

REPRESENTATION OF GENDERS IN THE MEDIA

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Abstract

The sixth chapter of Van Zoonen's book 'Feminist Media Studies', 'Spectatorship and the Gaze', provides a compelling introduction to the area of feminist film studies, more specifically, to different issues surrounding the concept of the 'gaze'. Van Zoonen draws on the arguments of Laura Mulvey's work, who used psychoanalytic tools in explaining why women are presented in the media as being looked at and men as the ones who act. Van Zoonen stresses the difficulty of the proponents of psychoanalysis to explain the pleasures of female spectatorship, which, nevertheless, can be accounted for by employing different perspectives on media studies. After discussing ideas regarding the male gaze, Van Zoonen turns her attention to the way images of men are presented in popular media, emphasising the fact that, out of fear that their image could be homosexualised, different methods and narrative codes are employed in order to make the objectification of male bodies less evident. Hence, the traditional perception of men being the ones who have the power and women the ones who are looked at is still in place in patriarchal cultures, even though there are signs of trying to put it aside.

Keywords: Media, Genders, Representation

Outline

- I. women are constructed in western popular media as being the passive object of the male gaze, whereas men as being the ones who act; the psychoanalytical paradigm was employed to explain this state of facts
- a) Laura Mulvey used psychoanalysis in her study of gender media representations as a useful tool in explaining the pleasures of male spectatorship, though failing to explain the independent female pleasure of looking at men
 - i. 'scopophilia' - the deriving of sexual pleasures simply by looking
 - ii. 'narcissistic identification' - the desire of men to identify themselves with other men, presented on the screen as flawless characters
 - iii. the film industry is linked to patriarchy, according to Laura Mulvey; both 'scopophilia' and 'narcissistic identification' are achieved by the way filmmakers frame the action, including the objectification of women - the male gaze
 - iv. fear of castration - the trauma suffered by boys when discovering the physical gender differences is diminished by the way male spectators take control over women's bodies in the film industry

- v. one of the problems of the way Mulvey employed psychoanalysis - it equates masculinity with being male and femininity with being female

b) Mary Ann Doane contends the impossibility of reversing the gender roles (i.e. men becoming feminine and women masculine)

- i. no preconditions of voyeurism in women - in childhood women do not experience the distancing from their mothers that boys do because of the sexual differences
- ii. the female spectator can become masculinized by identifying with the male characters in the film or narcissistically identifying with objectified female characters

c) criticism of the psychoanalytic paradigm: it reinforces the patriarchal norms by excluding the possibility of women to derive pleasure from viewing media products

II. Women derive pleasure by looking at other women - the psychoanalytical paradigm and beyond

a) some argue that the bonding between girls and their mothers creates the pre-conditions of finding pleasure in looking at other women

b) women have coexisting latent homosexual and manifest heterosexual desires - Chodorow's theory of female development

c) Arbutnot and Seneca assert that the psychoanalytic theory is concerned with male spectatorship and thus not appropriate to examine female experiences and motivations

III. Women derive pleasure by looking at men

a) Christianity repressing the abundance of nude representations of men made the patriarchal order imperceptible, whilst it still is the substratum of most societies

b) the female gaze - which is masculine by definition - looking at the male body is less dangerous than the homosexual gaze

c) narrative and visual techniques lessen the degree of subjection of the male body to the gaze of the female spectatorship

- i. e.g. staring back at the viewer, looking up or away from the camera, the text accompanying the images personifying male bodies and thus creating characters
- ii. men presented as active (e.g. signs of physical activity or labour) and in control, just happening to be looked at, not as posing specifically for being viewed by female or male spectators
- iii. male bodies presented like romantic objects, not sexual ones (e.g. Playgirl)

Literature Review

The three chapters I have chosen - Kaplan's (1983), Stacey's (1988) and Van Zoonen's (1994) - which do not offer a comprehensive discussion of the issue of the 'gaze', draw on the psychoanalytic explanations of the male gaze and attempt to explain which are the pleasures derived by female spectators watching media products. Hence, all authors use Laura Mulvey's and Mary Ann Doane's ideas as a starting point for their discussion; Kaplan argues that psychoanalysis is 'a useful tool, but not] necessarily uncovering essential 'truths' about the human psyche' (1983: 23). She further argues that it can explain only the current structural organization of society, which, I would argue, is a Marxist perspective; in her view, cinema is seen as a means of releasing the tensions created by the industrial society and psychoanalysis as a necessary means to understand the causes of these (Kaplan, 1983). Stacey (1988) identifies the gaps in Mulvey's line of argument, more precisely the discussion of the male as an erotic object (which Van Zoonen analyses) and of female homosexuality, and exploits the latter to address one of the issues tackled in little depth by Van Zoonen (1994): female homosexual pleasure, which has been ignored by studies within the psychoanalytic framework. Stacey (1988), like Van Zoonen (1994), draws on Mary Ann Doane's idea that women's pleasures are not related to fetishism and voyeurism, as men's are and further acknowledges Mulvey's argument according to which women oscillate between male and female identifications.

In discussing possibilities for understanding and explaining the female gaze, all three authors argue that the reversal of roles is impossible without losing the specific gender identification; the female spectator becomes masculinized and vice-versa, and thus the structure remains basically unchanged (Kaplan, 1983). Stacey (1988), as does Van Zoonen (1994), rhetorically asks if women necessarily have to occupy feminine positions and men - masculine ones. I would suggest that 'masculine' and 'feminine' actually refer to a set of characteristics associated with men and women respectively only because it has traditionally been thought that they occur more often in the specific gender from which their names derive. Hence, they are not intrinsic to men or women. However, there remains the problem that they are in opposition, not on equal terms. Moreover, if these names which refer to gender and sexual roles would be disregarded, I think it would not be a problem for female spectators to adopt an 'active' ('masculine') stance anymore.

Further discussing the feminine and masculine spectatorships, Stacey (1988) contends that the subjectivities of spectators should be also taken into account, even if their standpoint is seen as 'masculine'. Kaplan notes, drawing on Mary Ann Doane's argument, that if attempting to confer female spectatorship an active role and not masculinizing it, there is the danger of denying pleasure and of 'disembody[ing] their spectator' (Kaplan, 1983: 28). An active main female character nearly always loses her traditional feminine characteristics in so doing of kindness, humaneness, motherliness' (Kaplan, 1983: 29). The problem with this statement is that all these characteristics of 'femininity' are actually constructed in the same way as concepts like 'active', 'sexually desirable' etc are. Therefore, Kaplan's statement does no justice to the role of the female spectator.

The dominant images of women, all male constructs, as Kaplan (1983) emphasizes, are the objects of male fetishism and voyeurism, as all three authors mention. In addition to Van Zoonen's (1994) overarching discussion of these Freudian concepts, Kaplan (1983) points at three male gazes in popular media, identified by Laura Mulvey: that of the film-maker, of the film viewer and of male characters in the film. According to this explanation of female's position in the film framework, Kaplan argues, 'the man owns the desire and the woman'

(1983: 27), whereas female spectators only 'receive and return the gaze but cannot act upon it' (1983: 31). Hence, male and female spectatorships are different in essential respects.

All three authors have a feminist standpoint in common from whence they look at the representation of women in popular media. Stacey (1988) is probably the most dedicated of all three to the feminist cause, discussing issues which are taboo for other scholars (feminist or not): the homosexual female spectatorship. The arguments they bring forward overlap, being complementary in the respect that all offer new information. However, they do not discuss each other's contribution to the feminist debate mainly because all three (Stacey to a lesser degree) offer an overview of the arguments brought forward by Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane. All three concluded by pointing to the need of further discussing the sources of pleasure for female spectators both in relation to men and to other women. Moreover, the problem of confounding gender identifications with sexuality in film studies has also been stated as being an issue.

Crosscutting Themes

The issues concerning the representation of genders in the media is one of the most important areas of concern for feminist scholars because of the many assumptions hidden under what comes across as common-sense. Nevertheless, this is only one of the issues in which feminists are interested. Among the general concern with the resources of conferring women a secondary role in patriarchal societies, feminists address issues of work and employment, and of motherhood. These two themes have several links with those raised by Van Zoonen's chapter on the male and female 'gaze' in popular media.

One of the most evident crosscutting themes is that of women's passivity and male activity and control. As we have seen in Van Zoonen's chapter (1994), female spectatorship is constructed as being passive and to be looked at, whilst male spectators act upon women by looking at their objectified bodies. Witz (1993/1997) asserts that women have traditionally been seen as having the natural duty to do the domestic work, not men, and that feminists struggled to determine the official recognition of this 'second job' women performed. At least since the 18th Century, when the Victorian Domestic Ideology constructed women as passive, men have had the active role in a family, working in order to earn a wage for the household. Women, on the other side, have been seen as confined to the private sphere of life and, thus, as being passive since they did not have an active role in the public sphere, as men did. This way of seeing women as inferior to men has survived until the present day, when women have also acceded to work positions, and it can be easily seen in the structure of the labour market and in the representation of women in the media.

The images of women in popular media, as objects of the male gaze, are opposed to representations of motherhood in different cultures. Reynolds notes that 'the 'good' mother is endlessly patient, forgiving, nurturing and, most important of all, unfailing in her love' (1996: 41); this characterization powerfully contrasts with the images of women as sexualized objects or as secondary characters who only disrupt the narrative. For children, mothers are the main characters of their stories and are entirely feminine (whereas the character of a mother in popular media would be either masculinized or it would be the object of the male gaze). Nevertheless, as Reynolds further argues, the problem is that in reality 'mothering [is] synonymous with subjugation' (1996: 42). Moreover, motherhood is linked with psychoanalysis and the way boys suffer a trauma when they discover their difference from their mothers.

In conclusion, the chapters I have looked at on different topics written by feminists share the same view that women are currently oppressed in patriarchal cultures. Women share subordination roles in media, at work, in the family etc. However, the hegemony of patriarchy is most evident in media representations of women.

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