

Feminist Film Theory and Art Education

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Every ten years or so, lonely voices make themselves heard in the art education literature shouting something like 'Pay attention to the "newer media" (Lanier, 1966, p.7), or 'Have you heard? There's a "new image world" (Nadaner, 1985, p.9) out there.' One writer even suggested that "directed, critical inquiry of [television] will extend knowledge in art and aesthetics and enhance the quality of peoples' lives" (Degge, 1985, p.85). Despite these sporadic exhortations, Jaglom and Gardner's (1981) observation that "our culture has not yet invented ways of presenting [the mass media] or teaching its structure to children" (p.35) is still true in North America (Manley-Casimir, 1987).

In *Channels of Discourse* Robert C. Allen (1987) uses the term "contemporary criticism" to encompass the many current strands of critical discourse which have considered the structure and meaning of the lens media. In contemporary criticism it is generally argued that the (perhaps false) polarity of objective and subjective meaning is contained within a larger cultural context, with the result that the limited visual content that was once considered the domain of the fine art world now ranges across the broader spectrum of what [Victor Burgin has] called the "integrated specular regime of our mass media society" (Burgin, 1986, p. 204). In a postmodern society, Burgin argues, art theory shares the same function as "theories of representation in general" (p. 204).

Feminist film theory as it builds on psychoanalysis continues to address issues of form and content as well as the viewer and viewing context in arguing that our place in society and our notions of what is real or possible are gender issues. The feminist strands of contemporary criticism offer a broad theoretical base upon which art educators can begin a critical discourse on the mass media with their students.

Functioning as oppositional forces in the face of traditional aesthetics and drawing from psychoanalytic and semiotic theories in their discussion of the role of the unconscious in looking at the spectacle of film, a number of critics writing in the 1970's (Metz, 1975; Mulvey, 1975; MacCabe, 1976) found meaning in cinematic qualities such as framing, editing, and camera movement which are seen to influence viewer identification and pleasure. Much of this kind of criticism, which is based on the Freudian concept of an unconscious that functions in sexual terms (Freud, 1976) and Lacan's reworking of Freud in the light of structuralist theories of language (Bär, 1974), has been developed in the literature of feminism. Mulvey's pivotal essay (1975) linked the fascination experienced in film viewing with Freud's concept of scopophilia, the narcissistic pleasure to be had through looking at and recognizing the human form.

Mulvey described "looks" in film that are gendered. The dominant look, according to Mulvey (both in terms of actors and audience) is male, sadistic, and voyeuristic. At the simplest level, that of content, women in film are typically represented as passive and objectified. Male characters, on the other hand, are presented as active personalities with whom I, the idealized viewer, is to identify. Film form also plays a part in the gendering of viewers. In classic Hollywood cinema, continuity editing is used to achieve a seamless narrative from fragments of film. Through the careful sequencing of

shots, a film editor can encourage the viewing audience to "buy into" and participate deeply in the film's story. In this context of believability the viewer is positioned through camera angle and shot sequencing to identify with particular characters in the film. According to feminist film theory, the male viewer is in a privileged position, the camera's position. He can see but not be seen, and look at desirable "objects" without responsibility. The female viewer, according to Mulvey, is put in a position of uncomfortable, masochistic passivity. If she identifies with female characters in film she is put in the position of becoming the subject of an other's gaze (an all-too-common aspect of being female in our culture as it is). The other alternative for the female viewer, identification with the male characters, involves a denial of the female spectator's gender.

More recent feminist criticism has broken down Mulvey's image patriarchal determinism by positing a bisexual identification in women's experience of film (Modleski, 1988; Penley, 1988). As Modleski put it, "there must be other options for the female spectator than the two pithily described by B. Ruby Rich: 'to identify either with Marilyn Monroe or with the man behind me hitting the back of my seat with his knees'" (Modleski, 1988, p.6). Early 'universalizing' readings of psychoanalytic theory have been traded for theoretical positions that propose gender as an ongoing problem for all members of society. Sexual difference in psychoanalytic theory "is seen to be imposed upon the subject (who is originally polymorphously perverse, then bisexual, with a strong homosexual tendency). But because that imposition is only ever more or less successful, never totally so, the subject will always be in conflict with its own ill-fitting sexual identity" (Penley, 1990, p. xiv).

Contemporary feminist critical methodology seeks to find significance in film's total visual text, not just the traditional art categories of "form" and "content". The major breakthrough in feminist film theory has been the displacement of its critical focus from the issue of the positive or negative representation of images of women [i.e content and to some extent form] to the question of the very organization of vision and its effects [form and context]. This has the decided advantage of demonstrating that processes of imaging women and specifying the gaze in relation to sexual difference . . . are far more deeply ingrained than one might initially expect. (Doane, 1987, pp. 176-77)

Hitchcock's films have been at the centre of the discourse in feminist psychoanalytic film theory. Both in terms of form reflected in editing, and content Hitchcock's exploration of psychoanalytic themes in the suspense and horror genres have been used by feminist critics to focus on issues of spectatorship and gender. For these critics the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), with its multiple stabbing murder of the female lead, is key. Instead of admiring the wizardry of Hitchcock's editing, they draw attention to its consequences. Kaja Silverman, (1986) suggests that *Psycho* (1960) "obliges the viewing subject to make abrupt shifts in identification. These identifications are often in binary opposition to each other; thus the viewing subject finds itself inscribed into the cinematic discourse at one juncture as victim, and at the next juncture as victimizer" (Silverman, 1986, p. 223). In fact, in the shower scene, while our sympathies may be with the character, Marion, as a victim, visually we are positioned, through point of view editing, in two roles. Regardless of our actual gender, we become an omniscient and voyeuristic observer as we watch Janet Leigh in her character as Marion. This illicit pleasure is soon marred by the omniscient observer's awareness of an intruder. With this

awareness, our image of Marion comes, somewhat ambiguously, through the eyes of the attacker. During the 40 second duration of the attack our voyeurism becomes murderous sadism at the expense of a woman placed before us as a helpless object of our gaze. It has been argued that "the stylization and allusiveness of the shower scene in Psycho(1960) has provided critics with the rationale for lovingly and endlessly recounting all the details of its signification in the very process of self-righteously deploring its signified" (Modleski, 1988, p. 113). Silverman concludes that "what Psycho obliges us to understand is that we want [a privileged view of reality] so badly that we'll take it at any price, even with the fullest knowledge of what it entails" (p. 227). Meaning that, our desire to immerse ourselves in the flow of the fictional narrative is so strong that we will allow ourselves to identify with abhorrent characters, even, as in the case of Psycho (1960), when it is blatantly obvious that we are being manipulated. It is extremely important to recognize that the triad of form, content, and context in the film Psycho, but also in the critical literature on the film are brought into question by feminist writers.

Most recently, Penley has responded to concern over the apparent discord between feminism as a fragmented political movement and psychoanalytic feminist theory as some kind of unifying structure by arguing that At this point we do not need a new totalizing theory of differences, one in which each difference is perfectly articulable with all the others. On the contrary, we need theories of difference(s) that are to be constructed, argued about, negotiated, linked, yes, but with an understanding of how links need to be forged, not discovered. (Penley, 1990, p.xix)

The complexities of difference in terms of gender as it is reflected in film can be seen as one of the starting points of contemporary feminist criticism. Difference as a broader issue that crosses media categories as well as cultural categories should be seen as the legacy of this vital movement in theory. For art educators it is important to address not only the specific concern with gender in film, but to broaden our horizons to include concern with theory(s) of "representation" (Burgin, 1986, p. 204) or "difference" (Penley, 1990, p.xix). The role of "postmodern" art education is to complicate the learning environment by working through a contestable curriculum rather than one that is primarily testable. Art education that incorporates the kind of contextual analysis pursued in feminist film theory is working to recognize just such complexity. To take this one step further, in a psychoanalytically grounded pedagogy "the student becomes a teacher when he or she realizes that it is impossible to stop being a student. And the teacher can teach nothing other than the way he or she learns. For Felman (1982), then, psychoanalytic teaching is pedagogically unique in that it is inherently and inteminably self-critical. It is a didactic mode of 'self-subversive self-reflection'" (Penley, 1990, p.172).

As an example of theory moving across categories, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (1987), linked psychoanalysis, as it has grown out of film theory, with television, to draw attention to a critical difference between film and television found in the viewer's look. Discussed by Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982) in Freudian terms, and then evolved through Lacan and beyond by a number of feminist writers (Mulvey, 1975; De Lauretis, 1984; Tebbatt, 1988) the film text is built visually to demand (through editing for continuity, and the darkened theatre environment) and reward (through pleasurable, dream-like regression) a sustained gaze. "Th[is] gaze implies a concentration of the spectator's activity of looking" (Flitterman-Lewis, p. 187).

In contrast, "the TV viewer's attention is, at best, only partial (for all kinds of reasons, from the commercial "interruptions" to the domestic location of the TV set); there is a diffraction of the cinema's controlling gaze" (p. 187). "As John Ellis (1977) has pointed out, instead of demanding the sustained gaze of the cinema, TV merely requires that its viewers glance in its direction" (Flitterman-Lewis, 1987, p. 187). Where film viewing elicits, through image and viewing context, the suspension of "real time" in favour of an illusory dream-reality, TV "is not Plato's cave for an hour and a half, but a privatized electronic grotto, a miniature sound and light show to distract our attention from the pressure without or within" (Stam, 1983, p.23). Instead of experiencing the pleasures of the omniscient dreamer that film offers, the TV viewer functions as a blissfully irresponsible gardener, building a kind of order in his/her own back yard out of the chaotic fragments of TV programming or letting a particular channel's offerings, announcements, and ads proceed according to their institutionally pre-ordained plan.

We need not limit ourselves to the lens media. Art educators, along with needing to begin teaching about film and the other lens media as visual forms, should consider how the notions of context and viewer positioning drawn from feminist film theory can inform viewer response in more traditional art forms such as painting. What are the signifiers of authority in any viewing context? The visual "background noise" of walls, floors ceilings, lighting, guards, and the environment's relationship to human scale must be brought to the foreground and recognized as part of the meaning of a painting hung in a gallery. What kind of overburden of meaning is built into the narrative of the viewing experience in a national gallery, as opposed to a local, non-commercial gallery? How do framing and scale support or disrupt the illusion of reality in, for example, David's Death of Marat? And in the context of that reality, who are we, the viewer, positioned to identify with? In what ways is the viewer's point of view privileged in terms of race, class or gender in, for example, Delacroix's The Death of Sardonopolis? Is the question of viewer identification with the artist as creative authority gendered, and thus problematic in the same way that identification with the camera in film seems to be? Do we identify at all with the figures in a representational painting or are these "people" so objectified by the painting process that they become fetishized fragments meant for our consumption? When the Canadian National Gallery recently purchased Barnett Newman's Voice of Fire a furor ensued that touched on issues of nationalism, aesthetics, and economics. An analysis of that furor could be used to explore the values held in a number of sectors of society.

Feminist film criticism, as it has grown into current writing on art criticism (Pollack, 1988) and popular culture (Kaplan, 1987), has drawn attention to the notion that viewers can take on the role of critic and expand it to look at themselves and their surroundings as well as the image being viewed. Thus the importance of terms such as "gaze", "glance", and "look" in understanding our relationship to visual images in our culture. Despite the white walls, an art museum is not a "neutral" environment. Our perceptions in a gallery situation are a product of conflicting messages being sent by the artist, the medium, the curator and the gallery all filtered through the lens of our experiences, expectations and desires.

Some artists and art critics struggle with feminism because of its explicit political agenda, the righting of gender inequality. There is an assumption that art should strive to be above, outside of or somehow neutral to daily experience. Popular cultural forms such

as film or television are also criticised as compromised in that their commercial contexts represent another anaesthetic constraint. As has been discussed in the art education literature (Rosenblum, 1981; Duncum, 1987), the lines between "high art" and "popular culture" are far from clear. In attending to the televisual genre of music video and the institution of MTV using the critical tools developed in feminist film theory, Kaplan (1987) has taken several steps that are instructive for art educators. First, she has taken a pop-cultural form seriously enough to carefully (as opposed to gratuitously) criticise its form and content.

MTV is more obviously than other programs one nearly continuous advertisement, the flow being broken down into different kinds of ads. More than other programs, then, MTV positions the spectator in the mode of constantly hoping that the next ad-segment (of whatever kind) will satisfy the desire for plenitude: the channel keeps the spectator in the consuming mode more intensely because its items are all so short. (Kaplan, 1987, p. 143)

Kaplan has also taken music television seriously enough to recognize cultural opportunities in its visual form, content and context. While she draws ample attention to the stereotypical representation of women on MTV which another observer has described as "dyed and teased bimbos [wearing] their underwear . . . outside their clothes" (Thibault, 1990, p.10), Kaplan suggests that music television, as a prototypical postmodern form, also "constructs a decentered, fragmented text" (Kaplan, 1987, p. 150). In typical music television programming it is not unusual to find a video that explores issues of human rights or environmental responsibility followed by another that presents juvenile caricatures of human sexuality. The contrast between these conflicting images and world views is so strong that Kaplan and others argue that it is at least possible, if not inevitable, that viewers will begin to question the values and assumptions being presented. Music television's form is also fragmented. Montage techniques virtually abandoned since the early days of film are a mainstay of music television. This "breaking up of traditional, realist forms sometimes entails a deconstruction of conventional sex-role representations that open up new possibilities for female imaging" (Kaplan, p. 150). We are visually positioned with both genders and sked visually to consider wide variety of power relationships in even a limited selection of videos.

Theory into Practice

In moving from feminist film theory to its application in television we address the most dominant and dominating source of visual imagery in North America. And yet, as stated earlier, it is not a medium that has been explored, though it has certainly been used, in many art classrooms. Photography as a medium to be used and discussed exists in public school curricula as well as in the art education literature (Barrett, 1989). As one of the lens media, photography plays a special role. It is probably the most accessible, least intimidating means for most North Americans to make expressive imagery. At the same time it is certainly finding a place for itself in the art world, and quite obviously is an essential part of the mass media.

The predatory metaphors surrounding photography (Sontag, 1973; Kozloff, 1987) imply that this apparatus too (like film and television) is gendered. I would like, therefore, to conclude with several examples of photographic artists who use their work to address feminist critical concerns briefly touched on in theory above.

Jo Spence (Dennett & Spence, 1982) and Judith Golden (Grundberg, 1987) are among those who have used photography to explore the invisibility of being old, plain, female, or sick. Golden's imagery includes comic/ironic self-portraits where parts of her face peer through holes torn in the faces of media celebrities depicted on the cover of *People* magazine (Grundberg, 1987). Spence practices a personal form of phototherapy through explicit documentary photographs of the fleshly impact of her own and her mother's surgery (Hoy, 1987) and the re-enactment, presented in family photo-album form, of childhood fantasies about their fathers by Spence and a male friend/collaborator (Spence, 1987, pp. 24-5.). Spence produced an autobiographical text and guidebook designed to document her explorations and suggest how others might do the same (Spence, 1986). Spence's images are "theoretical" (McGrath, 1987, p. 71) in the same sense that Burgin (1986) used the term with reference to painting. That would imply that her work is to be taken as Art, but these images of the "unspeakable and invisible" (p. 71) are not only offered as challenging aesthetic objects in the traditional sense. Spence "suggests that the task at hand for any radical photographic practice is both to unpick the apparently seamless photographic web and simultaneously to weave new meanings" (p. 71). There is a pointed irony in Spence's work being collected in the form of a photographic how-to manual for the invisible. The text acts as a powerful antidote to the multitude of soft-porn photographic manuals on the market, epitomized by *How to Photograph Women—Beautifully* (O'Rourke, 1986) with its amply illustrated selection of poses, costumes, lighting and make-up tips. It functions as a visual dictionary for creating simulacra.

The technical and economic accessibility of photography explains, in part, the medium's popularity as an avenue for oppositional cultural practice. It is still true, however, that we only tend to see the work of those (young, feminist, gay or lesbian) among the invisible who have gained access to the artworld. One of the great fallacies that has grown out of "the age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin, 1985) is that the value or import of an image somehow inevitably corresponds to the size of its viewing audience. This assumes that the mass production of images, with the distance this puts between an original image and the viewing audience, unavoidably frees that audience from a kind of "false consciousness" implicit in the extreme value placed on the uniqueness of the art object. Walter Benjamin suggested in 1935 that mechanically reproduced art, "Instead of being based on ritual, begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin, 1985, p. 681). The availability of these images, it was believed, would inculcate a kind of critical realism about images generally. However, when Marcel Duchamp complained that "I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty" (Richter, 1966, p. 207-208) he pinpointed the artworld's capacity to undermine oppositional art by co-opting it into the institutional fold.

In another context, two feminist photographic exhibits (Wilkie, 1987; Bociurkiw, 1989) each argue in different ways that "the visual history of women is an incomplete record. If we don't make a [photographic] record of our lives it's as if we didn't exist" (Wilkie, 1987, p. 59). One show is a documentary presentation of young women living together in group homes (Wilkie); in the other, lesbian sexuality is expressed through erotic/pornographic photography (Bociurkiw). In this second example women viewers were encouraged to respond to the erotic content in the imagery by "Drawing the Line"

(the title of the show) with their comments on the gallery wall next to the photographs in an attempt to break down some of the distance between viewer and image, subject and object. In both cases the artists felt that the socially marginal subjects of their camerawork were given the status of existing in society by the images produced of them. At least in part, the message here seems to be that to be photographed, filmed, or videotaped is to be real. In a curious inversion of the notion of "stealing the spirit" with a camera, here the lens is seen as the avenue for giving people on the margins of the cultural mainstream an existence; to make them real.

Implications

Feminist film theory shows the mass media to be powerful, culturally defining forces both in terms of its content and form. Interestingly, that form is much larger than a screen or a print. Context, the whole arena of a visual experience, becomes a third critical area of inquiry when considering the meaning of a work.

The unavoidable question remains: What do we, as art educators, do with mass media imagery? In North America there are few examples of media studies curricula. It is pointedly ironic that there are strong media studies programs growing in a number of places (Including Australia, Scotland, England, and several Scandanavian countries) while in North America, the hub of mass-media production, there is very little critical study in the public schools (Pungente, 1985; Trend, 1988). Certainly the visual form of the mass media and the meanings it conveys are no more obvious and open to critical interpretation for our children than others.

Drawing from feminist film theory, a contemporary, critical art education should explore the formal aspects of image making or viewing which involve recognizing these processes as potentially predatory acts that can involve the desire to possess or consume. Art criticism, for example, can move from the discussion of design elements in an image to the way the viewer's gaze, glance or look is positioned in terms of gender, race or class.

In terms of content, feminist film theory at a very early stage of its development explored representation and stereotype and their influence on our attitudes. "Difference" is an enormous topic in art. This touches not only issues of gender, but also race, class, ability and even our attitude toward the earth and its resources. In the classroom the issue of representation can be translated into an unlimited list of thematic approaches for viewing both fine and popular art. Implied also in any discussion of representation is the power and responsibility of image makers, whether they are working as professional artists, media designers or public school students.

Contextual analysis demands a broader understanding of images in the world. An artist like Jo Spence uses her images to point out that the presentation of gender in the mass media and the fine arts validates particular people and patterns of behavior while excluding many important ideas and whole groups in society. On an immediate level, it suggests that the way an image is presented has an impact on how we understand it. In the classroom this can be as simple as discussing the changing level of authority an image takes on as it moves from the sketchbook through matting and framing to a gallery or other showplace. It could also involve exploring the differences between singular images such as paintings, drawings or monoprints, and multiple images such as linoprints or photographs.

Relating issues of form, content, and context together: Is our response to the display of images of the human body in an art gallery different from that same image displayed in a magazine? Why are photographs of the nude figure, for many people, more problematic than paintings of similar figures? What are the differences and similarities in the way the female form has been represented in art images compared to contemporary advertising, and what do these connections mean both personally, culturally, and educationally?

To echo Edmund Feldman (1972), if the end of art criticism is a broadened understanding of the meaning and value of an image, and the means to that end is through talk, the general absence of talk about the lens media in the schools as evidenced by the continued calls for the development of such programs (Jaglom and Gardner, 1981; Finn, 1980; O'Rourke, 1981; Boeckmann, 1985; Trend, 1988) suggests that the school system either doesn't consider the interpretation of filmic, photographic, and televisual imagery to be a problem, or the challenge is so huge that educators don't know where to begin.

Feminist film theory, as it can inform critical pedagogy in art education, offers a solid beginning point. Most of us use the media in our classrooms. Just as language arts educators argue that every classroom, regardless of the explicit content of the course being taught, is (for better or worse) a language class, every classroom, whether incidentally or intentionally is having an impact on students' visual understanding of their world. Feminist film theory and contemporary criticism, in exploring themes of gender, representation, and the impact of viewing context on meaning, have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the lens media both as visual/aesthetic forms and as mass media.

As art educators we are in an excellent position to encourage our students to think critically about all that they see. Our goal must be to bring our students to recognize that their potential as sexual, social and political beings is being influenced and at times defined by the images communicated through the mass media. They must know that as image makers and image consumers they can play an active part in that communication.

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