giving them a sense of detachment and appealing to their voyeuristic fantasies [2]. *Malena* tells the story of the tragic experiences of Malena (Monica Bellucci), a beautiful young woman in Sicily, Italy, during World War II, from the perspective of Renato Amoroso, a teenager [9]. In the film *Malena* (2000), Malena is the dream girl of the town's men.



Figure 1: Renato uses a small hole in the wall to peer at Malena [9].

The director repeatedly cuts to Renato's subjective camera to show Renato's voyeuristic approach to Malena through simulated binoculars and shots of Renato's eyes, making it seem as if the audience is following the teenage Renato's perspective in a tense and exciting voyeuristic scene (See Fig 1). But Renato does not just want to see just some naked bodies. What he wants to see is what is hidden by costumes or curtains, and Renato's eyes travel through that cover to get the pleasure of watching and to develop more fantasies; Renato projects his desires on the screen, while the audience projects theirs onto

Renato. “[...], 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”^[2]. Laura Mulvey argues that the relationship between scopophilia and narcissism is contradictory, but the two are balanced in narrative cinema.

The male gaze was an essential idea in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) and is vital for film studies nowadays. Even in today’s society, the male gaze is still unavoidable in cinema due to gender differences and patriarchal influences. “Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative”^[2]. Women are often only present as a spectacle. The presence of the woman only serves to satisfy the male gaze and has no importance in itself, nor does it have the ability to drive the narrative. This ability is exclusively male. Moreover, when men gaze at women, women are objectified as an objective body to be looked at. Laura Mulvey sees this objectification as a way for men to escape the castration threat.

“The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: [...] or else 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 over-valuation, the cult of the female star)^[2].” This objectification deepens the reduction of female power, creating a vicious circle. Thus Laura Mulvey led the rise of feminist film theory. Thornham argues that VP&NC was thought to be causing a theoretical impasse for a long time. However, it has opened up a space and forced the surrounding articles to face challenges^[10]. The traditional male gaze was no longer the only creative perspective, giving rise to several films with feminist overtones. *Thelma and Louise* (1991), as mentioned above, represents an escape from the male gaze. It opened up a new direction in road cinema, breaking with the male-dominated realm of the road movie.



Figure 2: *Thelma and Louise* break the fuel tank contained in the disrespectful van driver’s car with a gun, and the tank explodes [5].

The gun plays an essential role in this film and has been used as a representation of male genitalia and power. Traditionally, guns represent masculinity in movies^[11]. This also becomes a symbol of women’s desire for equal rights when they pick up a gun. Feminism wants to shatter the illusion of male access to pleasure, move away from the objectifying nature of the male role of women, and explore new models of the real woman as a subject. (See Fig 2)

3. The Limitation of “VP&NC”’s Argument

On the other hand, the ideas in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) are considered less relevant to today’s cinema. The most decisive proof of this is that Laura Mulvey admitted that the ideas in this article were too old^[2].

“Her manifesto inspired many and focused the mind, but as she states clearly in the seminar reproduced in this volume, it is ‘very archaic and an object that belongs to its own time...an obsolescent object which people go on looking at because they like it’^[4].” This suggests that the ideas of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) no longer apply to the new era. The article is also influenced by poststructuralism, with a partially radical feminist character. What is poststructuralism? Dillet argues that “Poststructuralism as such does not exist”^[12]. And he says that “A blind faith in truth has led to the worst

episodes in human history, [...]”^[12]. Simply put, poststructuralism cannot be considered a school of theory but rather a political trend of thought. It is really about critiquing individual theories and not trusting the so-called authorities. And this means that Laura Mulvey identified the problem from a critical point of view and believes, in the extreme, that the only escape left for women is a pioneering form of cinema wholly disconnected from the classic Hollywood model. However, she does not propose a specific solution to this form in the article.

One of the most controversial aspects of Laura Mulvey’s argument is the absence of the female gaze. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) only the male gaze and desire are explored in depth, ignoring the female desire and pleasure to see and be seen^[2]. The female gaze is missing from previous works, but under what circumstances does it appear? Balsom explains it this way: “Defined as such, the “female gaze”—a term Brey often renders in English—describes a film paradigm no longer governed by voyeurism and objectification, devoted to representing women’s experiences (including those of trans women) in ways that foreground their position as subjects of desire^[13].”

The classic feminist film, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, can reflect the relationship between women looking at and being looked at^[14]. The film follows Heloise, a bride preparing for marriage in 18th-century France, who develops feelings for Marianne, a female artist hired to paint her portrait. When the painter paints, the painted person becomes the ‘object’ to be gazed at, in the sense that Heloise’s portraits are. She loses her value as a subject and is objectified as a marital commodity. Heloise rejects this gaze because people do not care about what kind of person they see but only focus on their desires and aspirations. They are kidnapping and controlling her, robbing her of her freedom while demanding that she be a feminine figure in accordance with social expectations at the time. But this film shows another possibility of the gaze, the gaze of the other as an equal subject. In Balsom’s article, it is mentioned that six conditions must be met to achieve the female gaze. Balsom finds that Brey outlines six requirements for a movie to qualify for the category^[13]. Not to be enumerated here, but one of the conditions is that ‘The pleasure of spectators does not stem from the scopic drive’^[13].



Figure 3: Heloise and Marianne looking at each other while playing the piano together^[14].

The film fulfills this condition, and the audience’s pleasure does not come from objectifying the female character because the gaze in the film does not see Heloise as an object. This gaze is fluid and mutual, as Marianne looks at Heloise while Heloise looks at Marianne, and an equal love emerges in this gaze. (See Fig 3)

As mentioned earlier, Laura Mulvey has yet to focus on the power of the female viewer. But with the development of television, the female audience became the dominant audience in the domestic space. Although the article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) focuses on the theoretical aspects of cinema, television also has a screen, which means that the viewer still gets visual pleasure on television. And Wheatley investigates that TV is especially good at expressing women’s gaze and desire^[15]. This would suggest that women get more visual pleasure from television. This is because the audience of television is mainly women, especially the group of housewives. Take, for example, the TV series *Game*

of Thrones [16], which follows the adventures of a young girl named Daenerys Targaryen. The importance of the female protagonist in this series surpasses even that of all the male characters around whom the whole story revolves. In the male gaze proposed by Laura Mulvey, the female characters in the film do not affect the main narrative, even if they are removed. But in the TV series, this cannot happen because the whole story ceases to exist by removing Daenerys Targaryen. And it would no longer be a narrative under the male gaze, more in line with female desire.

Furthermore, the queer community represented in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) is similarly overlooked in Laura Mulvey's argument [14]. This is because Laura Mulvey's essay focuses on Hollywood films from the 1930s to the 1950s. This results in a genre-limited analysis and a lack of a forward-looking examination of later films due to the need for a broad enough target audience. Williams argues, at the time, a psychoanalytic film theory established the basis of visual pleasure and did not acknowledge the legitimacy of homosexual desire [4]. But in today's society, watching the same sex has overtaken the pleasure of watching the opposite sex. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) is the story of two women in love [14]. For the first time, Heloise ridicules Marianne's finished portrait, because she has lied to her, and Marianne burns the painting for her self-esteem. The second portrait is complete, but Marianne wants to destroy the painting, this time not for herself but for Heloise because Marianne does not want Heloise to go and marry a man she does not love because of this painting. The third portrait is a miniature portrait painted for Heloise at parting. These portraits are not a vehicle for the objectification of Heloise but an expression of Marianne's love. After the stare, the women leave a deep impression on each other's minds. It is a film in which the gaze, premised on equality, bursts into life and vitality against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. This explains why no male figure appears. This is because even if it does appear, the male role here is only as a functional villain to break up Heloise and Marianne, but the set-up is the same as that of the female character under the male gaze.

4. The Compatibility of Feminism in 1975 with Modern Society

Both of these arguments have some credibility, but this thesis prefers the second, as Laura Mulvey's argument in 1975 is no longer decisive for the development of cinema today. This is because it is almost 50 years old, and new technologies and genres in film are evolving rapidly. However, Laura Mulvey's arguments are still valuable for film analysis. Boyle finds that there will always be overjoyed and thrilled students after learning Laura Mulvey's theory [1]. Because in her theory, she offers a new way of thinking to reflect on the plight of women, which is illuminating for people. Many of them are no longer applicable to new types of films. Williams argues that "Laura Mulvey epitomized the feminist lesson of an era in her 'Visual Pleasure' manifesto, but that era has passed [4]". Academic progress lies in constantly questioning the arguments of those who have gone before us and finding the truth in the criticism. Boyle also suggests, "It is the nature of scholarship—but, particularly, of feminist scholarship—that the insights of the past need to be continually rediscovered [1]". "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) ignores the desires and needs of the female population and the LGBTQ community. In Laura Mulvey's argument, a woman cannot be an active viewer of a film; she can only watch and be watched passively. And it relies too much on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory and Jacques Lacan's image theory without addressing women's cinema itself for it to advance it any further [2].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main conclusion that can be drawn is that Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) is no longer very relevant today. The relevance of Laura Mulvey's arguments to today is analyzed in terms of both support and opposition. It is undeniable that the publication of this article has opened up a new space and direction for researchers of women's cinema. It is the dichotomy of viewing relationships due to gender differences. The essential gender relations in cinema are presented to the reader through psychoanalytic theory. But because it is an early study of women's cinema, there are inevitably some powerful arguments. It completely denies the possibility of active female viewing and ignores the pleasure of homosexual viewing. And having made the critical point about the male gaze, she does not allow the female gaze to emerge. Under the male gaze, women are objectified objects. Williams says, "At this stage the after-life of 'Visual Pleasure' resided in the further thinking it provoked beyond the apparent axioms [4]". Likewise, after the emergence of the female gaze, does the male become the object to be watched in the female film? These are the questions raised by the subsequent analysis of Laura Mulvey's argument as a new research direction. However, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) can no longer be used as a cogent reference in this research.

References

- [1] Boyle K. *Not Waving Agitating? "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," The Second Wave, and Me*[J]. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2015, 15(5): 885-888.
- [2] Mulvey L. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*[J]. *Screen*, 1975,16(3): 6-18.
- [3] Sorfa D. *Hieroglyphs and Carapaces: The Enigmatic Real in Laura Mulvey's Fetishism and Curiosity*[J]. *Film-Philosophy*, 2001, 5(1): e005.
- [4] Williams L. *Blue is the Warmest Color: or the after-life of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'*[J]. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2017, 15(4): 465-470.
- [5] Scott R. (Director). *Thelma & Louise*[CD]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.
- [6] Melfi T. (Director). *Hidden Figures*[CD]. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2017.
- [7] Hitchcock A. (Director). *Rear Window*[CD]. Paramount Pictures, 1954.
- [8] Mohan M. (Director). *The Voyeurs*[CD]. Amazon Prime Instant Video, 2021.
- [9] Tornatore G. (Director). *Malena*[CD]. Miramax Films, 2000.
- [10] Thornham S. *On "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"*[J]. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2015, 15(5): 881-884.
- [11] PheaSant-Kelly F. *The Sexual Signification of the Gun in Western Film*[R]. *A Fistful of Icons: Essays on Frontier Fixtures of the American Western*, 2017.
- [12] Dillet B. *What is poststructuralism?*[J]. *Political Studies Review*, 2017, 15(4): 516-527.
- [13] Balsom E. *In Search of the Female Gaze*[M]. *Cinema Scope*, 2020.
- [14] Sciamma C. (Director). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [CD]. Cannes Film Festival, 2019.
- [15] Wheatley H. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Television*[J]. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2015, 15(5): 896-899.
- [16] Martin G, Benioff D, Weiss D B, et al. *Game of Thrones*. Home Box Office, 2011.