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Spectatorship and the Gaze

A core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of woman as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience. Pornography is the most obvious genre built on the exhibition of women's bodies as objects of desire, fantasy and violence, but the 'objectification' of women is not exclusive to pornography. The incorporation of women's bodies as decorative ingredients in advertisements of drinks, tools and – most notoriously – cars is common practice, while in TV game shows the assistant to the quiz master is the predictably attractive, scantily dressed blonde. Fashion and lingerie photography as published in glossy women's magazines has moved beyond the mere presentation of new styles and lines, and has taken over many of the codes formerly restricted to soft core pornography. Hollywood cinema has a long standing tradition of constructing women as a spectacle for voyeuristic pleasure.

This common feature of popular and high culture alike – for in 'art' women's bodies have been exploited in similar ways – suggests that in western society to be looked at is the fate of women, while the act of looking is reserved to men. Even if women do the looking they do not seem to do it through their own eyes. John Berger writes in his classic study *Ways of Seeing*:

> Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972: 47)

Many feminist authors have pointed to the devastating effects that this 'to-be-looked-at-ness' might have on ordinary women. Wendy Chapkis (1986), for instance, discusses how cultural messages about beauty and slimness negatively affected her own and other women's sense of well-being in general and of being 'truly feminine' in particular. More recently Naomi Wolff (1990) has made similar arguments in her best selling book *The Beauty Myth*. According to Wolff, the cultural industry's prescriptions for women to be beautiful and slender – a pleasure to look at – has produced a generation of American girls and women who suffer from eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia nervosa.

Obvious as it may seem that for women there is little good or pleasurable in 'looking' as it is structured in western culture, it is an argument that denies the possibilities and historical existence of a positive and pleasur-

able female gaze. Women have been looking at movie stars like Rudolf Valentino, Clark Gable, Richard Gere, Don Johnson and others, enjoying not only their narrative characters but their physical appearance as well. Likewise, adolescent girls have turned male rock stars into objects of voyeurism and desire. The sight of hysterical girls throwing their underwear at the stage has been experienced by groups as diverse as the Rolling Stones, the Osmond Brothers and the New Kids on the Block, and has become a normal measure of success.

In this chapter I shall discuss issues like the male and the female gaze and the construction of women and men as objects of voyeuristic pleasure. Unlike content analysis and semiotics which concentrate solely on features of the text, the approaches presented here conceptualize the interaction between text and audience by analysing the particular subject positions enabled, suggested or induced by the text. In these approaches the 'spectator' refers to these subject positions, not to actual audiences.

Feminist film studies provide the main angles and examples for this chapter, however, some arguments may be extended to popular culture in general.[1] Laura Mulvey's landmark article on classic Hollywood cinema and the male gaze that inspired many subsequent feminist analyses, forms the starting point. I shall then review the criticism levelled at such psychoanalytic approaches focusing on two areas in particular: the possibility and pleasures of female spectatorship and the construction of male bodies as objects of voyeuristic pleasure.

Men looking at women

Visual pleasure and psychoanalysis

Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' was published in 1975 and has become the most reprinted article in film theory (Erens, 1990). It has been called 'the founding document of psychoanalytic feminist film theory' (Modleski, 1990: 53) and it dominated the field in the 1970s and the 1980s in the sense that feminist film studies that were not psychoanalytic were hard to find (cf. Byars, 1991). The influence of Mulvey's particular approach has extended to the study of television, advertising and other forms of visual culture as well (Moores, 1990). Although apparently abandoned with the renewed interest in actual audience pleasures, Mulvey's article provides a good starting point to explore the media construction of women as spectacle, the gender of the gaze and voyeuristic pleasure.[2]

Mulvey draws on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalyses to examine the pleasures of 'scopophilia' and 'narcissistic identification' that the classic Hollywood cinema offers. In psychoanalytic theory 'scopophilia' is defined as a basic human sexual drive to look at other human beings, a conscious and concentrated way of looking that causes particular feelings of lust and satisfaction that are not directly related to erotogenic zones. In some cases,

this can extend to extreme forms of 'obsessive voyeurism' or 'Peeping Tomism'. Sitting in the darkened auditorium of the cinema, separated from other audience members and exposed to a visual fantasy world that unfolds independently from the spectator – as if she or he were not there – satisfies common human voyeuristic desires and produces scopophilic pleasure: 'Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world' (p. 31).[3]

Cinema satisfies a second though seemingly contradictory narcissistic human need to identify with others, in this case with who and what is shown on the screen. Mulvey argues that the identification enabled by cinema is fed by the 'mirror phase' in childhood as described by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, at a certain point in its development a child comes to recognize itself in the mirror, but imagines the child in the mirror to be more complete, perfect and powerful. Apart from the direct analogy between watching a movie and looking in the mirror – both framed images – the cinematic experience produces a feeling of omnipotence through identification with the perfect characters on the screen, while at the same time being a reminder of the pre-mirror phase of maternal connectedness by its capacity to make people forget time, place and themselves.

At first sight, these two mechanisms of pleasure – voyeurism and identification – would seem to be at odds with each other and not easily reconciled within a unitary cinematic experience. Cinema, however, is not only a world of fantasy and desire, but is conditioned by the social reality from which it originates. Mulvey contends that the patriarchal definition of looking as a male activity and being looked at as a female 'passivity' allows for a reconciliation of the two contradictory, but constitutive pleasures of narrative cinema. In mainstream Hollywood film, women function simultaneously as erotic objects for the male audience who can derive scopophilic pleasure from their presence, and as erotic objects for the male protagonists with whom the male audience can identify. Camera angles and movements – the third 'looking party' aside from the protagonist and the audience – are crucial in realizing the double pleasure of scopophilia and identification. They enable the male audience to look through the eyes of the male protagonist, simultaneously to identify and objectify, or, in more straightforward terms, to be him and look at her. Thus the conflict between what Freud has called libido (scopophilia) and ego (identification) is resolved by the cinematic display of women as objects of the male gaze.

One might wonder why this process cannot simply be reversed to permit female pleasure as well? Would this not require merely a female protagonist with whom the female audience can identify and a male character displayed as spectacle for both the audience and the female character? Certainly, in the mid-1970s Mulvey found that examples of such reversal – whether in the cinema or other forms of popular culture – were hard to find.[4] Narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema construct the male protagonist as the active agent propelling the story. His actions drive the

narrative forward, and since the camera takes his point of view he is given the power of looking as well. While Mulvey did not directly address the issue of female pleasure, the argument developed in her article implies that within patriarchal culture a reversal of the structure of looking – facilitating concurrent female scopophilia and identification – is out of the question. According to Mulvey, cinematic practice is directly related to patriarchy: 'Film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (p. 28).

While female pleasure is inconceivable in Mulvey's psychoanalytic framework, male pleasure is not without its problems either. To the patriarchal unconscious, 'woman' signifies sexual difference and more particularly she connotes the lack of a penis which evokes fear of castration and 'unpleasure' as Mulvey calls it. 'Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified' (p. 35). Male pleasure in looking can only be rendered unproblematic if the unconscious but fundamental castration threat that women signify is eliminated. The scopophilic order of narrative Hollywood cinema allows for two ways of doing this. First, the original trauma of discovering the mother's lack of a penis can be reenacted by 'investigating' the woman and taking visual and narrative control of her body. Voyeurism borders on sadism here and can be recognized in narratives in which women are trouble-makers, guilty of disturbing the peace of mind of the male hero in whatever sense. Second, the castration of the woman can be denied by substituting her lack with a fetish object – high heels, long hair or earrings for instance – or turning her into a fetish object herself, exaggerating, stylizing and fragmenting female beauty into a reassuring object of the gaze. Mulvey mentions the films of Hitchcock and Sternberg who directed many of the early Marlene Dietrich films as typical of respectively sadistic voyeurism and fetishism.

Mulvey's article was part of a political project aimed at destroying the gendered pleasures of mainstream Hollywood cinema; 'to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film' (p. 30). Mulvey expanded that project by producing avant-garde films with Peter Wollen in which she illustrated the issues raised in the visual pleasure article, and in which she radically broke with the naturalistic camera movements, angles and frames that facilitate the double satisfaction of libidinous and ego drives in mainstream narrative film.[5] While having educational value in calling attention to the illusory mechanisms of Hollywood cinema, Mulvey's avant-garde project has been accused of being overly successful in destroying the pleasure of looking. It has been criticized by feminist critics and non-feminist women alike of being inaccessible and elitist, relegating feminist film making to the margins of cinematographic practice and experience (cf. Gaines, 1988).

Not only does Mulvey's alternative cinema raise questions, there are also considerable problems in her psychoanalytic arguments. The question why

men look at women is sparsely addressed, aside from a rather abstract reference to the way patriarchy has defined the gaze. In such an explanation, the distinction between social and psychoanalytic levels of analysis collapses. While Freud himself acknowledges the co-existence of 'feminine' passivity and 'masculine' activity within single subjects, in many feminist film analyses masculinity and the activity of looking is preserved to biological males and femininity and the passivity of being looked at to biological females. When psychoanalysis is employed in this manner, it appears to offer too narrow a conceptualization of gender which equates masculinity and femininity with being respectively male and female. As discussed in Chapter 3 such a misunderstanding of gender denies the dynamic and contradictory nature of gender discourse and its historic and cultural specificity.

Other authors working from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks have taken Mulvey's point further and employed a more sophisticated version of psychoanalysis to account for the male gaze. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, draws from French feminist theory to sustain her view that a reversal of the gaze is impossible since it cannot escape the same logic: 'The male striptease, the gigolo – both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting themselves as aberrations whose acknowledgement simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy' (1982: 44). Doane's point here is not unambiguous – is she opposed to the system of looking as objectification itself, or does she mean that the exceptions like the gigolo prove the rule of the male gaze? From what follows it is clear, however, that Doane denies the possibility of female subjectivity and voyeurism in current patriarchal society, although she arrives at this conclusion in a different and more subtle manner then Mulvey. While Mulvey sees the opposition between activity and passivity as underlying the exclusiveness of the male gaze, Doane considers the concepts 'proximity' and 'distance' more important. She argues that a precondition for voyeurism is a physical as well as a psychological distance between the bearer and the object of the look. Drawing on Lacan here, Doane contends that the subject's ability to create this distance is located in the appreciation of sexual difference that takes place in childhood. Little boys recognize sexual difference once they become aware of their mother's lack of a penis and are thus forced to dissociate themselves from the mother. Little girls recognize sameness instead and identify with the mother to the extent that separation and distance become problematic or even impossible. According to Doane, female specificity is characterized by proximity and thus women lack the sheer capacity for voyeurism. As a result, the female spectator can only be construed as becoming narcissistically immersed in the cinematic (female) object, or as suffering 'masculinization' by identifying with the (male) hero. While Doane does explain why it is that men look at women, her psychoanalytic framework excludes the possibility that women can look at men, unless they take up a masculine/male spectator position. In a later

article published as reaction to the issue of the female gaze, Mulvey (1979) also claims that the female gaze can only be a masochistic adaptation of the male spectator position enforced by the voyeuristic/fetishistic economy of narrative cinema in a patriarchal order. Autonomous, unmediated and pleasurable female spectatorship is thus inconceivable in the psychoanalytic framework employed by Mulvey and many others.

Female spectatorship?

Psychoanalytic feminist film studies have evoked extensive and varied criticisms, some of which are particular to film studies, others to psychoanalytic theory in general. Several authors have claimed that distinguishing two modes of active looking – voyeurism and fetishism – is a poor theorization of the male spectator position. Masochistic male pleasure is said to be engendered by the overwhelming presence of the fetishized women on the screen, being a reminder of the pre-Oedipal phase of maternal plenitude.[6] Other objections concern the understanding, implicit in psychoanalytic film studies, of media texts containing univocal meanings. The pleasures of the male/masculine spectators are conceived as the direct result of the way they are positioned by the cinematographic mode of address. The text–spectator relation forms a closed system determined completely by the articulation of visual and narrative means with gendered subjectivities which only permits a dichotomous pleasure of voyeurism or identification, and disregards the ambiguities and tensions present in every text (Stacey, 1987). In that closed system gender is believed to be the key factor to an understanding of the idiosyncrasies of spectatorship and pleasure, at the expense of other considerations such as race, sexuality, class, cultural capital, individual life histories beyond the Oedipal stage etc. (Gamman and Marshment, 1988; Pribram, 1988). Furthermore, psychoanalytic film theory has been criticized, like psychoanalysis in general, for its ahistorical nature and its powerless perspective. It is alleged that by denying the possibilities of female spectatorship, feminist theory itself collaborates in the patriarchal project by silencing and annihilating women's experience of mainstream cinema (Arbuthnot and Senaca, 1982). Moreover if, as psychoanalytic theory would have us believe, gendered identity formation takes place at such an early phase in life, prior to the subject's entry in social relations, we are all 'ideological captives' as Jane Gaines (1987) calls it, and the possibility of change becomes hard to envisage.

Most discussion has been prompted by the psychoanalytic foreclosure of female spectatorship, first by the question of whether women can derive pleasure from looking at women displayed by Hollywood cinematographic codes and conventions. With the growing appeal of popular cultural forms exploring the male body, for instance in films like *American Gigolo* and the Levis 501 commercials, the issue of heterosexual female voyeurism has also come to the fore.

Women looking at women

More psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytic framework employed by authors like Mulvey and Doane allows for very restricted possibilities of female spectatorship only. Since 'woman' signifies sexual difference and castration to the male spectator she needs to be brought under control, either through (sadistic) voyeurism or through excessive fetishism. The female spectatorship allowed for by the violence of such narratives will either entail a masochistic identification with the female object, or a 'transvestite' position – as Mulvey (1979) has called it – of masculinization. Both positions are derived from the active/male/masculine–passive/female/feminine dichotomy underlying the psychoanalytic approach. As a result female spectatorship that is not cast in patriarchal gender definitions is inconceivable: positive and pleasurable spectatorship can only be masculine and thus 'unfeminine', while the 'feminine' spectator position constructed by the text is problematic and unpleasurable. However, a quest for female spectatorship that is not chained to the restrictions of hegemonic gender definitions does not seem to be without difficulty either. According to Doane (1982) the feminist theorist is confronted with something of a double bind. She can keep pointing out the absence of women in patriarchal discourse, but in doing so she is reconstructing that same discourse. Or she can point out feminine specificity, running the risk of suggesting an essential femininity. While this indeed seems to be the fundamental predicament of feminist theory, the problem actually arises from the dichotomous definition of gender as either masculine and active, or feminine and passive. In assuming sexual difference, or the specificity of female spectatorship, one runs the risk of falling into the trap of (biological) essentialism, while by underlining the invisibility of women in patriarchal culture the hegemony of masculinity is confirmed and reinforced. The only way out of these predicaments is a radical abandonment of dichotomous definitions of gender, which implies in the case of psychoanalytic film theory an escape from the Oedipal prison house of 'normal' heterosexual development.

Psychoanalytic theory itself does suggest some possible routes for this escape which have been exploited by a number of authors in different ways. Whereas for Doane the girl's attachment to her mother forecloses distance and the possibility of female voyeurism and unproblematic spectatorship, others argue that it is precisely the pre-Oedipal bonding of the female child with the mother that facilitates the pleasurable attraction of women to each other. Since girls are never forced to overcome this attachment as boys are, they carry a latent homosexual desire with them that coexists with heterosexual relationships. Therefore, the female spectator looking at women is always involved in a double desire: an active homosexual one which is rooted in the bond with her mother and a passive

heterosexual one stemming from her identification with woman as object of the male gaze. The plausibility of such female homosexual desire is underscored by the fact that heterosexually constructed stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Bette Davis have also featured in lesbian subculture as objects of desire (Becker et al., 1981; de Lauretis, 1984).

Other authors too have referred to the girl's attachment to her mother to account for female pleasure in mainstream narrative cinema (for example, Byars, 1991; Williams, 1984). They differ however in their appreciation of psychoanalysis. Byars (1991) has developed an eclectic approach to film studies, disavowing Lacanian psychoanalysis for its bias towards white masculinity and its appropriation of the feminine as 'different', 'other' or 'lacking'. While Byars agrees that many films are exactly about the threat of female otherness, there are numerous melodramatic films for example, that belie the Lacanian scenario. Instead, Byars exploits Nancy Chodorow's and Carol Gilligan's materialist reworking of psychoanalysis. These authors claim that because girls are raised by a human being of the same gender, they experience themselves as closely related to other human beings and the outside world, while boys identify themselves as different from their mother and in opposition to the outside world. As a result, girls think of themselves in relation to others and boys perceive themselves as unconnected individuals. The main difference here from Lacanian theory is that Chodorow sees the social process of mothering as underlying current gender difference instead of anatomical otherness. Moreover, the specificity of femininity is defined positively as the capacity to engage in meaningful triadic relationships, and not as an absence or lack. Chodorow's theory of female development is particularly convenient for female orientated melodrama and the stories of mothers and daughters that were popular in the 1950s. The central theme of these films concerns the plight of the heroine who wants to reconcile her desire for exclusive heterosexual romance with her wish to maintain significant relations with other women, often family members and in particular her mother.

Even within the confines of psychoanalytic theory, female spectatorship appears to involve more complex mechanisms than masochistic identification or transsexual voyeurism. The never completely ending attachment to the mother underlies a variety of desires and recognitions evoked by the women on the screen producing spectator pleasure that can be considered as a particular form of female gratification constructed out of the capitalist and patriarchal organization of the western nuclear family. Needless to say, such pleasure cannot be considered a universal female response to mainstream Hollywood cinema. Black female authors have wondered whether the debate is relevant to their concerns at all (Roach and Felix, 1988), and recently some of the leading theorists in the field have incorporated issues of race in their work (Modleski, 1991). Mary Ann Doane (1991) argues, for instance, that both women and blacks constitute an enigma and a threat to the patriarchal unconscious that can only be contained by violent repression. Doane's psychoanalytic account of the

collective unconscious offers a powerful explanation of the persistent nature of sexism and racism. However, it also produces a somewhat 'egocentric' discourse that is preoccupied with the pathological character of white patriarchal society and that can only define blacks and women as 'different', 'other' and 'deviant'. The potential and realizations of these 'other' subjectivities and cultures in the context of white patriarchy are issues that psychoanalysis leaves undiscussed.

Beyond psychoanalysis

Female pleasure and spectatorship have been theorized outside the psychoanalytic frame as well. Instead of analysing the entire cinema–spectator relation as a re-enactment of pre-Oedipal attachments and Oedipal severance, several authors have examined the pleasures evoked by particular genres and single films. Byars' (1991) analysis of 1950s melodrama mentioned above, demonstrated that narrative, *mise-en-scène* and characters of the 'women's weepies' can hardly be said to position the spectator in a masculine, voyeuristic or fetishistic engagement, but engender an entirely different text–spectator relation based on maternal bonds. Likewise, analyses of films featuring strong women characters involved in friendships and/or affairs with other women show the possibilities these texts offer for female gazing or pleasure. Such examinations focus on the way narrative and visual devices enable different 'readings' of the texts. Whether and how these 'readings' will be actualized by real audiences depends on their particular characteristics and viewing contexts, and is not determined by the psychoanalytic drama inscribed in the text. Two examples of such approaches are often mentioned: Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's (1982) analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a 1953 Hollywood film starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell as showgirls, and Jackey Stacey's (1987) analysis of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a 1984 mainstream movie featuring Madonna (Susan) as the object of curiosity and longing by a suburban housewife.

Arbuthnot and Seneca reject the dominance of psychoanalytic theory in film studies for its preoccupation with male spectatorship: 'We suggest that it is time to move beyond the analysis of male pleasure in viewing classical narrative films, in order to destroy it, to an exploration of female pleasure, in order to enhance it' (1982: 123). While being a product of popular culture which usually does not allow enjoyment to feminists, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can be seen as a feminist text, according to Arbuthnot and Seneca. The two actresses Monroe and Russell portray strong, independent women who have ventured on a boat trip jointly to seek a husband. The heterosexual quest for romance might be the manifest narrative of the film, but underneath it is a story of resistance to male objectification and female love and friendship. There is a continuous tension between the romantic text and the feminist 'subtext'. Monroe and Russell are constructed as objects for the male gaze but they always return the look,

scanning their surroundings for appropriate husband material. In their dress and stature they resist sexual objectification which is furthermore prevented by particular camera angles and lighting. The more important source of feminist pleasure for Arbuthnot and Seneca however, involves the friendship of the two women entailing a genuine affection for each other in which feelings of competition and jealousy are absent. They defend each other in the face of criticism, give priority to their friendship over male courting, look at each other lovingly and frequently touch and caress one another. When they have finally succeeded in finding a husband, in their double wedding scene Arbuthnot and Seneca observe a superficial matrimonial commitment only and the endurance of their friendship. The authors conclude that: 'It is the tension between male objectification and women's resistance to that objectification that opens *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to a feminist reading. It is the clear and celebrated connection between Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell which, for us, transforms *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* into a profoundly feminist text' (p. 123).

In a similar vein, Jackey Stacey analysed *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a film about the obsession of a suburban housewife with a more adventurous cosmopolitan woman played by Madonna. As in most narrative Hollywood cinema, the central object of desire is an attractive, glamourous woman; an image that is reinforced by Madonna's real life spectacular exploitation of her sexuality. But we come to look at Madonna (Susan) through the eyes of Roberta, not a strong male hero, but a timid housewife who becomes so fascinated that she thinks she is Susan after a 'coincidental' concussion which causes memory loss. From that moment, the narrative is moved by the confusion that arises from the existence of two Susans who are a little alike and very different at the same time. Susan/Roberta is desperately trying to find out who she is, an exaggerated expression of an identity crisis which was already suggested in the beginning of the film when she was presented as the traditional unhappy housewife trapped in a dull and unfulfilling marriage. Susan/Madonna on the other hand wants to find out who her substitute is and bursts into Roberta's private life, taking over house, husband, clothes and swimming pool and – the ultimate investigation of her replacement – reading her diary. After a typical sequence of mistaken identities, Roberta, who has regained her memory by the end of the film, and Susan finally come to meet each other and the film ends with the two happily celebrating their new friendship. According to Stacey there is no way in which traditional psychoanalytic film theory can account for the fascination both female protagonists express for each other. The film is not about sexual difference but about difference between women, for which Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides no angles. The narrative and visual codes do not allow pure identification or erotic desire with either one or the other. It is far more a desire to know about other women and to become – in the case of Roberta – an idealized feminine other, that lies at the heart of the film inviting the female audience to come along on this pursuit.

These two examples of pleasurable and unmediated female spectatorship inscribed in particular cinematographic texts can be easily extended with analysis of other less well-known films (for example, Byars, 1991; Ellsworth, 1986; Williams, 1984). The common ground in all these analyses is an attempt to rescue from oblivion female pleasure in popular cultural forms. Byars favours 'an approach that enables us to hear the strong, feminine, resisting voices even within mainstream cultural artifacts' (1991: 20) and intends to examine 1950s melodrama with a so-called recuperative eye, revealing the textual struggles that enable female resistance and pleasure. Without denying the continuing, almost casual narrative and visual violence against women in many mainstream films, the evidence of the patriarchal nature of Hollywood cinema has annihilated the enjoyment, and even the resistance which women have constructed out of the inbuilt contradictions in patriarchal popular culture. As more authors have recognized this, Mulvey's dark and suffocating analysis of patriarchal cinema has lost ground to a more confident and empowering approach which foregrounds the possibilities of 'subversive', that is, non-patriarchal modes of female spectatorship. It is interesting to notice that in this shift of attention the level of analysis has changed as well. Whereas Mulvey and others talked of masculine spectator positions inscribed in narrative cinema, predominantly, but not necessarily coupled to the male viewer, the 'recuperative' feminist film critics increasingly discuss the possible pleasures offered by the narrative and visual contradictions of cinematographic texts to audiences of real women. Inevitably this development has led to an upsurge of studies that have moved away from 'textual' audiences (the audience position as constructed by the text) toward the examination of the pleasures of actual audiences instead. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

Women looking at men

In popular culture and art alike, it is quite rare to see the male body displayed in ways similar to the exhibition of women's bodies. To be sure, we see more then enough images of men but seldom are they subjected to the gaze of the female or male viewer, and it is even more uncommon to see them undressed. This invisibility is a relatively new phenomenon. In her book *The Male Nude* Margaret Walters traces the changes in representations of naked men.[7] For the ancient Greeks male nudity was unproblematic. The male body was a normal image in art which personified the Gods, and the erect penis was openly on view in the image of satyrs or as an image in its own right, symbolizing patriarchal power and fertility. People used representations and sculptures of erect penises as tokens of good luck, as scarecrows or as guards to their estates. The phallus was there for everyone to see, man and woman, and was considered an object of desire for both women and men. According to Easthope (1986), in Greek culture masculinity was defined through homosexual and hetero-

sexual desire. Christianity changed all that, banishing the erect penis from the public eye and relegating homosexuality to the realm of deviancy. From the Renaissance onwards, the representation of the male nude body became exceptional, always causing uproar and prohibitions. Easthope (1986) argues that the disappearance of the erect penis as a public symbol of power has not undermined patriarchy, far from it. Its invisibility is precisely what makes the phallic order appear natural, not worth mentioning or representing: 'Masculinity has stayed pretty well concealed. This has always been its ruse to hold on to its power' (Easthope, 1986: 1).

Not only does the patriarchal will to maintain power underlie the taboo on looking at the male body. In an article on the phenomenon of male strippers like The Chippendales and the London Knights, the ironic outcry of an editor of the Dutch edition of *Playboy* magazine gives away his unconscious fears: 'My God! Do I fear the gaze of the girls. I am less frightened of being destroyed by the wide gap in the ozone layer, than by the stares of the thronging "cockwatchers"'.[8] The comparison with the wide gap in the ozone layer is significant here and gives a strong clue to the castration fear evoked by the female gaze. Who knows what might disappear under the desiring looks of women? Several authors have argued however that the female gaze at the male body is infinitely less threatening than the homosexual desire the male body might provoke in the male spectator.

> [The male body] is not to be looked at with the eye of desire. This is precisely the look the masculine body positively denies as though it were saying, 'Whatever else, not that.' The hardness and tension of the body strives to present it as wholly masculine, to exclude all curves and hollows and be only straight lines and flat planes. It would really like to be a cubist painting. Or whatever. But above all not desirable to other men because it is so definitely not soft and feminine; hairy if need be, but not smooth; bone and muscle, not flesh and blood. The masculine body seeks to be Rambo, not Rimbaud. (Easthope, 1986: 54)

In a society which has defined masculinity as strong, active, in possession of the gaze, and femininity as weak, passive and to be looked at, it is of course utterly problematic if not impossible for the male body to submit itself to the control of the gaze – by definition masculine – and to go over to the other 'feminine' side, and surrender itself to masculine power. In western patriarchal society, such a homosexual scenario is inherent to the eroticization of the male body, even if it is constructed for the pleasure of women only. *Playgirl* magazine – the American female counterpart of *Playboy* – has, for instance, a large following of homosexual men as well. The inevitable homosexual scenario has rendered the display of male bodies in popular culture fraught with complications and contradictions. Steve Neale (1983) has argued that in all-male Hollywood movies like Westerns, the fear of any eroticism in the act of looking at other men – on the part of either the protagonist or the spectator – has produced narratives that are characterized by sadomasochism. The gaze of the male spectator is never direct but always mediated by the looks of the protagonists 'and these

looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression' (1983: 14). Discussing the films of Anthony Mann, Neale contends that: 'The mutilation and sadism so often involved in Mann's films are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified, so to speak, as an object of erotic contemplation and desire' (1983: 8). Neale's comment has a more general significance as well, given the repression of homosexuality in western patriarchal culture and the common violence against it.

Despite the patriarchal inhibitions against the eroticization of the male body, historically popular culture has nevertheless provided possibilities for women to look at men, be it in a rather secret and unobtrusive way, for private rather than for public consumption. At the beginning of this chapter I referred to the erotic appeal of rock stars whose pictures cover the walls of the bedrooms of teenage girls, who can look at them and fantasize in the privacy of their own space. In melodrama and soap operas it is also not uncommon to see the male body constructed as an object of desire. Byars for instance reviews a number of melodramas from the 1950s and concludes that camera manipulations and point of view structures enable a 'positive and unabashed expression of feminine desire' (1991: 178). More recent examples can be found on a regular basis in soap operas.

In these cases the context of reception – an all-female audience – reduces the dangers of exhibiting the male body. Textual devices can also modify a full-blown subordination of the male body to the gaze of the spectator, sports photography being exemplary. Easthope (1986) contends that nowadays the male body is mainly celebrated in sports photography, where the frozen image of male physical activity and strength permits a look at the male body as an object of visual pleasure.

According to Ien Ang (1983: 421), sports photography demonstrates the prevailing patriarchal limits for visualizing the male body: 'These pictures are a compromise between activity and passivity; the male body tolerates the transformation into an object of visual desire only when it is in motion.' In the more straightforward pictures of male pin-ups, currently increasingly popular as postcards, these limits are drawn in various ways. Richard Dyer (1982) has observed that the visualization of male pin-ups differs from the female pin-up in at least three ways. To begin with, if men look directly into the camera, the meaning of their look is far removed from the inviting smiles of female pin-ups. 'The male pin-up, even at his most benign, still stares at the viewer' (1982: 66). By his direct and unfriendly return of the look, the male pin-up denies that he is the one being looked at. Such a penetrating gaze prevents undisturbed voyeurism of the female spectator and attempts to restore some of the traditional balance of power in the visual economy. In Figure 6.1, masculinity as activity is further underscored by the muscular structure of the upper body, tautened and certainly not at ease.

The patriarchal tension between masculine activity and feminine passivity responsible for the instabilities of the male pin-up shows also in the way

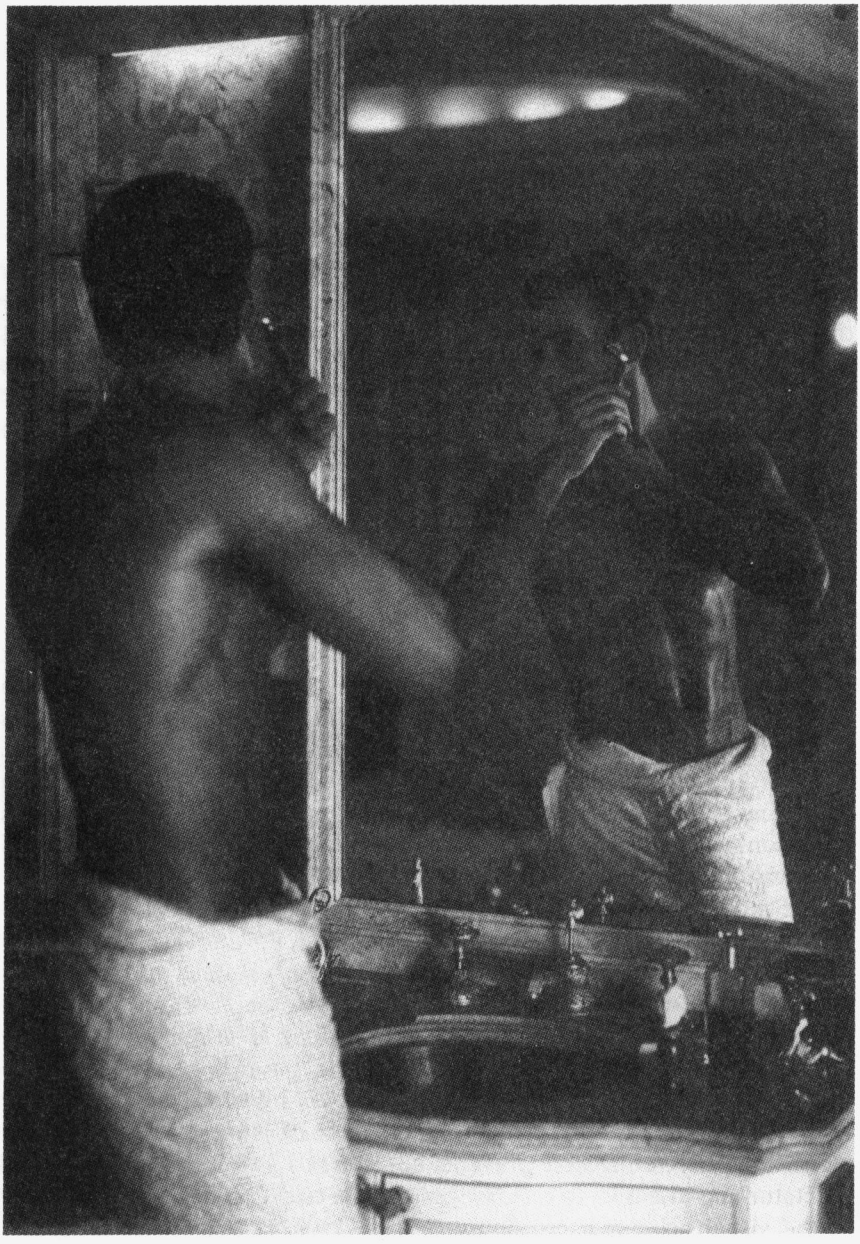

Figure 6.1 *Shaving (photography by Salvatore, published as a greetings card by Athena International)*

male pin-ups do not look at their spectators. Whereas women often avert their eyes in modesty and submission to the gaze of the male audience, men tend to look up, suggesting spirituality, or away from the camera, expressing a complete lack of interest in the viewer. Again, his presence as a pin-up, existing for the pleasure of the viewers, is denied. Instead he is presented as a man who just happens to be looked at. Not surprisingly, washing, bathing, showering etc. function as excellent excuses for the male body to be displayed. The character in such pictures is certainly not exhibiting himself to the female audience, but is merely caught in the perfectly legitimate masculine act of for instance, shaving.

The male pin-up's lack of passivity is one of his important features. If he is not actually doing something, the picture presents the female spectators with various signs of activity. Sports and muscular structure have already been mentioned, other signs often refer to work.

The male body thus seems to resist straightforward visual eroticization, confining female voyeurism to the incidental bits and pieces offered in patriarchal culture. In an interesting analysis of *Playgirl*, Ien Ang (1983) shows that even there, the explicit attempts to construct the male body as an object of female desire do not escape the conventions of the patriarchal visual economy. The pictures of the *Playgirl* pin-ups display most of the signs of male activity discussed above, like tautened muscles, physical activity or the suggestion of labour. The ultimate difference between *Playgirl* and *Playboy* pornography, however, is realized by the construction of the *Playgirl* man as a romantic object rather than a sexual one. According to Ang, this transformation is achieved in various ways. Contradictory to the penetrating stares of other male pin-ups, *Playgirl* men look at us as if we know them intimately. They are smiling, friendly and reassuring, as if to tell us that we are looking at a close friend and not at a body. The blunt sexuality associated with pornography is further suppressed by aesthetic compositions and lighting, 'effects that draw our attention to the active intervention of photography' (Ang, 1983: 427). Finally, the denial of the sexual qualities of the naked *Playgirl* men is achieved through the text that accompanies the pictures. Attention is focused on the particular personality we are looking at and his diverse qualities as a human being. These men are always presented with their first and last name, signifying that we are watching a person, not just a body. *Playgirl* Man of the Month for March 1992 for instance was introduced as:

> Handsome prince personified. Looking as though he'd been plucked from the pages of a fairy tale, Robert Johnston undoubtedly qualifies for the role of Prince Charming. . . . Bobby is a marine biologist whose fascination with ocean depths often send him into the far reaches of the deep blue sea [sic!]. . . . Single, but always looking, Bob says he never enters a relationship with any 'expectations about how it's going to be. Each experience is always new and rewarding.' Indeed, this taut 26-year-old proves wise beyond his years. 'I am a big believer in the notion that love can cure society's travails', he declares.

In that same March issue, the picture series of that month's 'Mr. Big' –

'proportions like these get noticed' – displayed other mechanisms to 're-personify' the objectified male body. The same picture of subject Tom Marinelli was printed three times with different shades of pastel colours. This man's body showed the evidence of intensive workouts, and also the presence of his motor bike in the picture signified that this was a 'guy on the move'. The accompanying text read:

> At 23, Tom Marinelli has the confidence it takes most people several decades to acquire. But then, this is no ordinary guy. You're looking at someone who actually wakes up every morning feeling good – in fact rarin' to go! . . . Tom the Triumphant credits his parents with instilling in him such old-fashioned values as the work ethic. 'Besides building my pride, doing a good job helps to get the bills paid', he notes pragmatically. Those close family ties may also account for the way he guards his private life – fiercely. Not one to blather about his special lady, Tom just smiles when *Playgirl* scribes attempt to pry.

Ang contends that the manifest display of male bodies in *Playgirl* supports a fantasy of heterosexual romance, rather than of female heterosexual desire. The *Playgirl* men's sex appeal depends on their charming, romantic, mature or whatever personalities, much less on the sexual qualities of their bodies. Even in a soft-porn magazine like *Playgirl* the objectification of the male body is in no way comparable to the objectification of female bodies in *Playboy* and its competitors.

The case of *Playgirl* suggests that within the patriarchal structure of looking, a straightforward reversal of the gaze does not offer much pleasure to the female spectator. Obviously, one-dimensional voyeurism in the masculine tradition does not satisfy female desires. The additional codes of heterosexual romance exploited by *Playgirl* seem just one means to enhance female pleasure. For instance, the popularity among women of film and television stars like Rudolf Valentino and Tom Selleck is said to derive from the articulation of 'masculine' and 'feminine' positions within one and the same character. These 'multi-faceted' characters offer various sources of pleasure, an important one being the polysemic construction of masculinity that encourages the female audience to negotiate its meaning. Sally Flitterman (1985: 46) writes about Magnum P.I., the main character in an American television series played by Tom Selleck:

> Magnum is partly transformed from a dashing macho-mythical figure with which a largely male audience can identify, into a desired and desirable object whom mostly female viewers can long to possess. This psychic collusion of being and having within a single potent figure at once collapses the distinction between traditionally gendered subjectivity and objectivity, identification and desire, and blurs the boundaries between erotic identity and object choice as a form of visual pleasure. (1985: 46)

Miriam Hansen (1986) has argued similarly of Rudolf Valentino films that: 'Valentino's appeal depends, to a large degree, on the manner in which he combines masculine control of the look with the feminine quality of to-be-looked-at-ness.' It thus seems as if a pleasurable heterosexual female gaze depends on the denial and disruption of traditional gender identities.

Ambivalence, contradictions and negotiations can stimulate female voyeurism rather than frustrating it. Although patriarchy has long offered only a few exceptional instances of gender ambivalence, more and more popular culture is beginning to explore the contradictions of gender. In *Miami Vice*, an American police series that was enormously popular around the world in the mid-1980s, one of the attractive male heroes (Sonny, played by Don Johnson) exhibits traditional 'feminine' qualities such as physical attractiveness and a caring and sensitive nature, as well as the hard-boiled masculine qualities expected of a tough policeman. King (1990) even argues that the visual and narrative codes in *Miami Vice* construct Sonny as predominantly 'feminine' and thinks that much male criticism of the series can be explained as fear of the 'effeminate' man.

Advertising is another genre which, while still a stronghold of straightforward objectification of female bodies, has begun to explore the ambivalence of gender, in particular by exploiting the erotic heterosexual appeal of men. According to Wernick (1991: 62), the conventions of advertising have become flexible enough 'to allow men and women to be positioned at either end of the objectified/objectifying sexual continuum'. He contends that the ultimate consequence of this interchangeability is that sex and gender have become arbitrary signs in advertising without any direct relations to their referents in real life. While that conclusion seems more than a little out of touch with most realities of contemporary advertising, images of women and men in popular culture are increasingly hard to interpret in traditional object/subject–active/passive–masculine/feminine dichotomies; a promising prospect for female voyeuristic pleasure.

Despite the contradictions in patriarchal culture and the opportunities these offer for alternative ways of looking, the dominant visual economy is still organized along traditional gender lines: men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. The reasons for the persistence of the traditional structure of looking have been located by various authors in the patriarchal will to maintain power, and in the anxiety 'woman' produces in the patriarchal unconscious.

While such an analysis may offer a relatively satisfactory explanation of the workings of dominant culture, it denies the experiences of women as spectators and forestalls the examination and development of female pleasure. For that reason, the greater part of this chapter has focused on the 'recuperation' of the experiences of female spectators looking at women as well as at men. To be more precise: in this chapter the visual and narrative codes that construct the female and male body as spectacle to be looked at, have been questioned together with the viewing pleasures they enable. Authors working within a psychoanalytic paradigm have argued that women can derive pleasure from looking at other women, due to a homosexual inclination resulting from the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. Other authors have claimed however, that the active/passive

dichotomy underlying most discussions about gender and spectatorship is much too simplistic to capture the variety of female viewing pleasures evoked by looking at other women. The analysis of the unstable way in which the male body presents itself to the female spectator supports that argument. 'Masculine' voyeurism of the male body is prevented by visual and narrative codes that signify activity and control by the male pin-up. It shows that within patriarchy a simple reversal of the masculine structure of looking which is based on identification and voyeurism does not produce an equivalent female voyeurism. Female pleasures seem to have their own specific logic, evoked by traditional patriarchal codes of romance – as in the *Playgirl* case, – and by the more subversive codes present in some expressions of popular culture, like *Magnum* and *Miami Vice*, which undermine hegemonic definitions of gender.

Finally, one needs to bear in mind that 'the female spectator' as discussed here is principally an imaginary concept without a direct referent in reality. What is examined in analyses like these are the textual constructions of 'subject positions' to be taken up by actual audiences. In contemporary patriarchal culture, many of these subject positions have a gendered character, like voyeurism and masculinity, and romantic desire and femininity. Moreover, visual and narrative codes are often employed to realize an ideological 'closure' of the text, 'enforcing' a traditional gendered subject position. This does not mean, however, that female spectatorship can only be moulded in the traditional patriarchal framework, nor male spectatorship either for that matter. Texts themselves are seen to offer ample opportunities for cross-gender identification and voyeuristic pleasure, and in the eyes of some the demise of gender as a mechanism for structuring looking pleasure seems likely, turning it into a 'floating signifier . . . free to swirl around and substitute for its paired opposite at will' (Wernick, 1991: 63). Given such developments, the concepts of a 'male' or 'female' spectator position become problematic and too essentialist in character. However, we are still far away from such a situation, since society is permeated with successful discourses of identity that constitute human beings, and of which gender is not the least important.

Notes

1. Flitterman-Lewis (1992) argues that technical, textual and social aspects of film and television are so different that television needs a psychoanalytic theory of its own.
2. This chapter builds on a review essay of recent publications on gender and film published in the *Journal of Communication* (van Zoonen, 1992c).
3. Page numbers refer to the reprint of Mulvey's article in Erens, 1990.
4. Byars (1991) on the other hand points out numerous examples.
5. These films are titled *The Bad Sister*; *Riddles of the Sphynx*.
6. Reported in Modleski, 1990.
7. As referred to in Easthope, 1986.
8. Dutch *Playboy*, August 1992.