

Riddles... or Oedipus Lack¹

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It may come across as impolite to start a very brief presentation of the film theorist and director Laura Mulvey with the pronoun ‘I’, after all it is not my work that is here under consideration. But ‘I’, the ‘I’, I am speaking of, am not me. This ‘I’ is both a statement and a possibility, a statement of agency and an opening to dialogue. Inhabiting a culture that speaks a language that is not theirs, as Laura Mulvey argues in the *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), women have experienced the displacement from a symbolical order structured upon the norm of the Father. The female I is thus a challenge, because it performs an action, it is a performative statement, at the same time as it suggests the possibility of ‘re-inhabiting’ an order that dislocates women by engaging in a retooling against the grain of those very same categories that have subjected them.

The 40th anniversary of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, published in the journal *Screen* in the Fall of 1975, is an occasion to celebrate not only a *tour de force* in feminist film studies, but as well a ground breaking contribution to the acknowledgement of the intricate relationship between the social, the political, and the representational, to the acknowledgment in fact that the cultural production of narrative and the image of woman were inextricably linked with the social and political struggle to empower women. The article, which has become an absolute classic in film studies – and not only in feminist film studies – had the career, that defines the horizon of excellence guiding researchers and academics: it was widely read; discussed and contested. This is perhaps the epitome

¹ This text is the introduction to the film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), shown at Cinema Ideal, in Lisbon, on November 2th, 2015, in the presence of the director, Laura Mulvey. The screening was jointly organized by the 5th Graduate Conference in Culture Studies on “Mind the Gap: The Artist in Culture Studies” and the Temps d’Images Festival.

of relevance, for what is not contested, what does not ruffle the mirrored, quiet surface of the academic waterscape becomes more often than not an irrelevant add-on in the momentous torrent of publishing. But irrelevant “Visual Pleasure” was not. Over the decades, it became mandatory reading in film theory courses, and it was widely reprinted in both women’s studies and film and visual studies’ readers.

Speaking to the fertile intellectual territory of the 1970’s, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inaugurates an academic style articulating French theory and psychoanalysis with the study of film and opening up a space of dialogue in film analysis beyond the narrow historical approach. More specifically, the article reveals the gendered nature of the gaze structuring the operation of the classical Hollywood film narrative as it connotes women’s *to-be-looked-at-ness*, that is, the cinematic work that renders woman the passive bearer of the male gaze/look.

Much has been written regarding the apparent defeatist attitude in this analytical approach that either seemingly denies woman agency in looking back, or radically confines her to a symbolical lack, as Mary Ann Doane did in her insightful “A Loss but not a Lack” (1987)². Nonetheless, it must be said that much of this critique came circa ten years after the essay’s initial publication. Though Mulvey has later accepted that there is a strategic ambivalence marking the signifier woman, creating spaces of empowerment and reverse appropriation within the operation of patriarchy, the fact of the matter is that “Visual Pleasure” is the result of a certain intellectual and political situation, that joins the struggle of feminism in the 1970’s, with the labour conflicts of the worker’s movement in Britain and the intellectual tradition of French theory. Rhetorically much of what has been – wrongly - understood as descriptive and prescriptive in Mulvey’s analysis results from a desperate search for answers on the part of her academic readers, when a great deal of her strategy speaks – quite like the sphinx – to the posing of questions. And it is precisely here, within the conditions of high patriarchy, that the female ‘I’ emerges as the questioning voice to the logic of the male dominated symbolical. This questioning voice that interrogates the conditions of social and political discourse opens up a conversational space about the place of woman in the social division of labour, about biological determinism, sexual difference, class, the family and motherhood. It adds in fact an element of contention to the false consensus of the phallogentric order while revealing the production of images in film as key to understand the social and political struggles of feminism.

² On the feminist critique to Mulvey’s theory see Doane (1987: 350–375), Modleski (2005: 69) and Williams (1997: 10–17).

The ‘I’ that am me read Laura Mulvey’s essay in the mid 1990’s. I was embarking then on a dissertation about the social pacts shaped by the representational work of myth and was avidly reading gender theory in two widely distinct academic environments: The Institute of German Philology at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago. Truly uncommon bedfellows, but in these too Laura Mulvey’s theory was tolerated, accepted, though not fully owned. And yet, the fact of the matter was that “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was instrumental in shaping my own questioning voice and strategic in the move to the visual that was to ensue years later.

Mulvey was read late in Portugal. On the one hand, because gender theory in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, were never fully embraced, and I must add, really understood by intellectual discourse. There were, and there are to this day, insightful theorists – such as Maria Irene Ramalho, in Coimbra, Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, in Lisbon, or Ana Gabriela Macedo, at Minho, as well as Ana Luísa Amaral, in Porto – very much those linked to the Departments of Modern Languages and Literatures, as well as some philosophers – but the theme of women in the cultural tissue is still, or perhaps increasingly more than in the past, seen as a radical marginal approach of embattled, unrepresentative pockets of theorists. And theorist is more than ever a swear word.

On the other hand, within the operation of cinema that “Visual Pleasure” engages with, the landscape is even more sombre. In Portugal, in 2016, the system of film critique continues to be overwhelmingly, not to say completely, occupied by male critics. Many of them, dear and respected colleagues, acknowledge the theory but simultaneously concede ‘I do not do gender’. This negative acknowledgement has also left its marks on many students, male and female, who want to study film but declare right out ‘I do not want to do gender’, as if, 40 years after “Visual Pleasure” the gendered structure of the gaze could be extracted from film analysis as an add-on to a gender neutral mainstream approach. As if gender could actually be undone from critique. It is a silence that speaks volumes.

The ‘I’ that am me, but also the ‘I’ of the many women viewers and theorists in the 21st century, speak from a different position than that the 1970’s. It is the ‘I’ of ‘post-feminism’, which does not argue from the standpoint of the overcome *pastness* of the social and, in my line of business, symbolical, issues that traverse the renewed need to emplace the diversity and creativity of female work at the centre of theoretical concerns; but it is also the radically distinct backlash subjectivity, Susan Faludi diagnosed. This latter subjectivity of the *pastness* of the women’s agenda that

seeps slowly across the affluent world of global intellectual elites clearly speaks to the urgency to renew the questioning and to make it relevant to utterances nurtured under different conditions, to voices cultivated, precisely, under the crisis of voice.

Riddles of the Sphinx, the film we are about to see, captures the discussion about feminism in the late 1970's. It speaks in fact about the riddle of Oedipus' lack and its struggle to go unnoticed. Acknowledged, but 'not done'. This is a visual discussion that may come across as somewhat archaeological, but which is extremely relevant to understand the now. Suggestively, its power rests, as Laura Mulvey wrote in the concluding lines of a more recent study, on the fact that it is urgent to understand that "The Sphinx and her Riddle are still waiting for a beyond" (Mulvey, 2009: 211).

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