Zoë Cunliffe, “Feminist Philosophy of Film”

ZC restricts her treatment of a feminist approach to film philosophy to ***current*** *popular cinema in the West* that either “enjoyed box office success” or “mainstream critical acclaim”.

JP: This limits the range of what a feminist philosophy of film can hope to address, which ZC partly acknowledges, but doesn’t actually defend. Curious.

ZC: “‘feminist philosophy of film’ is best understood as signifying a broad cluster of philosophical work that takes a feminist slant in its approach to the study of cinema.”[p653]

**Feminist Film Critique**

She covers five “broadly construed” areas of interest: 1) images of women, 2) spectatorship and the male gaze, 3) audience-text negotiation, 4) cognitivism, and 5) ideology critique.

Images of Women

Purveyors: Marjorie Rosen (from her *Popcorn Venus*) and Molly Haskell (in her *From Reverence to Rape*).

Chief features: focusing on Hollywood films, each author applies a sociological approach to interpreting the “changing images of women” as presented in Hollywood films over time. Each author assumes “that films are simplistic reflections of reality” and, as such, the ways in which women are represented in films *are false depictions* that are distorted through a ‘patriarchal lens’. [654m/b]

Rosen accepts Kate Millet’s view that ‘gender ideology [as presented in the negative stereotyping of women in films] [is a] conscious male conspiracy.’ {my emphasis}

Question for exam: What is Kate Millet’s view of gender ideology as expressed in mainstream films?

Haskell rejects the Millett view that gender ideology is “a conscious attempt to subjugate women through film”. Haskell thinks the “misogynistic violence” toward women in the films of the 1970s “[was] a reactive backlash against women’s progress.” (JP: cf., the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s)

Criticisms of this approach: it is theoretically simplistic; lacks an overarching and unifying theory to connect the things this approach focuses on; lacks any attempt to consider how the *means* of representation through film can contribute to the misogyny and sexism and patriarchal consequences for women that film generates.

What good this approach did: it “led feminists to poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, and to developing a more theoretically sophisticated account of how the formal conventions of Hollywood films reflect and deepen patriarchal values.” [655m]

Spectatorship and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is influential instance of this approach.

Applying Lacanian and Freudian concepts, she argues “that men and women are positioned differently by film, and that the visual pleasure afforded by cinema panders to the male gaze.” {my emphasis} [656t]

What ‘male gaze’ means: the formal conventions of mainstream cinema “reflect and are constituted by the patriarchal preoccupations of society” and as a result, “the viewer inevitably takes up and endorses a male perspective.” [656t]

Some ways this happens:

Male characters are active and push the plot forward, female characters are passive and inert.

Male viewer is encouraged to identify with the male protagonist, and to take pleasure in gazing at the female form (Freud’s *scopophilia* [pleasure in gazing] concept is in use here).

Mulvey’s approach dominated feminist film theory in the 1980s, but was frequently challenged and debated. There were four main objections:

1. Overly cynical in its analysis of female characters in mainstream films as it relies on a *totalizing* view of how pervasive patriarchal values dominate all aspects of culture, including language, and products of culture (film in particular).
2. Mulvey’s account leaves no space for the female spectator and her engagement with film, and this is implausible (women see films and they *have their own reactions to them*, reactions that are *themselves diverse*)
3. “…in purporting to offer a unified theory of film that applies to all women, Mulvey and those working within her psychoanalytic framework exclude non-dominant voices from their analysis.” (i.e., women who are nonwhite, disabled, not cis-het, not middle to upper class, etc.).
4. This approach “[misuses] psychoanalytic concepts in some way”[658] or (and more deeply) the reliance on the psychoanalytic theoretical framework is itself *unmotivated* in the face of alternative frameworks of analysis (N. Carroll, Cynthia Freeland, et al.)

Audience-Film Negotiation

On this approach, drawn from cultural studies that focus on the “social and political context” of film production and film viewing, turned attention to how a viewer *negotiates* the interpretation of the film that they view (rather than being a product of the mechanisms and devices of the film itself, it is a *negotiation* between the contents of the film and the interests, perspectives, feelings and ideas of the viewer lead to a *complex* interpretation that is different for different viewers (even for the *same viewers* at different times and/or different places/settings).

This can, and does (for advocates of this approach), make possible *an oppositional gaze*.

Question for the exam: “What is what Cunliffe calls the ‘oppositional gaze’ and which approach to feminist treatments of film introduced it?”

Cognitivism

This approach attempts to answer a question that has not been addressed by other approaches, namely, “how and why viewers engage with films.” [662t]

Cognitivism tries to apply “techniques from cognitive science and philosophy of mind to investigate cinema’s effects as grounded in processes of perception, inference, and judgment.”

Question for the exam: “What is cognitivism, as discussed in Cunliffe’s article?”

Cognitivism allows for a dynamic relationship between emotional reactions to a film and the role that **active** processes of *appraisal* play in the generation of those emotional reactions.[663m/b]

Criticism of cognitivism: it tends “to invoke a generalized and ahistorical mind that lacks race, class, and gender.”[663b]

Ideology Critique

Since all the other approaches *involve* a critique that deploys *ideological notions* (both to explain phenomena that are against the interests and needs of women, and to promote different ideological notions that *support* those interests and needs), what is distinctive about this approach?

Answer: this strand of film criticism “takes as its primary function the analysis of the relationship between the construction of mainstream films and gender ideology.” [664m] {my emphasis}

Some recent examples of this kind of film criticism include reactions to ‘gender reversal’ films (like *Ocean’s 8* or *Ghostbusters* [2016]) where a film franchise that used to focus on male characters are remade with females in the same lead roles. [665m]

**Constructive Feminist Philosophy of Film**

Here Cunliffe says there are two strands of a broadly constructive approach to philosophy of film.

1. Critiquing mainstream films for their patriarchal undertones and sexist failings.
2. The search for alternative, non-patriarchal films (which has involved the positing of a ‘counter-cinema’ that overcomes the limitations of patriarchy-influenced films and approach to filmmaking).

Cunliffe says there are *three ways* that mainstream films can promote feminist thought:

1. Through subversion of patriarchal ideas
2. Development of a resistant imagination
3. Expansion of the feminist imagination

Subversion of Patriarchal Ideas

Some examples of films that engage in such subversion: Greta Gerwig’s *Lady Bird*, George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Development of a Resistant Imagination

This comes from Josė Medina. He defines ‘resistant imagination’ as “an ongoing process that challenges hegemonic discourse and meanings, and is pluralized, polyphonic, and experimentalist.”

Example: Sean Baker’s *The Florida Project*.

Expansion of the Feminist Imagination

This can be accomplished by “expanding feminist hermeneutical resources” which will then lead to “expanding the feminist imagination.”

For students: ‘hermeneutics’ concerns “the interpretation of language, whether written or spoken. But as philosophers in the West use the term, it is “the name for the philosophical discipline concerned with analysing the conditions for understanding. Hermeneutic philosophers examine, for example, **how our cultural traditions, our language, and our nature as historical beings make understanding possible**.”

Murray Smith’s notion of *expansionism* is an example of hermeneutics in action. “Expansionism refers to the claim that the process of watching a film can involve an expansion of ordinary experience, wherein the film pushes everyday perception and cognition beyond their standard manner of functioning.”[672m/b]