

The State of Film and Media Feminism

From the mid-1970s until around 1990, I was actively involved in “film feminism.” Although not a career academic for most of that period, I was doing a lot of teaching and writing and, for several years during the 1980s, conducting doctoral research in the social history of cinema. I got into feminist film studies in the first place because I was a cinephile and a student of film. I was (and am) also a feminist, and there was a period when it seemed politically urgent to bring these commitments and enthusiasms together—in one’s work and practice. That moment has, I think, passed—to a degree because many of the battles have been won. But in different ways and to various degrees that moment has been formative of the disciplines of film and media studies, shaping their content and conduct as well as the habits of thought of those of all genders and generations who work in those fields.

This change of consciousness goes beyond the academy, too: themes and motifs in films that might thirty years ago have seemed commonplace or gone unremarked (women in peril, say) are treatable on screen today, if at all, only ironically or in some other distanced manner. If we choose to be optimistic about the impact of our work, we may conclude that this is a measure of the consciousness-raising potential of scholarship and teaching. At the same time, if the political energy that brought about these changes is still there, it seems to require less proclamation. So if in my own work feminism is still a *sine qua non*, it seems less necessary, less urgent, to say so. It is built in, can be taken for granted.

Cinema and film remain my main areas of interest, and I am aware that these have changed in all sorts of ways since I first got involved in film studies. Nonetheless, the seductiveness of “new media” notwithstanding, I think it would be unwise to lose sight of the idea of film as a distinctive medium. Of course the nature of film’s distinctiveness does not stay constant—this is something to be charted and explored. Film studies is a different discipline from what it was in the 1970s (and media studies scarcely existed then), and here I would like to explore three areas in which both disciplines seem to me to be evolving and to look at the issues

around feminism in each of them. If I focus my discussion largely on film and cinema, this is not just because these are the areas with which I am most familiar but also because I think there are significant issues of media specificity here, and I want to avoid conflating different media. The three areas are: the ontology, aesthetics, and metapsychology of film; cultural studies of cinema (and other media); and social histories of cinema (and other media). I shall concentrate mainly on the first and offer some brief concluding remarks on the other two.

The ontology, aesthetics, and metapsychology of film

There is a distinction to be made straight away between film and cinema. I use the term *film* to refer to the distinctive textual features of the medium. By *cinema* I mean the entire industry or apparatus of cinema, that is, film texts along with the contexts and manner in which they are produced and consumed.

Inspired by the novelty of this very modern medium, the earliest theorists of film were keen to pinpoint what was different and distinctive about it and thus directed their inquiries at the ontology, the essential nature, of film and also at film's aesthetics (see, e.g., Balázs 1970). Later theorists expanded ontological concerns into metapsychological studies—explorations of the distinctiveness of film's address to its spectators, of the relationship between the film text and the subjectivity of the spectator (Metz 1982). Are we at risk now of losing sight of the aesthetic and metapsychological distinctiveness of film—even if this is very different today from what it might have been in the medium's earlier years?

The task of theory is to illuminate its objects, and vice versa. Film theory should help us make sense of film, and films ought to be the grounding and the inspiration for film theory. In an essay from the late 1980s on the then-current state of feminist film theory, I wrote that theories of film do not translate automatically to other media (Kuhn 1989). This, I think, is still true. We need to take the objects, not the theory, as the starting point for our thinking and allow ourselves to learn from them in all their specificity, whether they be film, television, video, or whatever else. This is one reason why the idea of “applying” theory makes me uneasy: it feels rather a constraining, procrustean sort of exercise and rarely produces convincing or helpful results.

We are asked to consider whether psychoanalytic theory still has anything to offer feminist inquiry into the media. Psychoanalysis was used first of all in relation to film (as opposed to other media), and as I see it feminist psychoanalytic film theory sprang from two rather different de-

sires: to understand the nature of film, in particular its metapsychology, in relation to sexual difference; and to understand how gender informs the contents of films and/or how men and women relate to film and/or cinema.

These desires come together in thinking on how psychoanalytic ideas on the production of sexual difference may contribute to a more general understanding of the interaction between films and those who watch them. In practice, however, they pull in opposing directions. The central preoccupations of the first do not readily map onto gender or other identity politics, in part because of the polymorphous range of subjectivities in the internal world. Feminine subjectivity is not the same as femaleness, and male subjectivity is not the same as maleness, and in the psyche many more subjectivities even than these are potentially available. More importantly, perhaps, psychoanalysis is as much, or more, concerned with the internal world of the psyche as it is with the external world of politics and social action. It is not that these worlds are separate and unrelated so far as psychoanalysis is concerned. Rather, they are different from each other, and it is the job of psychoanalysis to explore and explain their interrelation in particular cases rather than to assume it. The second desire springs from a more overtly political debate about women (or men) as they appear in films and/or constitute an audience for them. For the sake of brevity, I shall call the two tendencies, respectively, “psychoanalytic” and “social.”

Not surprisingly, these two tendencies constantly seem to anger or disappoint each other. For many feminists, the “psychoanalytic” tendency seems abstruse and unrelated to the “real world,” a judgment scarcely mitigated by the difficulty of some of the writing in this area. Many have felt excluded from this debate, and such feelings generate resentment along with lack of understanding. Even those like myself who find psychoanalytic theory enormously helpful in thinking about film (and indeed about culture more generally) can struggle with this. As well, at a certain period, happily now past, a demand for compliance seemed to be in the air, especially around acceptance of the work of Jacques Lacan. This is the very sort of thing that makes people feel inadequate, and I certainly still have difficulty finding some of Lacan’s work, particularly that around sexual difference, convincing. At the same time, I do not believe that this absolves me from trying to come to grips with it, and colleagues whose work I greatly respect have successfully done this and produced excellent feminist exegeses of—and challenges to—Lacan. The best of this work sheds light on the connections and the differences between Lacan and Sigmund Freud on the one hand and existential phenomenology on the

other. Where it is linked with the metapsychological study of film, this work is particularly helpful and should be required reading for all students of film (Rose 1986).

From the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory the “social” tendency generates the demand that psychoanalysis explain phenomena that are beyond its scope. For example, psychoanalysis does not claim to deal with social aspects of gender and other social differences such as those of “race” and class. The very fact that we are asked to review the continuing relevance of psychoanalysis to the study of film (and other media) suggests that these differences remain unfinished business. This has made for a fraught encounter between feminist politics on the one hand and psychoanalytic film theory on the other. An immediate consequence of this is that at a certain point the two tendencies parted company and set off in quite different directions, without really acknowledging that a separation had taken place. The “social” strand inspired various kinds of cultural study of cinema and other media (on which more later), while the “psychoanalytic” tendency fed into various feminist-inspired metapsychologies of film, including theories of the masquerade, fantasy, and masochism (Doane 1982; Cowie 1984; Studlar 1984).

So what, if any, is the relevance of feminist psychoanalytic film theory today? My first response to this question is to say that if I were working in cultural studies of cinema (or other media), psychoanalysis would not be my first port of conceptual or methodological call. In this area other approaches (such as cultural ethnography and audience research) have proven more productive. If psychoanalysis does offer any continuing relevance to understanding film (if not necessarily to understanding other media), it will be in a circumscribed arena, accompanied by the recognition that psychoanalysis cannot explain everything. It will also be with objectives that are not powered first and foremost by feminism *tout court*. That is, we might consider setting aside a totalizing feminist desire (I do not, of course, suggest that such a desire should be abandoned) and not being shy about concentrating on film as distinct from cinema and from other media. With these caveats in mind, I believe that psychoanalysis has a lot to offer film theory, in particular the metapsychology of cinema, in terms of depth of understanding and inspiration for further inquiry.

“Cinepsychoanalysis” has concerned itself largely with the psychical organization of looking and seeing, drawing on the psychoanalytic account of human development: it is for good reason that the subject of cinema is invariably called a *spectator*. This emphasis on vision calls up Freud’s thinking on the drives and their activity in creating differences of social gender out of psychical sexual difference. We should remember that

for Freud, one of the key processes at work here is repression, and therefore the Unconscious. To this extent, in Freudian terms, sexual-libido drives, including the drive to pleasurable looking (scopophilia), partake in the production of the Unconscious and have a central unconscious component. This is transported into and elaborated on in Lacan's thinking. To this extent, psychoanalytic theories of film spectatorship have rested on both the centrality of vision and the activity of the Unconscious, and these concerns have been carried over into feminist psychoanalytic film theory in work on "the gaze." While, as I shall suggest, psychoanalytic theories of the gaze can be seen as rather limiting, there is much work still to be done in this area. In particular, the key question in Christian Metz's seminal essay "The Imaginary Signifier" ("in what way can psychoanalysis cast light on the cinematic signifier?" [1982, 25]) has still not been satisfactorily answered.

This project was more or less abandoned in anglophone film theory, largely because Metz's work is not only gender blind (which would not necessarily make it untenable) but is also (unacceptably) dismissive of the sexual difference agenda informing the Freudian concepts on which it otherwise productively draws. To cite just one example, Metz rightly points to the role of disavowal ("I know this is not so, but I accept the illusion for the time being") in organizing spectatorial belief and pleasure in film, arguing that to this extent the "cinematic signifier" is a fetish and/or that the spectator-film relationship is psychically analogous to that between the fetishist and his object. At the same time, though, Metz contrives to disregard Freud's main point about fetishism, which is that it arises from the disavowal of sexual difference (Freud 1977). It is possible that, as far as the metapsychology of film is concerned, the disavowal is more important than the sexual difference: we are not after all bound to the letter of Freud. But such a hypothesis calls for inquiry and argument.

What I am suggesting is that prefeminist psychoanalytic film theory, or film theory that does not prioritize issues of sexual difference, has been prematurely abandoned, and that psychoanalytic metapsychologies of film that do not take sexual difference as their starting point might be just as worthy of exploration as those that do. For the latter, feminist readings of Freud and Lacan have led the way in that for both Freud and Lacan the key arena of sexual difference is the Oedipal moment, when the infant recognizes the mother's "lack." However, while most feminist psychoanalytic film theory has followed this lead, a number of writers, feminist and otherwise, have argued for the significance of the pre-Oedipal in understanding the spectator-film relationship (Baudry 1974; Studlar 1984). Nonetheless, to the best of my knowledge, psychoanalytic work

on early objects and how they get woven into the subject's experience of its world has yet to be thoroughly explored in relation to film as an object that inhabits both our inner and our outer worlds (Winnicott 1971; Konigsberg 1996). This area, for one, could be significant to the extent that it addresses at least two of the objections raised against psychoanalytic film theory.

It has become commonplace to observe that psychoanalytic film theory's emphasis on vision in the film-spectator encounter is partial, and that spectatorial engagements have been—and with certain kinds of cinema, such as IMAX, remain—more fully embodied than the idea of the gaze would suggest (Gunning 1986; Bukatman 1999). In addition to this, I would argue that the emphasis on the Unconscious in psychoanalytic film theory has resulted in a downplaying of the activity of partly or fully conscious aspects of the spectator's inner world in the encounter. That is, the spectator's *experience*, considered in psychoanalytic terms, might also be usefully addressed (Kuhn 1989, 2003).

In conclusion, then, I believe that, as a system of ideas that can illuminate film and in particular add to our understanding of what is at stake in the encounter between films and spectators, psychoanalysis has much to offer film theory. To the extent that psychoanalysis can shed light on the question of how sexual difference organizes this encounter, film scholars who are also interested in questions of a broadly feminist nature will undoubtedly continue to follow or contribute to this rather specialized debate. However, I believe that the key agenda for psychoanalytic film theory lies elsewhere.

Cultural studies of cinema (and other media)

Psychoanalysis is unlikely to prove useful to feminists who are interested in cinema (as opposed to film), by which I mean those seeking to interrogate cinema for its engagements with women, sexual difference, sexual/gender identity, or sexual politics. Many of those who approach cinema from this angle do so from a base in disciplines other than film studies—media studies, cultural studies, and women's studies, for example, as well as more traditional disciplines like English, history, or sociology—and so may well be uninterested in the ontology, aesthetics, or metapsychology of film. In cultural studies of cinema, films or cinema are studied not in their own right but as they engage external issues: "race," gender, violence, and so on. By extension, media other than cinema are readily assimilable

to this approach. Regardless of the medium, in cultural studies the time frame tends to be the present, the media contemporary.

Terms like *reflection* and *representation* characterize work that inquires into the relationship between media content (and occasionally formal organization) on the one hand and a range of social issues on the other. Cultural studies of media may also include inquiries into the consumption and uses of media. Because inquiry in these areas can appear deceptively straightforward until you try to do it properly, work in cultural studies of media can vary enormously in quality. Research methodologies in cultural studies are on the whole underdeveloped, and where they are not (as in certain types of audience research and media ethnography) research design can be complicated and the conduct of a good-quality investigation expensive and time consuming, often yielding disappointingly superficial findings. However, as long as there are media, and feminists interested in media, the demand for feminist cultural studies of media will remain. We owe it to the discipline and to our students to enhance methodological skills and awareness in this area.

Social histories of cinema (and other media)

While there is potential for overlap between cultural studies and social histories of media, in that cultural studies methods may be brought to bear on historical media and their uses, in practice they remain effectively separate areas of inquiry. Unlike cultural studies, social histories of media have the benefit of established methodological protocols. As far as cinema is concerned, certainly, sources and methods of research are well documented, and film studies scholars have been pursuing innovative and distinctive lines of historical inquiry since the 1970s (Allen and Gomery 1985).

At the same time, there is still work to be done in feminist, as in other, social histories of the media, and excellent examples have been set in particular by some U.S. feminist scholars with backgrounds in film studies (see, e.g., Hansen 1991; Staiger 1995). Key areas of feminist inquiry include the history of women's contribution to the making of films and the history of women's activities as consumers of films, and the scope for new research in these fields is clearly potentially international. As far as feminist-informed work in film and media studies worldwide is concerned, this, in my view, is where to seek the cutting edge today.

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