Chapter 9

Feminism

Feminism
1. Advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of equality of the sexes).

Setting the scene

As far back as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (mother of Mary Shelley) published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which is generally considered the first text on Feminism. During the nineteenth century, women started to campaign for equal rights and react against the suffocating Victorian image of the 'proper role' for women. Women were expected to care for the family above all and to be satisfied with domesticity and the patriarchal law. It was against this strongly patriarchal (male-led) society that the first Feminist movements emerged, although the term 'Feminism' was not coined until the 1890s. The development of the Feminist movement is recognized as having three stages, known as 'waves'.

The First Wave gained momentum around the 1900s. Writers such as Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (1911) and Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) gave vivid portrayals of the unequal treatment of women. They felt that women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood were frowned upon. Therefore, Feminists campaigned for equal property rights, rights to higher education, to careers and later, women's right to vote (Suffragettes). During World War I (1914–18), women put their demands to one side to help with the war effort. In 1918, women were finally given the vote, providing they were thirty years of age, owned a property or held a degree. It was not until 1928 that women secured the vote on the same terms as men, at the age of twenty-one years.

The freedom afforded women during World War II, in undertaking what had been seen as male roles (factory work, farming the land, etc.), fuelled women’s aspirations to remain in the public sphere. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, a political and theoretical work that laid the foundations for subsequent Feminist research and incited women to question their position in society. De Beauvoir's book quickly became a classic and helped to inspire the next wave of Feminists.

This Second Wave of Feminism was known as the Women's Liberation Movement and lasted from the 60s-80s, with the term 'Women's Lib' passing into common usage, often with negative connotations. For example, it was implied that Feminists burnt their bras and disliked men. Importantly, these 60s Feminists were informed by the political, social and cultural climate of the time. They wanted to raise awareness of how the existing patriarchal ideology excluded, silenced and oppressed women. Rather than 'his-story', Feminists wanted 'her-story' to be recognized.
Psychoanalytic approaches to feminism

Psychoanalytic has been readily adopted by Feminists as a means of understanding the way women are represented on screen. Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey both produced seminal articles 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' targeted the processes of film production rather than Foucault and Louis Althusser in her investigation of film as a semiotic sign system. She focused on argued that films worked to preserve and perpetuate sexual inequality, and that the dominant 'feminism'. They discussed the importance of developing filmmaking in ways that would question and challenge mainstream dominant cinema and its patriarchal agenda.

Mulvey employed a Psychoanalytic approach to explain how cinema works at the level of the camera, concerned with production and technology and as actors. In contrast, women would sperm'.

Before looking at Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, an understanding of the terminology that she appropriates from Freud is instructive:

- **Scopophilia:** This Freudian term denotes pleasure taken in looking. The scopophilic instinct occurs when people or images are viewed as erotic objects. For Freud scopophilia can become a perversion if it is connected with deviant behaviour as in the case of voyeurs (Gay, 1995, p.251).

- **Voyeurism:** Pleasure is voyeuristic when it is dependent on the object of the gaze being unaware. Someone seeing another is popularly known as a 'Peeping Tom'. To some extent both photography and film invite voyeuristic looking. It is the act of viewing the activities of others unknown to them. Therefore the act of looking can be seen as illicit or as having forbidden connotations. In the cinema we are voyeurs, watching people on screen who are 'ignorant' that we are watching them. We derive pleasure from this. The camera is also a voyeur.

- **Fetishism:** An object becomes a fetish when it is the focus of sexual desire. The fetishist idealizes an object associated with a woman to displace sexual anxiety. '[T]he normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it...what is substituted for the sexual object is some part of the body' (Gay, 1995, p.249). For example, images of shoes or hair can take on sexual connotations. In film, the audience may notice an excessive objectification of the female body, numerous shots of breasts and legs. Say, the intense concentration on parts of the female body in the cinema is a prime example of fetishism.

- **Narcissism:** This is erotic pleasure derived from looking at one's own body. For both Freud and Lacan it was a natural stage in childhood. In film it is the audience's identification with the image on the screen and is often explained through the use of Lacan's 'mirror stage' (see Chapter 8, 'Psychoanalysis').
Reflect and respond
1. Can you think of any films that adopt scopophilia, voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism as plot devices?
2. From your examples, can you see any generic trends?
3. Can you speculate why feminist film theorists were so preoccupied with scopophilia, voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism?

Laura Mulvey

'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975)

Laura Mulvey is a feminist film theorist. Her work signals a move from purely textual analysis towards an interest in the visual pleasure and identification found in the cinema. She employs Psychoanalytic Theory to discuss how popular cinema produces what she calls the 'male gaze'; here she appropriates theories from Freud and Lacan (see Chapter 8, 'Psychoanalysis'). In more traditional film theory, the spectator is assumed to be male; in light of this, Mulvey places the issue of sexual difference as central to her discussion. In order to do this:

It [the essay] takes as its starting-point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. [...] Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious patriarchal society has structured film form. (1975, p.34)

For Mulvey 'the gaze' is the main mechanism of control in film (1975, p.60). The image of the woman is first the object of male desire and second the signifier of the threat of castration.

Mulvey notes two 'pleasures', the first being scopophilia and voyeurism that are crucial to the sexual objectification of women. The second part of this pleasure is the narcissistic aspect that develops from scopophilia. This is discussed by Mulvey with the aid of Lacan's mirror stage as an explanatory model (see Chapter 8, 'Psychoanalysis'). According to Mulvey, elements of narcissistic identification with the person on screen occur because the projector is behind the spectator's head. This allows the spectator the illusion of controlling the image.

In her section, 'Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look' (1975, p.62), Mulvey takes issue with the sexual imbalance of looking. It is Mulvey's contention that this gaze is always male because the 'look' in cinema (by the camera) is controlled by men and aimed at the female as an object. Furthermore, the male actors and the spectators (presumed male) voyeuristically identify with the camera and gaze at the woman in a fetishistic way. Mulvey selects films by Hitchcock as examples, Rear Window, Vertigo, Psycho and Marnie.

One of the key ideas that Mulvey promotes is that within traditional storytelling the female subject is always passive, whereas the male is active. For example, in fairytales the princess waits to be rescued by the dashing hero (knight, prince, etc.). Mulvey recognizes that these long-established tropes have carried through into filmmaking. She states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to be-to-look-at-ness. (1975, pp.62-3)

Mulvey has suggested that women have two roles in film, 'as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium' (1975, p.63). Mulvey believed that filmmakers had been trapped into following certain codes and conventions in traditional Hollywood narrative. However, recent historical work suggests that the situation is much more complex than this. Women do undertake starring roles and increasingly make up part of the production team or are directors.

While Mulvey's article was groundbreaking and became the focus of debate and quotation, it was also criticized for its limited and essentialist focus in addressing only the male spectator. Various academics noted how she overlooked the important areas of women's voices, race and sexual preferences when looking at the male hero. Academics such as E. A. Kaplan (1976) criticized Mulvey's findings, claiming that the male was not always a controlling force and that the female was not always a passive object. Furthermore, she believed that the female viewer could identify with both the passive and active positions. Nearly ten years later Mulvey responded to her critics.

'AFTERTHOUGHTS ON "VISUAL PLEASURE AND NARRATIVE CINEMA"' (1981)

'AFTERTHOUGHTS' was inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun. Here, Mulvey responded to critics who found her work essentialist and reductive (as her assumption that the gaze was solely male).

After defending her position in the original article, this essay concentrates on Melodrama and on the woman spectator in particular. She develops two lines of analysis:

First (the 'woman in the audience' issue), whether the female spectator is carried along, as it were by the scruff of the text, or whether her pleasure is more deep-rooted and complex. Second (the 'melodrama' issue), how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a female character occupying the centre of the narrative arena. (Mulvey, 1981, p.122)

Mulvey says that she is 'concentrating on films in which a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between [...] passive femininity and [...] regressive masculinity' (1981, p.123). She sees these as the dilemmas of the female spectator. Here, her work indicates a move away from how women are represented, towards studying female responses. She considers how women watch films and discusses the role of Melodrama (a genre traditionally considered female in orientation) in contrast with genres typically regarded as male action movies.

Mulvey notes that the conventions cited by Freud on masculinity are deeply embedded in the structure of most popular narratives (Freud in Gay, 1995, pp.440-3). The male hero saves the female victim and any sexual desire is contained in marriage. Further, it is the hero's sense that
‘nothing can happen to me’ that drives him on. In contrast, the heroine is passive, waits to be saved and the narrative closes when this happens.

Mulvey then turns to Vladimir Propp’s work on folktales (see Chapter 3, ‘Formalism’) to confirm how firmly these structures of active male/passive female are ingrained in storytelling. She notes that when a woman is introduced as central to the story, the structure and meaning of the narrative changes (as exhibited in Duet in the Sun). In this Western, the woman is faced with the conflicting desires of passive femininity or regressive masculinity. When the lead protagonist is female, the plot can be ‘overly, about sexuality: it becomes a melodrama’ (1981, p.127). Mulvey analyses the female position in this film in great detail and summarizes her findings. She suggests that female spectators need to be awoken to be ‘pleased’ in stories (1981, p.129).

Reflect and respond
1. To what extent do you think the tradition of the passive female and the active male is still prevalent in cinema today?
2. Discuss whether you agree or disagree that the camera adopts a male gaze?
3. Can we invert Mulvey’s ideas and consider whether men adopt a female gaze when watching women’s genres (Musicals, Romantic Comedies and Melodramas)?
4. Consider whether women are still objectified in contemporary filmmaking. Can the same be said of men?

Mulvey’s ‘Afterthoughts’ in the early 80s recognized the change in mood among some Feminists. They wanted to focus the debate exclusively on political issues and indeed this remains a powerful line in Feminist thinking today. Accordingly, a number called for a counter-cinema to deconstruct the images associated with the patriarchal agenda of the film industry. There was a turn towards exploring the ideas of femininity and reconstructing lost or suppressed records of female experience.

Mary Ann Doane

‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator’ (1981)

The American theorist Mary Ann Doane explored the female gaze in relation to masquerade and drew insights from the work of psychologist Joan Rivière (1929). Rivière had observed that an ‘intellectual’ woman, when in a position of authority, donned a mask of ‘womanliness […] to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the repulsions expected if she was found to possess it’ (Rivière, 1929, p.38). Doane introduces the term ‘masquerade’ to describe the way women often adopt a metaphorical mask, a way of behaving that is inscribed by gender expectations. She found that a common strategy was for women to act in an excessively flatterious manner. This performance can then be manipulated for pleasure and this entails developing a new interpretative strategy (1981, p.137). Doane asks:

After all, even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure? (1981, p.134)

Doane combines Rivière’s findings with Freud’s lecture on ‘Femininity’, in which he maintained that issues in childhood paved the way for fetishism, and that this was an invariably male tendency. Accordingly, Doane sees the male spectator as destined to be a fetishist, whereas the female finds it difficult, if not impossible, to take that position. Rather than absorbing the image, she is absorbed by it. She argues that the female spectator lacks the distance that voyeurism dictates. This has profound effects on women’s leisure patterns and means that they will see adornment and consumption as inherently pleasurable activities. Women can indulge and inhabit their feminine identity. Doane refers to this as ‘over-identification’. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed (1981, p.138).

Doane questions Christian Metz’s work on apparatus and image in the cinema, she finds much of this theorizing untenable for a female spectator as it ‘lacks the attribute of distance’ (1981, p.143). Cinema has relied heavily on voyeurism, fetishism and identification with the ego, all in masculine terms. Thus it has encouraged theorists to see the female gaze as repressed. For Doane this shows that it is crucial to understand the woman’s position in this in order for spectatorship theory to develop in a positive way.

Reflect and respond
1. Discuss whether femininity and masculinity are ‘performed’?
2. Can you identify films where women deliberately adopt ‘masquerade’ as a plot device?
3. How far is the notion of ‘over-identification’ appropriate or useful?

Before moving on to consider Horror and the feminine, it is important to understand two crucial critical categories.

1. Masochism: Freud defines masochism as ‘any passive attitude towards sexual life and the sexual object […] in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object’ (Gay, 1995, p.252). For example, people who like to be whipping for sexual gratification can be termed masochists.

2. Abjection or abjection: For the French Feminist Julia Kristeva, the abject is ‘the place where meaning collapses’ (1982, p.2). It is where we cannot explain what we see. It is being forced to face a traumatic event or object such as Kristeva’s example of ‘the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have seen elsewhere’ (1982, p.4). Further, according to Kristeva this is ‘essentially different from “uncanniness”, more violent, too’ (1982, p.5). She explains: ‘It is the infecting life […] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (1982, p.5).
Barbara Creed

'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection' (1989)

Barbara Creed's contribution to feminist critical analysis relates to the horror film and the notion of the monstrous-feminine. Drawing on writers as diverse as Freud (Fetishism, 1927), Joseph Campbell (primitive mythology, 1959) and Julia Kristeva (abjection), Creed examines 'horror as a perversion of the pleasure' (1989, p.253). She finds that the Horror film illustrates the way abjection works in the sociocultural arena.

Creed illustrates in great detail things that create the abject. First, there are countless images of corpses, 'whole and mutilated [...] bodily wastes such as blood, vomit' (1989, p.253). She records how spectators feel sick or experience fear within the viewing process. Yet watching records how spectators feel sick or experience fear within the viewing process. Yet watching

[Between the human and inhuman, man and beast (Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde) [...] the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (Carrie, The Exorcist, The Omen) [...] or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up proper gender roles from those who do not (Psycho, Dressed to Kill, Reflection of Fear); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (Cruising, The Hunger, Cat People). (1989, p.253)

Third, Horror films frequently cast the maternal figure as abject. Creed draws on Kristeva again, who suggests that all babies face abjection when they try to break free from the mother who tries to resist this separation. This refusal to let go prevents the child from achieving its proper place in society. This is seen in Hitchcock's Psycho. The Birds and Brian De Palma's Carrie (1976), where the mother is presented as the monstrous-feminine (1989, p.254).

Furthermore, Creed draws on Kristeva's discussions on the rituals of defilement, the polluting substances of excrement and menstrual blood, 'images of blood, vomit, pus, shit etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific' (1989, pp.254-5). Creed cites The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) and Carrie as particularly representative examples of the 'gaping wound' and castration anxiety that are central concerns (particularly in slasher films). Creed claims that historically, religion functioned as a means to purify the abject. However, this is a no longer true because 'the work of purification now rests solely with that enthusiastic and inhuman culture'. (1989, p.257).

Many of Creed's points are developed in her extensive analysis of Alien ( Ridley Scott, 1979) in which she addresses the idea of the 'recessive mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother of the primordial abyss [...] the toothed vagina' (1989, p.258). This image of the 'toothed vagina' is present in many cultures and is frequently referred to as 'vagina dentata'. It can be read as a symbol of male castration anxiety. Creed argues that the function of the Horror film within a patriarchal culture is to evoke the monstrous-feminine. She also suggests that the blurring of gender boundaries in horror reveals a great deal about male fears and desires.

Reflect and respond

1. Why does the film industry rely on bodily fluids to instil feelings of abjection?
2. Why do you think the idea of 'vagina dentata' occurs in all cultures?
3. Can horror be understood as the manifestation of male fear?
4. How does film deal with taboo objects such as bodily fluids and/or taboo practices such as necrophilia and incest?

Mulvey, Doane and Creed's work on the gaze, spectatorship and the monstrous-feminine utilizes psychoanalytic theories to examine how the female spectator is constructed by the text. Yet there are other approaches that require attention, such as questions of audience response.

Feminist approaches to subjectivity

Annette Kuhn was concerned with the 'woman in the audience'. She felt that film theory had not examined the ways in which audiences have understood films within a framework of social contexts. To address this, she explores Soap Operas and Melodramas in her essay, 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory' (1984). Kuhn outlines three problems that she intends to address: first, the problem of gendered spectatorship; second, the historical specificity of gendered spectatorship; and third, the relationship between film and television texts (1984, p.21).

According to Kuhn, these problems have arisen because psychoanalytic theories have offered 'little scope for theorising subjectivity in its cultural or historical specificity' (1984, p.22). Kuhn advocated the notion that there was no fixed feminine text, although a text could become feminine when it was read. She looks at the relationship between text and context by concentrating on the differences between the spectator and the idea of the wider audience.

Kuhn notes that, 'Looking at spectators and at audiences demands different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, distinct discourses which construct distinct subjectivities and social relations' (1984, p.23). For her, it is important to question how large audiences of women identify with popular media texts. This will enable an assessment of 'the political usefulness of popular genres aimed at, and consumed by, mass audiences of women' (1984, p.27).

Teresa de Lauretis raised issues concerning subjectivity. In her essay, Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (1984), she examined the structural representations of 'woman' in cinema and discussed how narratives produce images of subjectivity. She points out that narrative structures are formed by desire. This desire is inherent in Oedipal (men's control of women). To explain this, she cites many examples from Hitchcock, in particular the female characters in Rebecca (1940) and Vertigo. Here the females are made to conform to the ideal image that the male protagonist imposes upon them. In Vertigo, Scottie's (James Stewart) desire for the enigmatic Judy/Madeline
(Kim Novak) drives the narrative of the film. The female subject is made to perform a specific feminine role. Yet for de Lauretis the performance of the female character is impossible, and the narrative tension is often resolved by the destruction of the female (Judith/Madeleine) in Vertigo and the new Mrs de Winter (Joan Fontaine) in Rebecca. Furthermore, she finds that desire in narrative is intimately bound up with violence against women, and the techniques of cinematic narration both reflect and sustain the social forms of oppression of women.

De Lauretis writes about two different processes of identification in cinema. The first involves between a masculine and active identification with the gaze (Scottie) and a passive feminine identification with the image (Judith/Madeleine). This enables the female spectator to take up both the active and passive positions of desire. The second is simultaneous identification, which can be seen with both the new Mrs de Winter and with the imagined image of the first Mrs de Winter in Rebecca. For de Lauretis, feminist theory is built on the contradiction of the unrepresentability of woman as subject of desire.

**Reflect and respond**

1. Discuss films in which female subjectivity is made central.
2. Account for the destruction of the female character when she is portrayed as an object of desire.
3. Identify other film texts where men manipulate women to conform to their expectations.

For Feminists, female spectators are seen as marginalized. In order to develop ideas from Mulvey and others into different directions, critical analysis began to focus on other ‘marginalized’ spectators (gay, black, etc.).

**Feminist approaches to marginalized groups**

Jackie Stacey’s 1987 essay ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’ takes up the homosexual perspective to address critiques of homosocial spectatorship. Adopting the work of Doane and Kuhn, she notes that the pleasure of the female spectator has hardly been addressed, specifically homosocial pleasures of female spectatorship have been ignored completely (1987, p.244). Although it needs to be noted that various writers, including de Lauretis (1984), have written on this, Stacey sets out to suggest some reasons for the general neglect.

She considers that the film text can be read and enjoyed from different gendered positions, or, despite the masculine apparatus, spectators can respond differently to the visual pleasures of the text. Stacey examines All about Eve (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) and Desperately Seeking Susan (Susan Seidelman, 1985) to pursue ideas on the pleasures of desire and identification. From her work Stacey concludes that a focus on the ‘distinction between either desire or identification, so characteristic of film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes’ (1987, p.257) Of course, it is important to distinguish between the different spectator positions adopted by lesbians and male homosexuals.

Whereas Stacey acknowledged that Feminists had historically ignored the gay female audience, bell hooks raised concerns regarding black female spectatorship.

**bell hooks**

*The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*’ (1992)

It is important to note that bell hooks, the African American feminist scholar, insists that her name appear in lowercase rather than with initial capitals. She believes it is the substance of her writing that is important, rather than who she is. hooks queried Mulvey’s position on the ‘male gaze’. She points out that black people have historically been punished for looking. Here she cites the incident when Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy, was murdered for looking and whistling at a white woman (p.118). She believes that Feminist theory ignores the issue of race in the same way that the film industry has historically struggled to represent black womanhood on screen. Even when African American male filmmakers attempt to depict black women, they typically objectify them, which, for hooks, perpetuates the subtext of white supremacy (p.118).

hooks states that as a black woman she has a choice either to identify with the white woman or resist identification. The latter is the logical position, as black women do not recognize themselves on screen, since the film industry has tended to misrepresent or ignore them entirely. Accordingly, black women adopt an ‘oppositional gaze’ or what Mantha Diawara calls ‘resisting spectatorship’ (p.128). In embracing this attitude of rejection, black women can no longer be hurt by derogatory images of African American female identity. Rather than agreeing with Mulvey’s concept of the female as passive and the male as active, hooks laments that, even when black women assume the role of director, black femininity is still victim to ‘the white supremacist capitalist imperialist dominating “gaze”’ (p.129).

**Reflect and respond**

1. Identify the difference in spectatorial positions between heterosexual and homosexual viewers.
2. Discuss whether hooks’s notion of the ‘oppositional gaze’ can be usefully applied.
3. Have gay women and black females been under- and/or misrepresented on screen?

As has been noted here, much of the work from Feminist critics in the 80s has taken its lead from Mulvey. However, there are other approaches. Kaja Silverman is a Feminist critic who has focused her attention on the woman’s voice. In ‘Dis-Embodiment of the Female Voice’ (1984), her analysis looks at the sound/image relationship in terms of gender, and concentrates on the noticeable absence of a female voice-over in classical cinema. She believes that this absence expressed the fact that the female subject was ‘associated with unreliable, thwarted, or acquiescent speech’ (1984, p.131). Silverman called for a re-analysis of Hollywood films with more attention focused on the construction of the soundtrack. She discussed the use of the ‘disembodied’ female voice-over in a number of films directed by women, especially Yvonne Rainer’s *Journey from Berlin* (1971). She developed her ideas further in the book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988).
In the 90s there was a notable interest in Feminist theories on pornography, which took a wide-ranging approach to the issue of female objectification. Maggie Humm noted that Feminists were anti-pornography, arguing that it was misogynist and dehumanized women. On the other hand, other Feminists such as Linda Williams took a more complex position. In her essay, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess' (1991) Williams succinctly summed up what she thought of pornography and Horror films, alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite. Attraction to films of this kind is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. In this phenomenon of the 'sensational' in pornography, horror, and melodrama, there is a form of power between the sexes, a form of power that can be used to manipulate and control women.

In this chapter we have shown some of the ways in which Feminism has stimulated new debate for Feminist theory. Moreover, it can be seen that there is a lot of 'cross-fertilization' between Feminist film criticism. As Feminists they were working to the same agenda in the fight for female recognition.

Case study: Mamma Mia! (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008)

Mamma Mia! is a 2008 musical film based on the long-running musical of the same name. The story follows the characters of the hit Broadway musical, who are on the verge of a wedding. The film is directed by Phyllida Lloyd and stars Meryl Streep, Colin Firth, Pierce Brosnan, Amanda Seyfried, and Julie Walters.

The film is set in a Greek island and is about the 1970s, where twenty-year-old Sophie, the daughter of a local hotel owner, plans her wedding day. During the ceremony, the father of the bride, Don, is revealed to be her mother's lover, and it is revealed that she has been fathered by either Don, her mother's husband, or her mother's lover. The film explores themes of family, love, and identity.

Writing in the New York Times, Sylviane Gold comments on the rarity of female directors and writers in the film industry. 'Where are the female directors and writers in the film industry? It is rare to see a woman behind the camera, and even rarer to see a woman directing a major studio film.'

The film offers a historically precise window on the world. In addition to being popular with young female audience, Mamma Mia! has been instrumental in appealing to the older female spectator. It is possible to speculate that many of the females in the audience would have lived through the 70s, either as single or married women, meaning that the music would be well known to them, so that they can sing along, while also relating to the clothing and cultural references.
Conclusion

Mamma Mia! evokes a nostalgic and escapist narrative of the 70s in a prescribed musical fashion. It follows the light-hearted escapades of three women who have pursued their individual paths; Rosie, shown above, on closer examination it is evident that many of the patriarchal and cinematic roles have been inverted. Lloyd's lightness of touch presents on the surface of narrative. However, it is not neutral and the outcomes deny a straightforward reading. Throughout the story, the theme is one of freedom, living outside the typical conventions still prevalent in the 70s, the idea that women should marry and have children rather than pursue a career. These women are shown as being in control of their lives and free to follow their dreams.

However, the daughter's wedding does not take place; her mother Donna marries Sam (Pierce Brosnan). Rosie rejects her single status and throws herself into the arms of the Italian waiter (Stellan Skarsgård); and Tanya returns to her husband. The three older women interestingly turn their back on the 'free love' attitude of the 70s and choose to adhere to conventional patriarchal order. However, the daughter, who represents the younger generation, opts for freedom as she sails into the sunset with her former fiancé.

It can be concluded that not all feminist positions will produce new insights on films. Some of them may give rise to new knowledge, some prove too restrictive. Clearly there is a need to be more selective when developing the theoretical ideas. Moreover, we need to take account of when and where a film was produced, since some films are made from a feminist perspective, or taken on board a feminist agenda. Mamma Mia! is clearly one of these and, although a popular film, it undertakes a sophisticated exploration of feminism.

Reflect and respond

1. To what extent is Mamma Mia! a female film? What does it have to say about masculinity and femininity?
2. Discuss whether the format of the narrative (musical) enhances the film as a female text.
3. Consider the four main female characters (played by Streep, Walters, Baranski and Seyfried). Are they stereotyped in any way?
4. How far are the ideas of femininity informed by the seemingly 'all-female' production team?

Conclusion

Feminism can be seen as a site of social and intellectual debate. There is a focus on women's experience of sexuality, work and the family. The Feminist movement recognized the patriarchal nature of society; that the world is organized on terms dictated by men to their own advantage. In order to challenge this, Feminists have worked to achieve rights for women, to promote artistic undertakings in order to challenge the stereotypical representation of women.
Feminism has no single voice. Feminist theory crosses borders of history, philosophy, anthropology, art, etc. Furthermore, it utilizes other theories such as Structuralism and Semiotics, Post-structuralism, Race and Ethnicity, Queer Theory and most importantly of all, Psychoanalysis. Post-structuralism and Feminism have changed in feminist film theory. The gaze is definitely no longer considered to be male; it can be homoerotic, oppositional and so on. Film can be engaged as an ideological tool.

Much has changed in feminist film theory. It can be seen as a complex way to the structure of patriarchy.

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