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FEMINISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS IN REAR WINDOW



The nucleus of the ocularcentrist visual culture is *the body*—the fundamental object through which power relations are established. Feminist theoreticians propound a rejection of the stereotypes created by the patriarchal system in films. The means of doing this consists in exposing the offensive mechanisms whereby the woman is sexualized in the film industry. “The cinematic apparatus”, a syntagm proposed by Christian Metz in his essay *The Imaginary Signifier*¹ becomes a social technology. That is to say, a gendered one being absorbed by each individual whereto is addressed. To view a movie implies a process of identification with the camera, in which the notion of *spectator* serves as a substitute for the camera, the projector and the screen.

¹ Metz, Christian, *From the Imaginary Signifier: Identification, Mirror. Film Theory And Criticism*, Sixth Edition, Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 820-834.

Thus he sees exactly what the camera shoots, with less effort though. The device slides in panoramic movements while the spectator remains still so that he becomes an all-seeing transcendental subject. Especially striking is the fact that the cinematographic images are reflected on the spectator's retina. As a consequence he regains the features of a screen and then the images are recorded in the memory.

More specific, the gleam goes into the eye ball, then through the crystalline of a lenticular shape so as to project itself on a light sensitive layer situated on the back of the eye, the retina. Sensible sensor cells called *rods and cones* in the retina convert incident light energy into signals that are carried to the brain by the optic nerve. In the middle of the retina is a small dimple called the *fovea* or *fovea centralis*. It is the center of the eye's sharpest vision and the location of most color perception.² The human eye has three types of receivers sensible to the red, green and blue radiations. When these radiations stimulate the receivers equally, a white or neuter gray light is perceived. But if stimulation is unequal, an imbalance which causes the eye to distinguish only the dominant colour. So, Technicolor and other colour techniques became vital marketable devices, providing the viewer with an optical experience that could not be achieved outside the cinema. Colour effects are used to describe scenes, people

and moments as objects. Cinema involves the senses. The spectator's position is a privileged one because it offers the illusion of a control upon the animated experience on display. Taking into account the course of the film, he suffers an imaginary deification, suggested by Metz: "the camera inscribes an empty emplacement for the spectator-subject, an all-powerful position which is that of God himself, or more broadly of some ultimate signified." According to him, we have a double movement of the look: a passive one and an active one. Active, because it throws its vision upon something, choosing to look in certain direction and a specific angle; and passive because it records the object.³ This mirror mode of the apparatus thus becomes a metaphor for the relation between the spectator and the signifier.

As a follow-up, the spectator subconsciously recognizes the absent nature of the signifier. He is well aware that what he sees is just a recording, but he deliberately chooses to understand it as a reality within the boundaries of cinema. This knowingly choice of the observer is called *disavowal* of the subject's perceptual belief in favour of a more primal one. Nonetheless, the feminists say that the very concept of *spectatorship* gives a gender distinction. I am referring to the ways in which the film communicates itself to each individual or the manner which the identification of his persona is requested and structured

² <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/vision/retina.html>, 19 Jan 2009.

³ Metz, Christian, *op.cit.*, p. 824.

in the film. All these things and more are related, intentionally and explicitly, with the spectator's gender. Similarly, sexuality as a construct and self representation, is no longer regarded as ambivalent (both masculine and feminine), but a sole one—masculine. While femininity is represented as passive, seen only in terms of its relation to masculine sexuality. The later being active, spontaneous, easily excitable by objects of desire and phantasies.

Rear Window (1954), the film directed by Alfred Hitchcock focuses on matters intensely discussed by feminist theorists, such as: *Scopophilia*, *Voyeurism*, *the Gaze*, *Objectification*, *Fetishism*; all this in a psychoanalytic context. It was filmed at Paramount Pictures starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly. The Hitchcockian vision implies several cameos inherited perhaps from its mentors: George Fitzmaurice and Graham Cutts. It is worth mentioning that these top directors had an overt influence in shaping the peculiar cinematic universe. As we can observe the movie has a rather holistic *Weltanschauung*, seen from a subjective point of view and being "theatrical" in its content.

In her innovative article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis as a means in understanding the fascination that enlures the Hollywoodian picturedom upon the cinema-goer. The scene I am about to analyze places L. B. Jeffries, a

photojournalist, in a wheelchair. His constrained position is due to an attempt of taking a picture of a race car that rolls over. His bold gesture left him with a gypsum cast on his foot with the amusing writing: "Here lie the broken bones of L.B. Jeffries". Once he is called on the phone by a friend, his ocular raid begins. The picture is filmed within the confines of a small courtyard seen from his studio-apartment. The spectator identifies himself with the libidinal masculine look because of the movement of the camera. There are three ways of looking: through the camera, the character and the spectator.⁴ Hitchcock films via the subjective channel of the male protagonist; a fact that makes the audience share his vision. We have a lot of close-ups that show us the reaction of Jeffries when he is seeing Miss Torso. The voyeurism and the impetus in scripting the neighbours lives comes from his job as a photojournalist. He is definitely not a misanthropic person, as he was dynamic and social before the accident. He has a celibate life style and his physical entrapment becomes a pretext in spying the neighbours. Although there is no moral doctrine sustained by any scene, Stella, his nurse protests against his peeping "the New York State sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse. And they got no windows in the workhouse". His clear interest on Miss Torso and the other habitants of the

⁴ Mulvey, Laura, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Houndsmill, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1989, p. 6-9.

complex is displayed as a daily routine in the life rhythm. She is having breakfast in all her splendour. With her blonde hair and pink lingerie, she is practicing her dance routine on a sultry tune. Every move she makes is carefully observed by his and our eye. Miss Torso swirls in ballet steps, her attitude denotes grace as she stands on one leg while the other is lifted and well turned out with the knee bent at a 90-degree angle. The masculine gaze is delighted as her tawdry semi-nakedness is indulging him. This matter of sexuality is transposed in a frequent ritual starked by overt ballet positions; better yet a theatrical spectacle that portrays an objectified image.

“Throughout his work Hitchcock reveals a fascinated and fascinating tension, an oscillation, between attraction to the feminine [...] and a corresponding need to erect, sometimes brutally, a barrier to the femininity which is perceived as all-absorbing”.⁵ The spotlight feminine presence can be observed in all her evolution. Each and every element has a contribution to this *mise en scène*. The automatic gesture of opening a fridge turns, in the airy and gentle hands of the ballerina, into an act of the show. She is leaning over to get some food whilst she is moving her pelvis in an alluring way. Thus the visual object has an intentional

signification⁶, in the shadow of which a mixture of cultural, symbolic, social and material influences are put together. The woman is susceptible to the media and the manipulative dimension can be discovered after the translation of visual consignments. It maintains the scanner-like gaze for the exhibited object. The difference between the *gaze* and the *glance*, in the foucauldian consideration, is that: the *gaze* implies an open field, and its essential activity is of the gradual order of reading; it records and totalizes. It is related to hearing and speech. That is why, Jeffries first hears the joyful music and then casts the gaze upon Miss Torso. The *glance* does not scan an entire field, it strikes at one point, which is central and decisive. The gaze bears a modulated focus, while the glance knows what she is after. It is demystifying.⁷ The dancer carries the burden of the subjective gaze that canvasses her flexible corporeity and sets up male dominance. She is no more than an object of sexual gaze with no biography, no real name. There to serve the libidinal drives of the male. Her desirable and young look become no more than functions of some image practices: framing, light, the movement of the camera, the angle of capture etc. According to Laura Mulvey she is more associated with the surface of the image, not with its depths.

⁵ Modleski, Tania, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, Methuen, New York, 1988, p. 42.

⁶ <http://www.phantasma.ro/caiete/caiete/caiete2/05.html>, 11 Ianuarie 2009.

⁷ Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Routledge, London, 1973.

The two-eyed vision has a third dimension, meaning space depth. Here, the human eyes place a certain item in space and their optical axes achieves the angle of convergence. The opening of the angles depends if the item is situated near or far. As a result, the human obtains the sensations of accentuation, volume, deepness in space. The item will not be received identical from various points of observation.⁸ When Jeffries uses his professional telescopic photo lens camera with its huge objective glass, his view becomes one-eyed. Although the elements of the objectives in space can be perceived, they cannot be ordered on a third dimension, on depth. The woman is an erotic object, an icon for the character within the screen story and an erotic object for the spectator by shifting tensions through camera movements. The image-scene transmits a message, it stimulates the man's imagination. Moreover, it has an incentive function as the erotic and artistic expression of Miss Torso's dance allows the human body to be exposed. It advertises the free peeping show. Her movements are on the ascending diagonal of the frame, denoting a state of optimism, accomplishment and pleasure. All this can be seen on Jeffries smiling face. The voyeur needs to keep a certain distance between him and the image. The film is characterized by a sensorial

illusory plenitude and still haunted by the absence of those objects that are there to be seen. Absence is a distance for the Peeping Tom to configure space. The spectator and protagonist's desire comes also from the pleasure of seeing something forbidden related to the feminine body. Mulvey brings up phallocentrism and its manifestations.

Consequently, the woman in the patriarchal subconscious exists only in correlation with castration. That is to say, the illusory correspondence of the male penis with the phallus, makes women be looked as castrated. Through his absence or presence, the penis becomes the defining feature of both sexes. Female bodies are seen as incomplete, mutilated whereas the penis a "detachable" organ prefigures the function of the phallus. By the agency of the erectile form and force of penetration, the phallus is a means of accessing the field of the other; extensively filling in the lack. The symbolic investment of the phallus transforms it into a fetish. The woman is an object of desire for the man placed on a marginal position in the symbolic order. Thenceforth, the castrated woman lacks the phallus, symbol of power, strength and occupies an inferior social role. When she says "I", it is simply a masquerade of the masculine ego, an inconspicuous reflection of the subject, an imitation of the phallic subject.⁹ The sex drive that plunges

⁸ http://www.photocami.ro/docs/Tema_1_Formarea_imagini.pdf, 19 Jan 2009.

⁹ Grosz, Elizabeth, *Jacques Lacan. A Feminist Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, first published in 1990, reprinted 1991, pp. 77-78.

the man to look is malleable. The purpose is twofold: to get the object and to gain satisfaction. The voyeur acquires pleasure even by deviating from the main purpose, because the objects can be interchangeable. Jeffries observes the entire complex of apartments to gain gratification. Both voyeurism and exhibitionism are forms of the scopic drive of the relentless desire which don't take into account the amount of energy invested in the process. They are governed by a grammatical function, who is also incorporated by a self-reflexive position: "I look", "I am looked at", "I look at myself".¹⁰

The object is not a Real one, but the presence of an absence, which can be occupied by any other object. Here, Jeffries, curiosity and attention is drawn toward the others: Mrs. Lonely Hearts, Mr. Lars Thorwald etc.

Lacan is asking himself: "What is the voyeur trying to see? To what is his gaze directed?... What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence. What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there

is only a hairy athlete. What he is looking at is not...the phallus but precisely its absence..."¹¹ The gaze must be placed outside the conscious control of the subject and that means it comes from the area of the other. The scopic drive possesses the object and that makes us think that the object is both part of the subject, but can be detached by it.

In an online journal called *Senses of Cinema*, professor Murray Pomerance¹² says that his "recuperative state of being" develops Jeffries interest and ingenuity in solving crimes by its focal clarity in "scripting the lives of the neighbours upon he is spying". We see more than him because he keeps having a doze from now and then, on a fierce heat. So, the "motion pictures: are not pasted up in a fluid way but with many gaps. He resembles Jeffries with a movie-buff absorbed by each small spectacle across him. Every window is like a "window shop", where he uses his imagination to pick up "fascinating tidbits or make provocative speculations".¹³

If we take into consideration the urban setting of the film and see the next door apartment as "window shops", Jeffries becomes the central figure of the new aesthetics of the visible. A flâneur, a man

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Murray Pomerance is Professor and Chair in the Department of Sociology at Ryerson University, and the author of *An Eye for Hitchcock* (forthcoming) and editor of *BAD: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen* (SUNY). He is editor of the "Horizons of Cinema" series at SUNY Press and, with Lester D. Friedman, co-editor of the "Screen Decades" series at Rutgers University Press.

¹³ http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/29/rear_window.html, 19 Jan 2009.

of the crowd who is fascinated by a world displayed in front of him. He is moving in this world as if it were in a supermarket store filled with images, bodies, objects which can be consumed to satisfy him. Miss Torso has also an artistic message and it seems the aesthetic of her image has a commercial finality.¹⁴

Classical cinema encourages the desire to look by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image. Narcissistic visual pleasure can be derived from self-identification with the figure in the image.¹⁵ The active instinct is further developed into a narcissistic form. *Der Schautrieb* stands as a motivation in viewing objectified women. Along Jeffries, we find his glamorous model girlfriend, Lisa Freemont, “who never wears the same dress twice”. Her insistence on fancy clothes and jewelries trigger the anxiety for the castrated woman. Mary Ann Doane speaks of a female masquerade; meaning that the female spectator puts herself in the position of a man. This mask

of femininity functions as a compensation for their masculine position. Doane argues that the female spectator lacks the distance mentioned above (needed by the voyeur), because she is the image. An “overwhelming presence to itself of the female body”¹⁶; moreover the effectivity of this type of masquerade lies in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image. In this way, the image can be manipulated and readable by the women. Lisa sees the party at Miss Torso’s apartment and says, very much assured, that she doesn’t love the man who embraces the dancer. Doane remarks the female spectator is consumed by the image rather than consuming it. Lisa Freemont makes that assertion as she has in mind her own relationship. The emotional baggage of Lisa leads to overidentification so that the man’s object of desire is not desirable for her. The active desire of both the female character and the female spectator is transformed into a passive one—to be the desired object.

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¹⁴ Pop, Doru, *Ochiul și corpul. Modern și postmodern în filosofia culturii vizuale*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 156.

¹⁵ Mulvey, Laura, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Jones, Amelia, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 60.

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