

CAPTURING THE HER/OINE:
A Comparative Study of the Female as Director and Subject
to Define Same-Agent Communication

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Largely empirical in approach, this research has two objectives. Primarily, it weighs the dialectics of the female subject as filmed from both male and female gender perspectives. I am using the broader terms of 'same-agent' and 'opposite-agent' (or 'opposing' agent), rather than the terms, "male-gaze," or, "female-gaze," coined by Laura Mulvey [1] and expanding discussion to incorporate Laura Marks' process theory and significance of haptic cinema [2]. In a similar vein, Trinh T. Minh-ha's work further extends process theory, incorporating both writing and filmmaking in terms of, "processes of transformation;" not as one static message [3]. The primary goal of the first phase of study is to establish how messages/communication delivered via cinema can be understood over the course of methodical film observation as it applies to contemporary feminist perspectives and traditional visual theory.

The secondary purpose of this research is to suggest, and put to test, ways in which the dichotomy of 'same-agent' and 'opposing-agent' applies to various micro-social groups who share experiences and/or social identities. This purpose is to understand their collective film methods as non-verbal, identity-based messages/communication. Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, frames this studies' analysis process by concept [4]. However final summations of this secondary research phase is more informed by the psychoanalytic perspective of film theorists Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry's application of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's *Mirror Theory*, reappropriated alongside Italian feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis' theory of reading and spectatorship based on figurality and the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and translation [5] [6] [7] in her book *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*.

Conclusions of this two part study are to establish probable methods by which to recognize aesthetic and narrative patterns as micro-communications used by various shared social identity groups. Comparative cinematic observations of the female subject perspective by the director will be used to create the initial interpretive framework characterized by contributing factors of the 'same-agent' and 'opposing-agent' sociological and visual relationships.

Primary Objective: *Observational Analysis of Empirical Data*

To begin, approximately one-hundred films by female-gender directors are reviewed with an equal number of male-gender directed films, where the female is the subject. Half of the selection will be authored by international directors, and half by North American directors. Criteria for chosen films are:

- (a) Directors with more than one film under their name, and/or popular with critical film theory; allowing for existing references to be discussed whilst determining patterns in stylistic symbolism [8].
- (b) Elements of non-traditional female protagonists/antagonists or non-traditional narratives; forcing observations of the 'heroine/lead' to be evaluated with more fluidity in context of structural expressions -- without contingencies upon other 'heroic journey' theories [9].

This stage allows the opportunity to solidify the conception of interpreting visual communication as an inter-social, archival memory of a distinguishable, “cinematic group language.” Regarding assessment of the selected films, each review is discussed qualitatively over four distinguished categories consisting of a film’s:

- (I) Linguistic use or textual analysis.
- (II) Recognition of semiotic/symbolic images in mise-en-scene.
- (III) Visual connotation of performative movement of subject and/or camera.
- (IV) Discursive evaluation of key scenes informing story narrative or character arc.

Initial theorists informing this particular four-category process of analysis are *Unspeakable Sentences* by Ann Banfield, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film* by Jean Mitry (Translation by Christopher King), *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* by E. Ann Kaplan, and *Aesthetics of Film* by Jacques Aumont, respectively.

Secondary Objective: *Testing Hypothesis for Inductive Conclusion*

The overarching hypothesis proposes that if there are ways to determine where significant cinematic communication/language is taking place, then there is enough probable reason to presume elements of visual dialogue are consistently present to become interpreted as a statement in time, or evolving messages, within a chosen collective creative body.

One first derives patterns from *symbolism in patterns or methods* within scene direction (camera or subject movement) [10], scene structure in design/ framing/ editing (including sound or blocking) [11] and narrative structure (traditional or non-traditional) [12]. Secondly, one makes a *comparative observation of that pattern* with other same-agent groups [13]. Lastly, one looks to *find repetition* in other forms of media [14]. Therefore, application begins once framework for a ‘same agent’ / ‘opposing agent’ relationship are specified, so that significant presence of concerted cinematic visual communication can be labeled as recognisable and interpreted for record.

In this study, the hypothesis is tested by addressing patterns of haptic cinema by:

- 1) *Noting symbolism in patterns or method*, first in ‘the female as subject and as director’ model.
- 2) *Comparing observations within similar same-agent / opposing-agent pairings*, such as LGBTQ filmmakers, directors from censored nations, or North and South Asian cinema.
- 3) *Find repetition in other forms of media*; for instance, documentaries and social media, or where ‘female as subject and as director’ can also be found.

This study introduces the concept of ‘same-agent’ perspective as an inextricable part of visual discourse by shaping a model that can move beyond the initial ‘female as subject and as director’ pretense establishing a broader foundation by which to evaluate other cinematic communication methods.

The resulting dissertation provides, secondarily, an evaluation of applied testing techniques to validate illustrated artistic communication, as shared by specific 'same-agent' groupings. Together, both study phases constitute a visually mnemonic system reflective of how specific groups cinematically interpret memories, ideas and representations of their shared experiences or identities.

Ultimately both phases will contribute to a branch of visual arts research delineated by the process of, "self-capture," and adds yet another facet of perspective to the range of the cinematic-eye [1]. Ironically, this collective film study hails to an art which, in and of itself, consists of the act of recombining human images -- reflective of past and present -- to better understand the individual experience, and gladly yields to this premise.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Mulvey, Laura (2005). *Death 24x a Second*. London: Reaktion Books.

Addresses some of the key questions of film theory, spectatorship and narrative. New media technologies, such as social media and cell phone cameras, have transformed the way we experience film, and the viewers' relationship to film image and cinema's narrative structure has also been fundamentally altered. By exploring how new technologies can give new life to 'old' cinema, Mulvey offers an original re-evaluation of film's history and also its historical usefulness.

2. Marks, Laura U. (2000). *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. University of Minnesota Press.

Same Agent exploration informed by Professor Laura Marks, who draws upon both European and North American process thinkers, specifically the metaphysical works of Alfred North Whitehead on *process theory*. Her approach toward evaluating how same-agents' view themselves, in a cinematic sense, is reflected by her thoughts on African-American visual artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa's showcase -- *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Rendition*, which traveled from the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, in London -- as a way to "test the possibility of viewing someone or something not as a figure, subject/object or thing such as, but as a larger entity always in the process of becoming... he's forcing us to think about 'what is it that I am seeing?' and 'why am I seeing it this way?'"

3. Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1989). *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana University Press.

"To raise the question of identity is to reopen the discussion on the self/other relationship. Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology -- a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness. If identity refers to the whole pattern of sameness within a being, the style of a continuing "me" that permeated all the changes undergone, then difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another." This raises the possibility of "identity" being interlinked with others' experiences, converging over time.

4. Somers-Hall, Henry. (2013). *Deleuze's 'Difference and Repetition: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Setting the premise of this research is Deleuze's "axiomatic notion that there is no time but the present, which contains past and future. These layers describe different ways in which past and future can be inscribed in a present. As this inscription grows more complicated, the status of the present itself becomes more abstract". This paves the way for a broader discussion and recognition of interlinked viewer relationships connected by history, modernity, and collective memory, all under visual symbolisms in film media..

5. Fairfax, Daniel (2019). *Between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Jean-Pierre Meunier's Theory of Identification in the Cinema*. Amsterdam University Press.

This paper situated Meunier's *The Structures of the Film Experience* within the constellation of film theory at the time of its writing in 1969. More specifically, it argues that Meunier's text can, in retrospect, be seen as a 'missing link' in film theory, bridging the divide between phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches to the study of cinema. This moment in 1969 saw an abrupt shift in editorial policies on flagship film journals *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Screen* and *Cinéthique*.

- 6 Zakin, Emily (2011). *Psychoanalytic Feminism*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

This article discussed psychoanalytic feminism, not feminist psychoanalysis. In doing so, it discloses the ways in which our sense of self, and our political loyalties and attachments, are influenced by unconscious drives and ordered by symbolic structures that are beyond the purview of individual agency. It might appear at the outset that any alliance between feminism and psychoanalysis would have to be coordinated on treacherous ground, where many feminists have been wary both of the biases contained in Freud's oratory and of the overt content of his claims. This article explained and sets about enquiring how a woman develops out of a child with a "bisexual disposition". In using the term 'bisexual,' Freud refers to a quality of the sexual instinct, not a relation to a sexual object, but a child as one who is psychically not yet either a man or a woman, with instinctual life functions prior to sexual difference.

7. Chaudhuri, Shohini (2006). *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (Routledge Critical Thinkers)

An edition published in conjunction with editors from Royal Holloway, my alma mater, showing how these four theorists construct their theories through their reading of films as well as testing their ideas with a number of other examples from contemporary cinema and television. She concludes that the concepts have not remained static over the past thirty years but have continually evolved with the influence of new critical debates and developments in film production, signalling their continuing impact and relevance in an era that is often unthinkingly branded as 'post-feminist'.

8. Real, Michael R. (1989). *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach in Communication and Human Values*. Royal Roads University Canada.

An examination of newly emerging cultural studies approaches to understanding media by providing a critical review of previous traditions of media research and theory -- illustrated with tables and comparative charts -- and re-integrates media study around cultural studies. He argues that issues of personal identity and consciousness, of conflict and bias, are more effectively articulated and understood through cultural studies. And that by drawing from both humanities and the social sciences, he centers his analyses in text, meaning, representation, interpretation, conflict, ideology, hegemony and culture.

9. Murdock, Maureen (1990). *The Heroine's Journey*. Shambhala Publications Inc.

As a starting point to understanding a female perspective on the "contemporary woman's" goals, Murdock frames her analysis on a female lead as "search for wholeness" in a society "she has been defined by, according to masculine values". Thirty-two years later, this study's analysis can draw from the differences and consistencies of her reference point as an early feminist writer attempting to define a heroine's arc in a cinematic narrative. Yet as with the widely generalized book, *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell, Murdock also draws upon limited scopes of cultural myths, fairy tales, ancient symbols and goddesses, to describe a heroine's turnpoints. However she does illustrate the need for—and the reality of—current feminine values in Western culture today.

10. Iles, Chrissie (2016). *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016* Whitney Museum of Art.

A generous survey of filmmakers and artists who have pushed the material and conceptual boundaries of cinema. Over the past century, the material, optical, abstract, spatial, and tactile properties of film have been tested at a level of experimentation and utopian ambition that is generally unrecognized. The essays published here offer an intensive look at the themes of cinematic space, formats of the screen, animation and the materiality of film. Contributors place particular emphasis on the idea of the cinema as a sensorium and on the ways in which it defines the human body, both through representation and in relation to the projected image, bringing together rarely seen and previously unpublished stills, in addition to concept drawings from historic and contemporary films.

11. Burch, Noel (1981). *Theory of Film Practice*. Princeton Legacy Library
Helen R. Lane (French to English Translator)

Classic film theory reference presenting a systematic study of the techniques of the film medium and of their potential uses for creating formal structures in individual films such as Dovzhenko's *Earth*, Antonioni's *La Notte*, Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, Renoir's *Nana*, and Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*.

12. Chatman, Seymour. (1980). *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press.

This book is the first comprehensive approach in English to a general theory of narrative, both in verbal and in visual media. The primary question to which Professor Chatman follows such French structuralists as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gerard Genette, asking "what makes narrative?" and "is 'story' narrative's discourse?" Liberally, he illustrates his concepts with discussions of particular novels and films, emphasizing effects and synthesis of the latest European continental critical thinking about narrative and Westernized Anglo-American storytelling traditions exemplified by Henry James, Percy Lubbock, Wayne Booth, and others.

13. Bayraktar, Nilgun (2017). *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving Image Art Cinema Beyond Europe*. Taylor & Francis Books.

This brief explores cinematic and artistic representations of migration and mobility in Europe since the 1990s. Drawing on theories of migrant and diasporic cinema, moving-image art, and mobility studies, Bayraktar provides historically situated close readings of films, videos, and cinematic installations that concern migratory networks and infrastructures across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Probing the notion of Europe as a coherent entity and a borderless space.

14. Doane, Mary Ann, (2002). *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* Harvard University Press.

A compelling alternative reading on contemporary film studies, still relevant twenty years later, Mary Ann Doane's visual analysis captures and reconfigures the passing moments of art, history, and philosophy. She further suggests cinema's essential paradox: temporal continuity conveyed through "stopped time," the rapid succession of still frames or frozen images. Doane explores the role of this paradox, notions of the temporal indeterminacy and instability of an image, in shaping not just cinematic time but also modern ideas about continuity, discontinuity, archivability, contingency, determinism, and temporal irreversibility of cinematic knowledge.