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## Feminist film studies 40 years after 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', a triologue

Laura Mulvey, Anna Backman Rogers & Annie van den Oever

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### Abstract

Forty years after the publication of her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen*, Laura Mulvey, together with Anna Backman Rogers, has edited *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, which is the latest instalment of *The Key Debates* series. NECSUS invited Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers to join Annie van den Oever, editor of NECSUS and series editor of *The Key Debates*, in a 'trialogue', which in part reflects and re-emphasises the topics publicly discussed during the *Feminisms* symposia.

**Keywords:** cinema, feminism, film studies, Laura Mulvey, screen

Forty years after the publication of her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen*, Laura Mulvey, together with Anna Backman Rogers, has edited *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), which is the latest instalment of *The Key Debates* series. The book was recently promoted and discussed in a succession of symposia and public presentations in London, Gothenburg, Amsterdam, Groningen, and Utrecht. Later this year, *Feminisms* will be the topic of a public debate at Centre Pompidou in Paris.

This succession of debates signifies, among other things, a renewed and keen interest in feminist scholarship in film studies today as well as a return to some of the political questions regarding gendered film viewing and fe/male spectatorship – questions which were put on the agenda of film and media studies by Laura Mulvey exactly 40 years ago. NECSUS invited Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers to join Annie van den Oever, editor of NECSUS and series editor of *The Key Debates*, in a 'trialogue'.

gue', which in part reflects and re-emphasises the topics publicly discussed during the *Feminisms* symposia.<sup>1</sup>

*van den Oever:* Back in 2006, at one of the foundational meetings for *The Key Debates* in Groningen, while reflecting on relevant ways to reassess the history of film theory in terms of the debates that had prompted fundamental mutations and appropriations in the field, it was you, Laura, who suggested we devote one volume of the book series to feminist film theory. Fellow series editors Ian Christie and Dominique Chateau seemed to agree that this topic deserved its own publication. We were delighted when later on in the meeting you added, 'and perhaps that book should be edited by me'. We thought that was a very generous offer. As you may recall, we immediately and full-heartedly accepted. We returned to you in 2011 with the suggestion that Anna Backman Rogers, then working with me at the University of Groningen, would be an ideal co-editor. You not only thought this a very good idea but soon decided with Anna that the angle on feminisms should be contemporary rather than historical. The two of you were determined from the start to focus on feminisms, plural, as it is experienced and theorised today. For some time now many of us have felt that feminism is back on the agenda, academically as well as in a broader social, cultural, and political sense, as Patricia Pisters recently mentioned in the Amsterdam roundtable discussion. A keen interest in the feminist debate can be sensed among today's younger students and PhD candidates, in television programmes such as Lena Dunham's *Girls*, in current gender-driven viewing attitudes, and in the 'male gaze'. Now, before we dive into questions about the editing of this book and the topics it addressed, may I take you back 40 years ago, Laura, to the time when you wrote your now canonical essay, which is familiar to most students of film and media theory? How did you come to write 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'?<sup>2</sup>

*Mulvey:* I have recounted this story a number of times in various essays, but I am grateful to both of you, and to NECSUS, for giving me this opportunity, in light of the publishing of *Feminisms*, to give some background. The historical context for the essay is really significant, as it was written under the immediate influence of the Women's Liberation Movement. As such, film was really secondary to the process. During the early part of the 1970s, I was part of a Women's Liberation reading group ('The Family Studies Group'). In this group we analysed a number of texts by male theorists which investigated the structure of patriarchy, family life, and women's place within society. Having read Engels and Levi-Strauss, we started reading Freud. Psychoanalysis as a discipline supplied us with a conceptual vocabulary to scrutinise questions of sexu-

ality, gender, and social interpellation via the regulation or control of sexuality. Of particular interest was the Oedipus Complex, which creates a hierarchy of male over female. This was an important and illuminating discovery for all of us, as it seemed to speak to the ways in which women are assimilated into and controlled socially and psychically by patriarchal force, a structure that is repeated ad infinitum.

*van den Oever:* So in fact, re-reading Freud in the early 1970s was useful, as it helped to frame and analyse the repetitive reconstruction of misogynous forms the 1970s feminist movement felt had not disappeared at all?

*Mulvey:* Once again, there is the question of context. I'm not aware of a previous movement that had used Freud in this way. Although, of course, we looked back with interest at antecedents, there was not a sense of 'following on' but rather of initiating and formulating both actions and ideas in relation to the demands of the time. In addition to a collective reading and discussion of Freud, I was (and this was personal, not collective reading) very struck by Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1933), which correlated well with Freud's delineation of the male castration complex because of its intricate analysis of phobic misogyny in late-nineteenth century culture. These sources helped me to read certain images as exhibiting a kind of 'vernacular fetishism' that laid bare partially-concealed symptoms. These symptoms spoke of a patriarchal unconscious that had very little to do with the reality of female experience, an experience that was defined by oppression. These texts provided me with a critical framework and also made the task of deciphering the meaning or coded message of these images a lot of fun.

*van den Oever:* In your article for *Sight & Sound* you explained that the driving force of the argument in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' was derived from psychoanalytic theory and the concept of a patriarchal order, and that your idea had been 'to use one, psychoanalysis, to reveal the unconscious of the other, patriarchy, and it was the perspective of feminist theory that made possible this, perhaps paradoxical, political and intellectual venture/adventure'.<sup>3</sup> You saw that the method was productive?

*Mulvey:* Yes. And Hollywood cinema was the 'case in point' for 'Visual Pleasure'. Moreover, the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement had established a kind of politics that centred on the female body as a site of struggle – a struggle for reproductive rights and health (abortion/freely available contraception) and women's demands to define their own sexuality. By extension, we

came to examine the representations of the female body as its own form of politics. Psychoanalytic theory, as well as semiotics, abstracted sexualised images of women from a natural or referential context and forced one, rather, to examine these images as cultural constructions – that is, as a product of the society from which they emanated.

*Backman Rogers:* You have indicated before that it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of Hollywood cinema for your essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ and, indeed, the idea of a new postwar avant-garde film movement that runs through the essay. You discussed some of these issues at hand at greater length in the introduction to the second edition of *Visual and Other Pleasures* (2010), and in your *Sight & Sound* article.

*Mulvey:* Especially in the UK, the 1970s turned out to be a major shifting point in the history of film criticism. I was very much a part of that shift, and my thinking stems from it. This is perhaps best emblematised by the axis between Hollywood and avant-garde film, which was preoccupying us all in this moment. The decision to write about Hollywood cinema was born out of both personal and aesthetic factors. It was primarily the cinema I was most familiar with at the time of writing and also loved to watch. This period came to an end with the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the demand for and rise of a new kind of filmmaking, the introduction of more politically-influenced thought into the realm of cultural criticism, and my experiences with the Women’s Liberation Movement, which forced me into seeing films that I had loved in an entirely different light.

*Backman Rogers:* They brought about the change in your viewing attitude that underpins your manifesto?

*Mulvey:* Yes. Prior to this, I would say that I had very happily consumed this kind of film, perhaps unknowingly. I came to realise that I had watched these films by assuming a masculine perspective, which was coded within the very language or structure of the films themselves. I would say, then, that the essay is really autobiographical in this sense, because it was based on my own patterns of spectatorship – before encountering feminism and after. Along with a changed viewing strategy, I discovered the potential for emerging critique and analysis, and my desire to see a new kind of counter or avant-garde cinema was born.

*van den Oever:* In your public address at the event held at the Netherlands Research School for Gender Studies in Utrecht, you referred to your essay as an 'intellectual experiment', implying that this type of experiment was typical of the 1970s. And you described *Screen* at that time as intellectual through and through, and 'quite unafraid of jargon'.<sup>4</sup> Your essay or manifesto sprang from an era quite unafraid of intellectual enterprises. Your films with Peter Wollen were conceived within this same intellectual and critical climate, were they not? In his retrospective analysis of the context of *Screen* in its early days, Ian Christie reassessed the period as deeply political and theory-driven.<sup>5</sup> Your films were part of it. If I recall correctly, you have always labelled your avant-garde films of the period as 'theoretical movies'.<sup>6</sup> Today we would perhaps call them 'film essays', or 'video essays', or even 'audiovisual essays', as Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin do in *NECSUS*, or Catherine Grant in *Film Studies for Free*.

*Mulvey:* Yes. Perhaps this is also a good moment to recall that this was a period of a film intelligentsia rather than a film academia. Of course, I don't mean to criticise film academia as such, but rather to draw attention to the very different context. However, the institutional framework was extremely important, and the British Film Institute Education Department that founded and funded *Screen* pre-existed university film departments in the UK. The 1970s was an extremely fecund period for experimental filmmaking and critical writing and these movements were deeply imbricated. People often forget nowadays that these experiments with form and content did not actually come out of an academic context!

*van den Oever:* Your essay was not written within the constraints of academia known today. Nor, for that matter, did 'film theory' as we have come to know it exist yet – as a sub-discipline within film studies, developed from the 1970s onward. In fact, as Ian Christie argued in his contribution to the *Feminisms* book promotion at Birkbeck on the 25th of April, there is an interesting simultaneity between feminist scholarship and film theory being shaped in the same context and decade in the UK in the 1970s. From the outset, we as editors of a book series on the mutations and appropriations in European film theory were always aware of the vital role the feminist debate of the 1970s played in shaping both modern feminist scholarship as well as today's film theory, and both owed much to your seminal essay. It therefore seemed highly appropriate that this second phase of *The Key Debates* series should start with a volume that takes stock of how nearly half-a-century of debate has surrounded and continues to link concepts of feminism and film theory. Naturally, we are honoured and delighted that this volume is co-edited by you, as one of the group who origin-

ally conceived the series, and Anna, who has done extensive writing in the field of feminist studies, on Sofia Coppola, Lena Dunham, and others. My question is, do you too in retrospect, think of the 'birth' of feminist scholarship and film theory as simultaneous developments?

*Mulvey:* Although I really appreciate Ian's point, it focuses perhaps rather narrowly on feminist theory. The *Screen* editorial decision to publish contemporary film theory was complemented by its republication of relevant essays from the USSR in the 1920s, as well as its Brecht special issue. This rediscovery of the film theory and avant-gardes of the 1920s were very influential at the time. *Screen* was influenced by the earlier editorial decision of the *New Left Review* to introduce Marxist European theory to the journal in order to counter the English left empirical tradition. Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour had written key essays in French that were being translated around that time into English. However, it's worth mentioning the film theory seminars that Peter Wollen organised during his time at the British Film Institute's Education Department during the late 1960s and his own work that led up to the publication of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* in 1969. And in 1972, Thomas Elsaesser published 'Tales of Sound and Fury' in *Monogram*. So, as happens so often, it's difficult to pick out certain trends among others. However, the use of psychoanalytic theory in 'Visual Pleasure' was innovative, certainly in English, and due to the fact that it was specifically influenced by feminism.

*van den Oever:* Following up on this, let me briefly insert a comment on Metz and the apparatus theory and how it was received within the context of *Screen* in the 1970s. You once said that though Metz, who at that time had made his well-known shift toward psychoanalysis and studying the cinema spectator, was indeed hugely interesting and his work was well read and discussed in the *Screen* context, you only read him yourself after writing your own seminal essay. Am I right in the assumption that this was in part because Ben Brewster, I believe, suggested you not read him so you could fully emerge yourself in your writings on fe/male spectatorship and Hollywood cinema? And another question: could we perhaps add that your essay simply needed to be written and was timely precisely because Metz left women out? The female viewer seems to have been a blind spot for him. Was your manifesto meant to fill this gap?

*Mulvey:* The Metz essay was due to be published in the same issue of *Screen* as my essay. I was working extremely hard to finish 'Visual Pleasure' in time for the deadline and I couldn't embark on reading Metz at that particular point. Also, my essay was polemical, a 'Manifesto' in Mandy Merck's phrase, and I



*Fig. 1: Laura Mulvey (left) and Anna Backman Rogers in a discussion on Feminisms at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 12 May 2015. Courtesy of Olivia Gragnon.*



didn't want to enter into distracting dialogue, even in my own mind. Ben had told me about the Metz essay but agreed that it would be better to focus on the deadline. This was only the second essay I had written (after my 'Allen Jones' essay published a couple of years earlier in *Spare Rib*) since leaving university in 1963 with a severe 'writing block'. It would have been very easy to throw me off course and Ben was an extremely skilled and supportive editor. He also came up with the title. I cared a lot about the 'shape' of the essay, that it had a pattern built into it so that the structure of the argument was visual as well as conceptual. I noticed when I was preparing for the BFI Southbank's event '40 years of Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' that I had said in the first introduction to *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 'I sacrificed a well balanced argument and refinement of style to the immediate interests of the moment, demands of polemic or the economy of an idea or the shape or pattern of a line of thought.'

*Backman Rogers:* Laura, in conversation at the Eye Film Institute in Amsterdam,<sup>7</sup> you mentioned that you considered Alfred Hitchcock to be a co-author of the article on visual pleasure. Indeed, his films seem uniquely suited to visualising the psychic drives and internal conflicts that you elaborate on.

*Mulvey:* I do not think I would have admitted or realised that at the time, but a great deal of my concerns in the article, and my subsequent work, came out of my love of Hollywood cinema and my discovery of psychoanalysis, as I just pointed out. Hitchcock's films work very well within such a psychoanalytic paradigm and, as such, exemplify how sadism, voyeurism, and fetishism can be embedded within the situation of cinematic spectatorship. Of course, with the advent of digital technology and the alteration of how we watch, analyse, and consume films, our relationship to these kinds of images has changed. Looking back though, I see that my early fascination with certain films, such as *The Red Shoes* (which was probably the second film I ever saw) has influenced my writing in a number of ways...

*Backman Rogers:* Yes, because we have spoken about that dance scene in Powell and Pressburger's film in which the figurine that is cut out of newspaper is brought to life (or to dance) and how this scene has stayed in your memory and informed your work on the uncanny and the inanimate.

*Mulvey:* It was the only clear image of memory of the film that I had retained since seeing it as a child...

*Backman Rogers:* It seems to me that this is a foundational idea for your seminal work on the digital turn in *Death 24x a Second*. In what is to my mind a work of exemplary film philosophy, you elaborate on the idea that alongside this altered relation to the image and how we can view it, we also come to see the image as archive. Stillness or stasis, as a signifier of death, haunts the moving image. I am so intrigued by this idea of hauntology, also the ways in which we create meaning (or put into narrative) and order can be destabilised by the potential for disruption that stillness creates. Your use of Barthes' notion of the punctum – even though he dismissed film's capacity to produce this effect – is revelatory precisely because we come to see film's uncanny qualities. I am continually struck by the passage in which you talk about the cinematic retrospectives organised around certain film stars and how a kind of aura is created through this. I remember thinking how apt your words are when Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* came out a few years ago. I didn't particularly like the film, but I was interested in how the auratic presence of Heath Ledger, who had recently died, became part of the film's cultural cache. Perhaps a more poignant example would be your film of Marilyn Monroe in which you distil every gesture and movement of her seductive dance routine. I don't think it was until you screened that in Amsterdam in the Stedelijk museum back in 2011 that I truly grasped what you meant by Hollywood cinema being an art form of gestures and poses – but you can see it in your film; that is, the confluence of auratic qualities and star performance, which only becomes discernible once the image is slowed down or halted. I think this idea of the still image that comes to life, the tension between stillness and movement, has actually informed your scholarship throughout your career.

*van den Oever:* To quickly add to this. When the cinema apparatus changed radically in the 1960s and 1970s, classical Hollywood narrative cinema inevitably changed. TV and video had entered the scene and had an immediate impact on the spectator. Furthermore, from the 1980s onward, and even more clearly from the 1990s onward, the impact of digital devices was widely felt. All these devices allowed film viewers a less passive role than the one analysed by you, Laura, as typical of Hollywood cinema. You were among the film scholars to assess the shift from a celluloid and mechanical to a digital medium, which, as you stated in *Sight & Sound*, has 'profoundly affected not only how films are watched but also the ideological significance of spectatorship'. You even boldly stated that '[i]t was partly to underline the irrelevance of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to contemporary modes of spectatorship that I wrote *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving image*.' Moreover, you suggested that 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which is deeply bound up with Holly-

wood cinema and the technologies of the pre-video era, perhaps ‘... might have acquired a new value precisely due to its age and to the kind of archaic quality of the kind Walter Benjamin noted in the out-dated technologies of the nineteenth century. Today, the essay stands primarily and emblematically for its own moment, actually becoming part of film history that it has, so often, been accused of neglecting’. You suggest, in other words, that your manifesto is a historical piece now. I know you are going to object to the comparison but, just for the sake of clarity, would it not be helpful to speak, like with Picasso, of three distinct phases in your work? In the 1970s you were made to rethink cinema viewing from an ideological, feminist perspective; second, you were made to rethink the impact of technologies on the spectator’s position; and third, you were made to rethink the feminist project today by readdressing many of its facets, past and present, in *Feminisms*. Since the 1970s, things indeed have changed, and today’s most urgent questions in the feminist debate seem very different from questions and debates back then. You engaged a range of interesting authors to contribute to your book: Martine Beugnet, Lucy Bolton, Annette Brauerhoch, William Brown, Jenny Chamarette, Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Anu Koivunen, Sophie Mayer, Janet McCabe, Veronica Pravadelli, Geetha Ramanathan, Ingrid Ryberg, Leshu Torchin, Patricia White, and Sharon Willis. Moreover, you added a dialogue with Miranda July. What did you and Anna feel were urgent topics to deal with in your new book?

*Mulvey*: I think the three phases work well! Or rather the first two are clear to me, and I like the way that the third enters in. Most of all, working on the book with Anna was a learning experience for me. It was extremely important for both of us that the book should acknowledge the dialogue between feminism and other political movements that had included questions of representation and thus the cinema in their concept of struggle, most obviously the impact of theories of race and Lesbian theory, as well as other recent theoretical and aesthetic developments, such as women’s work in installations, pornography, activism, and the question of affect. I learned a great deal from my dialogue with Martine, which, alongside working with Anna, was one of the illuminating and exciting aspects of the book. However, both Annette’s essay on *Frauen und Film* and Amelie, Lynne, Patricia, and Sharon’s collective essay on *Camera Obscura* create a link between the old days, the early phases of feminist film activism, criticism and theory, and the very different demands of the present. Both essays trace the ways in which the journals’ editors over the years have responded to historical, ideological, and technological changes.

*Backman Rogers:* I think one of the things that Laura and I found both inspiring and perhaps a little difficult in terms of drawing up an outline for the book was the sheer amount of material that was available to us. Of course, we were working across a generational divide which also served to illuminate or perhaps contextualise the remit of what we would cover. We knew that certain contemporary, and perhaps even controversial, issues would have to be addressed (such as pornography and theories of affect), and so we decided to focus almost entirely on new and emerging phenomena and to work with younger scholars. One major shift has been in the field of activism, because the notion of collective agency has changed. Multiplicity and diversity are central themes of the book, and the idea was not to shut down or delimit what feminism is and how it functions as a philosophy and politics. Interestingly, the question of activism is one that has been raised in a number of settings as we have promoted the book. We have been surprised that people are still somewhat determined to perpetuate the myth that there is such a great divide between academia and activism. For us, they are different faces of the same coin; some of us come at this from the street and some of us come at it from the classroom – but these are not mutually exclusive. I think we were all really moved when Veronica Pravadelli, one of our contributors, said during the book promotion in Groningen that she considers her teaching to be her activism. Her version of activism takes place in the classroom, and I think Laura and I feel similarly. I certainly wrote the piece on Lena Dunham's *Girls* as a kind of polemical manifesto. It should be read like a doctor's prescription: diagnosis, symptoms, and cure!

*Mulvey:* In fact, Anna, your piece on *Girls* and Janet McCabe's piece on Nordic Noir function very much as a diptych in this respect. While Janet writes about the externalisation of violence onto the female body – images of dismemberment and torture – your piece on *Girls* is very much about the internalisation of violence. There is a similar dialogue between Lucy Bolton's essay on the ageing female body, especially aggravated in its abjection by dementia, and William Brown's on the dematerialisation of the female body in the digital age as personified by Angelina Jolie.

*Backman Rogers:* It does seem now that Janet and I are in dialogue. I think both essays investigate the fractious nature of female identity lived within contemporary, and alarmingly renewed, forms of patriarchy. I've been really touched by the number of young women who have said they could identify with the reading I make of *Girls* because it is about the ways in which we internalise patriarchy and the violence we do to ourselves. It has always been my hope that in stating it loudly and plainly that some female readers might also have that

small moment of epiphany, and activism always starts with awareness. So, when Veronica said that her teaching is a form of activism, I was incredibly moved too, because I feel my writing is my activism and, ultimately, I know I have taken my cue in that from Laura!<sup>8</sup> I was also struck by the number of questions we received on young female celebrities eschewing feminism as a politics; this is something we address in the preface of the book, and I think Laura is absolutely right in stating that something has gone horribly wrong, because young women seem not to understand what feminism is. I do also wonder if there is a larger power structure still at play too. I think I may have upset some people when I said too many young women are deeply afraid of being disliked by men, but I meant it. Our whole social structure has to change because so much of it is still predicated on a culture in which women are 'to be looked at'. It is these kinds of power structures that are in play in a series such as *Girls*, and these kinds of issues always take me back to the sustained relevance and power of Laura's essay. Indeed, one of the ways in which the book creates a dialogue between the 70s and now is through our inclusion of the *Camera Obscura* and *Frauen und Film* pieces. I think young feminist scholars working today are acutely aware of how indebted they are to the work not only of Laura but also of Gertrude Koch, Heide Schlüpmann, Patricia White, and Miriam Hansen, to name but a few. Perhaps one could even say we have an ongoing dialogue with the work of these feminist scholars?

*van den Oever*: Laura, you are known as a most generous intellectual and colleague. In these last years you received several honorary doctorates from universities around the world, the University of the Free State among them, which honoured you for your contribution to feminist scholarship and thanked you for the impact this has had on the changes and transformations in South Africa. Just recently you announced you will retire in the summer. Are you really stepping back, or are you merely stepping back from the burdens of institutional management so typical of university life today?

*Mulvey*: I'll have to see what happens in due course. In the first instance, I just want to have time to lead a normal intellectual life. To read, think, and go to the movies. And see more of my friends!

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## Notes

1. Guest speakers and hosts participating in the public presentations, debates, and round-table discussions in London, Gothenburg, Amsterdam, Groningen, and Utrecht included: Laura Mulvey, Anna Backman Rogers, Veronica Pravadelli, Ian Christie, Dominique Chateau, Patricia Pisters, Rosemarie Buikema, Lucy Bolton, Janet McGabe, William Brown, Annie van den Oever, Giovanna Fossati, and others.
2. Mulvey 1975.
3. Mulvey 2015.
4. The event took place on 22 May 2015 and was hosted by Rosemarie Buikema, Head of the Netherlands Research School for Gender Studies NOG.
5. Christie 2010.
6. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen made *Penthesilea* (1974), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), and the short film *Amy!* (1979).
7. The conversation took place as part of an event organised at Eye Film Institute Netherlands in Amsterdam on 20 May 2015, and was hosted by Giovanna Fossati, Head Curator at Eye.
8. This is a reference to the closing words spoken by Veronica Pravadelli at the Groningen event on 21 May 2015.

