

3

Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*

* Written in 1973 and published in 1975 in *Screen*.

I INTRODUCTION

(a) A Political Use of Psychoanalysis

This paper intends to use psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him. It takes as its starting-point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. It is helpful to understand what the cinema has been, how its magic has worked in the past, while attempting a theory and a practice which will challenge this cinema of the past. Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.

The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies. Recent writing in *Screen* about psychoanalysis and the cinema has not sufficiently brought out the importance of the representation of the female form in a symbolic order in which, in the last resort, it speaks castration and nothing else. To summarise briefly: the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end. It does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory, which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack. Both are posited on nature (or on anatomy in Freud's famous phrase). Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the

symbolic). Either she must gracefully give way to the word, the name of the father and the law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the imaginary. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.

There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists, a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallogocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings closer an articulation of the problem, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy? There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one. We are still separated by a great gap from important issues for the female unconscious which are scarcely relevant to phallogocentric theory: the sexing of the female infant and her relationship to the symbolic, the sexually mature woman as non-mother, maternity outside the signification of the phallus, the vagina. But, at this point, psychoanalytic theory as it now stands can at least advance our understanding of the *status quo*, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught.

(b) Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon

As an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking. Cinema has changed over the last few decades. It is no longer the monolithic system based on large capital investment exemplified at its best by Hollywood in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Technological advances (16mm and so on) have changed the economic conditions of cinematic production, which can now be artisanal as well as capitalist. Thus it has been possible for an alternative cinema to develop. However self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal *mise en scène* reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema. The alternative cinema provides a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film. This is not to reject the latter moralistically, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it and, further, to stress that the alternative cinema must start specifically

by reacting against these obsessions and assumptions. A politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can still only exist as a counterpoint.

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In the highly developed Hollywood cinema it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions. This article will discuss the interweaving of that erotic pleasure in film, its meaning and, in particular, the central place of the image of woman. It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.

II PLEASURE IN LOOKING/FASCINATION WITH THE HUMAN FORM

A The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is *scopophilia* (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated *scopophilia* as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated *scopophilia* with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. His particular examples centre on the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden (curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence or absence of the penis and, retrospectively, about the primal scene). In this analysis *scopophilia* is essentially active. (Later, in 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', Freud developed his theory of *scopophilia* further, attaching it initially to pre-genital auto-eroticism, after which, by analogy, the pleasure of the look

is transferred to others. There is a close working here of the relationship between the active instinct and its further development in a narcissistic form.) Although the instinct is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object. At the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.

At first glance, the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of the surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim. What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer.

B The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for *pleasurable looking*, but it also goes further, developing *scopophilia* in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world. Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego. Several aspects of this analysis are relevant here. The mirror phase occurs at a time when children's physical ambitions outstrip their motor capacity, with the result that their recognition of themselves is joyous in that they imagine their mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, reintrojected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future. This mirror moment predates language for the child.

Important for this article is the fact that it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity. This is a moment when an older fascination with looking (at the mother's face, for an obvious example) collides with the initial inklings of self-awareness. Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience. Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings, for instance), the cinema has [structures of fascination] strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition. While at the same time, the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals, through the star system for instance. Stars provide a focus or centre both to screen space and screen story where they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary).

C Sections A and B have set out two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of ego libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud. Although he saw the two as interacting and overlaying each other, the tension between instinctual drives and self-preservation polarises in terms of pleasure. But both are formative structures, mechanisms without intrinsic meaning. In themselves they have no signification, unless attached to an idealisation. Both pursue aims in indifference to perceptual reality, and motivate eroticised phantasmagoria that affect the subject's perception of the world to make a mockery of empirical objectivity.

During its history, the cinema seems to have evolved a particular illusion of reality in which this contradiction between libido and ego has found a beautifully complementary fantasy world. In *reality* the fantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it. Sexual instincts and identification processes have a meaning within the symbolic order which articulates desire. Desire, born with language,

allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex. Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox.

III WOMAN AS IMAGE, MAN AS BEARER OF THE LOOK

A In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. (Note, however, how in the musical song-and-dance numbers interrupt the flow of the diegesis.) The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. As Budd Boetticher has put it:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.

(A recent tendency in narrative film has been to dispense with this problem altogether; hence the development of what Molly Haskell has called the 'buddy movie', in which the active homosexual eroticism of the central male figures can carry the story without distraction.) Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the

film into a no man's land outside its own time and space. Thus Marilyn Monroe's first appearance in *The River of No Return* and Lauren Bacall's songs in *To Have and Have Not*. Similarly, conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen.

B An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor co-ordination.

In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of his imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape. Here the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action. (There are films with a woman as main protagonist, of course. To analyse this phenomenon seriously here would take me

too far afield. Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's study of *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* in Phil Hardy (ed.), *Raoul Walsh* (Edinburgh, 1974), shows in a striking case how the strength of this female protagonist is more apparent than real.)

C1 Sections III A and B have set out a tension between a mode of representation of woman in film and conventions surrounding the diegesis. Each is associated with a look: that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy) and that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis. (This tension and the shift from one pole to the other can structure a single text. Thus both in *Only Angels Have Wings* and in *To Have and Have Not*, the film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalised sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.)

But in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star).

This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The first avenue, voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with

2. fetishistic
scopophilia

castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end. Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, can exist outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone. These contradictions and ambiguities can be illustrated more simply by using works by Hitchcock and Sternberg, both of whom take the look almost as the content or subject matter of many of their films. Hitchcock is the more complex, as he uses both mechanisms. Sternberg's work, on the other hand, provides many pure examples of fetishistic scopophilia.

Sternberg C2 Sternberg once said he would welcome his films being projected upside-down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator's undiluted appreciation of the screen image. This statement is revealing but ingenuous: ingenuous in that his films do demand that the figure of the woman (Dietrich, in the cycle of films with her, as the ultimate example) should be identifiable; but revealing in that it emphasises the fact that for him the pictorial space enclosed by the frame is paramount, rather than narrative or identification processes. While Hitchcock goes into the investigative side of voyeurism, Sternberg produces the ultimate fetish, taking it to the point where the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative film) is broken in favour of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator. The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look.

Sternberg plays down the illusion of screen depth; his screen tends to be one-dimensional, as light and shade, lace, steam, foliage, net, streamers and so on reduce the visual field. There is little or no mediation of the look through the eyes of the main male protagonist. On the contrary, shadowy presences like La Bessière in *Morocco* act as surrogates for the director, detached as they are from audience identification. Despite Sternberg's insistence that his stories are irrelevant, it is significant that they are concerned with situation, not suspense, and cyclical rather than linear time, while plot complications revolve around misunderstanding rather than conflict. The most important absence is that of the controlling male gaze within the screen scene. The high point of emotional drama in the most typical Dietrich films, her supreme moments of erotic meaning, take place in the absence of the man she loves in the fiction. There are other witnesses, other spectators watching

her on the screen, their gaze is one with, not standing in for, that of the audience. At the end of *Morocco*, Tom Brown has already disappeared into the desert when Amy Jolly kicks off her gold sandals and walks after him. At the end of *Dishonoured*, Kranau is indifferent to the fate of Magda. In both cases, the erotic impact, sanctified by death, is displayed as a spectacle for the audience. The male hero misunderstands and, above all, does not see.

In Hitchcock, by contrast, the male hero does see precisely what the audience sees. However, although fascination with an image through scopophilic eroticism can be the subject of the film, it is the role of the hero to portray the contradictions and tensions experienced by the spectator. In *Vertigo* in particular, but also in *Marnie* and *Rear Window*, the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination. Hitchcock has never concealed his interest in voyeurism, cinematic and non-cinematic. His heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law – a policeman (*Vertigo*), a dominant male possessing money and power (*Marnie*) – but their erotic drives lead them into compromised situations. The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking). True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness – the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong. Hitchcock's skilful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze. The spectator is absorbed into a voyeuristic situation within the screen scene and diegesis, which parodies his own in the cinema.

In an analysis of *Rear Window*, Douchet takes the film as a metaphor for the cinema. Jeffries is the audience, the events in the apartment block opposite correspond to the screen. As he watches, an erotic dimension is added to his look, a central image to the drama. His girlfriend Lisa had been of little sexual interest to him, more or less a drag, so long as she remained on the spectator side. When she crosses the barrier between his room and the block opposite, their relationship is reborn erotically. He does not merely watch her through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally giving him the opportunity to save her. Lisa's exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection; Jeffries's voyeurism and activity have also been established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images. However, his enforced inactivity,

binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the fantasy position of the cinema audience.

In *Vertigo*, subjective camera predominates. Apart from one flashback from Judy's point of view, the narrative is woven around what Scottie sees or fails to see. The audience follows the growth of his erotic obsession and subsequent despair precisely from his point of view. Scottie's voyeurism is blatant: he falls in love with a woman he follows and spies on without speaking to. Its sadistic side is equally blatant: he has chosen (and freely chosen, for he had been a successful lawyer) to be a policeman, with all the attendant possibilities of pursuit and investigation. As a result, he follows, watches and falls in love with a perfect image of female beauty and mystery. Once he actually confronts her, his erotic drive is to break her down and force her to tell by persistent cross-questioning.

In the second part of the film, he re-enacts his obsessive involvement with the image he loved to watch secretly. He reconstructs Judy as Madeleine, forces her to conform in every detail to the actual physical appearance of his fetish. Her exhibitionism, her masochism, make her an ideal passive counterpart to Scottie's active sadistic voyeurism. She knows her part is to perform, and only by playing it through and then replaying it can she keep Scottie's erotic interest. But in the repetition he does break her down and succeeds in exposing her guilt. His curiosity wins through; she is punished.

Thus, in *Vertigo*, erotic involvement with the look boomerangs: the spectator's own fascination is revealed as illicit voyeurism as the narrative content enacts the processes and pleasures that he is himself exercising and enjoying. The Hitchcock hero here is firmly placed within the symbolic order, in narrative terms. He has all the attributes of the patriarchal superego. Hence the spectator, lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent legality of his surrogate, sees through his look and finds himself exposed as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking. Far from being simply an aside on the perversion of the police, *Vertigo* focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero. Marnie, too, performs for Mark Rutland's gaze and masquerades as the perfect to-be-looked-at image. He, too, is on the side of the law until, drawn in by obsession with her guilt, her secret, he longs to see her in the act of committing a crime, make her confess and thus save her. So he, too, becomes complicit as he acts out the implications of his power. He controls money and words; he can have his cake and eat it.

IV SUMMARY

The psychoanalytic background that has been discussed in this article is relevant to the pleasure and unpleasure offered by traditional narrative film. The [scopophilic instinct] (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and, in contradistinction, [ego libido] (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which mould this cinema's formal attributes. The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film. The argument must return again to the psychoanalytic background: women in representation can signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat. Although none of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.

To begin with (as an ending), the voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down. There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth. Nevertheless, as this article has argued, the structure of looking in narrative fiction film contains a contradiction in its own premises: the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and

bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish. Thus the two looks materially present in time and space are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego. The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera's look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate can perform with verisimilitude. Simultaneously, the look of the audience is denied an intrinsic force: as soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator, the fact of fetishisation, concealing as it does castration fear, freezes the look, fixates the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him.

This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and [passionate detachment]. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest', and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret.

Part II

Melodrama

Notes

1. S. Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', *Standard Edition*, vol. xxiii (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964).
2. S. Freud, 'Femininity', *Standard Edition*, vol. xxii (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964).
3. Ibid.
4. S. Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day Dreaming', *Standard Edition*, vol. ix (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964).

5

Notes on Sirk and Melodrama*

* Presented as a paper for the SEFT weekend school *Melodrama* and published in *Movie* in 1977.

It has been suggested that the interest of Hollywood 1950s melodrama lies primarily in the way that, by means of textual analysis, fissures and contradictions can be shown to be undermining the films' ideological coherence.¹ These contradictions, whether on the level of form or of narrative incident, seem to save the films from belonging blindly to the bourgeois ideology which produced them. This argument depends on the premise that the project of this ideology is indeed to conjure up a coherent picture of a world and conceal contradictions which in turn conceal exploitation and oppression. A text which defies unity and closure would then quite clearly be progressive. Although this line of argument has been productive and revealing, there is a way in which it has been trapped in a kind of Chinese box quite characteristic of melodrama itself. Ideological contradiction is actually the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious thread to be picked up only by special critical processes. No ideology can ever pretend to totality: it searches for safety-valves for its own inconsistencies. And the 1950s melodrama works by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; its excitement comes from conflict, not between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love.

Melodrama as a safety-valve for ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family may lose its progressive attributes, but it acquires a wider aesthetic and political significance. The workings of patriarchy, and the mould of feminine unconscious it produces, have left women largely without a voice, gagged and deprived of outlets (of a kind supplied, for instance, either by male art or popular culture) in spite of the crucial social and ideological functions women are called on to perform. In the absence of any coherent culture of oppression, a simple fact of recognition has aesthetic and political importance. There is a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive, and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping-ground, the family. While the Western and the gangster film celebrate the ups and downs endured by men of action, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, like the tragedies of Euripides, probing the pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women, act as a corrective.

Roughly, there are two dramatic points of departure for melodrama. One is coloured by a female protagonist's point of view which provides a focus for identification. The other examines tensions in the family, and between the sexes and generations; here, although women play an important part, their point of view is not analysed and does not initiate the drama. Helen Foley's article 'Sex and State in Ancient Greece' analyses Greek drama in terms that illuminate the 'safety-valve' function of Hollywood's family melodramas. She argues that Aeschylus shows how overvaluation of virility under patriarchy causes social and ideological problems which the drama comments on and attempts to correct: 'male characters . . . overly concerned with military and political glory at the expense of domestic harmony and their own children', and 'the emotional domestic sphere cannot be allowed direct political power and the wife must subordinate herself to her husband in marriage; but the maternal or domestic claims are nevertheless central and inviolable, a crucial check on bellicose male-dominated democracy'.²

For family life to survive, a compromise has to be reached, sexual difference softened, and the male brought to see the value of domestic life. As art and drama deal generously with male fantasy, a dramatic rendering of women's frustrations, publicly acting out an adjustment of balance in the male ego, is socially and ideologically beneficial. A positive male figure who rejects rampant virility and opposes the unmitigated power of the father achieves (at least by means of a 'happy end') the reintegration of both sexes in family life. The phallogentric, misogynist fantasies of patriarchal culture are shown here to be in contradiction with the ideology of the family. These tensions are certainly present in both the Hollywood Western and melodrama; both tend towards a beneficial sacrifice of unrestrained masculine individualism in the interests of civilisation, law and culture. Rafe in *Home from the Hill* re-establishes the family and 'feminine' values on the grave of his overbearing father. But, as Sirk has pointed out, the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, the cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled, in the last five minutes, into a happy end.

Sirk, in the two films on which he had virtual independence (both produced by Albert Zugsmith), was able to turn his attention to the 'masculine' or family melodrama without conforming to a standard happy end. He turns the conventions of melodrama sharply. Roger Shumann in *Tarnished Angels* and Kyle Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (both played by Robert Stack) are tortured and torn by the mystique of masculinity, haunted by phallic obsessions and fear of impotence. Both are suicidal, finally taking refuge in death. In these two films Sirk provides an extremely rare epitaph, an insight into *men* as victims of

patriarchal society. He shows castration anxiety, not (as is common) personified by a vengeful woman but presented *dreadfully* and without mediation. In dealing with the male unconscious Sirk approaches complexity near to the tragic. His Universal movies deal more specifically with women, and work more clearly within melodramatic conventions.

Significantly, discussions of the difference between melodrama and tragedy specify that while the tragic hero is conscious of his fate and torn between conflicting forces, characters caught in the world of melodrama are not allowed transcendent awareness or knowledge.

In tragedy, the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things. Tragedy is concerned with the nature of man, melodrama with the habits of men (and things). A habit normally reflects part of nature, and that part functions as if it were the whole. In melodrama we accept the part for the whole; this is a convention of the form.³

Melodramatic characters act out contradiction to varying degrees and gradually face impossible resolutions and probable defeats. However, the implications and poignancy of a particular narrative cannot be evoked wholly by limited characters with restricted dramatic functions – they do not fully grasp the forces they are up against or their own instinctive behaviour. It is here that the formal devices of Hollywood melodrama, as analysed by Thomas Elsaesser,⁴ provide a transcendent, wordless commentary, giving abstract emotion spectacular form, contributing a narrative level that provides the action with a specific coherence. *Mise en scène*, rather than the undercutting of the actions and words of the story level, provides a central point of orientation for the spectator.

Sirk allows a certain interaction between the spectator's reading of *mise en scène*, and its presence within the diegesis, as though the protagonists, from time to time, can *read* their dramatic situation with a code similar to that used by the audience. Although this device uses aesthetics as well as narrative to establish signs for characters on the screen as for the spectator in the cinema, elements such as lighting or camera movement still act as a privileged discourse for the spectator.

In the opening scene of *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary (Jane Wyman) looks at Ron (Rock Hudson) with the first inklings of desire. The emotion is carried through into the second scene through the presence of the autumn leaves he has given her, so that we, the spectators, share with Cary his secret importance. The touch of nature he has left behind marks the opening seconds of her preparation for what is to prove a barren evening at the Country Club. The children comment on Cary's red dress, interpreting it, as we do, as a sign of newly awakened interest in life and love but mistaking its object as the impotent and decrepit

Harvey, her date and their preferred future stepfather. The camera does not allow the spectator to make the same mistake, establishing in no uncertain terms the formal detachment with which Cary sees Harvey, in contrast to the way in which in the previous scene Ron had been subtly extracted from the background and placed in close face-to-face with Cary.

Lighting style clearly cannot be recognised within the diegesis, and in *All That Heaven Allows* it illustrates the basic emotional division which the film is actually about: Cary's world is divided between the cold, hard light (blues and yellows) of loneliness, repression and oppression and the warmer, softer light (red/orange) of hope, emotional freedom and sexual satisfaction. In keeping with the pace and emotion generated by a particular scene, Sirk occasionally changes lighting from one shot to the next, for instance, in order to use the dramatic potential of an intricate screen which dominates Cary's confrontation with her son Ned.

Although it is impossible to better Rainer Werner Fassbinder's plot synopsis of *All That Heaven Allows*,⁵ it might be useful to bring out some different emphases. The story-line is extremely simple, if not minimal (concocted specifically to repeat the success of *Magnificent Obsession*)⁶ and is told strictly from a woman's point of view, both in the sense of world view (the film is structured around female desires and frustrations) and point of identification (Cary, a widow with two college-age children and a standard of life in keeping with her late husband's elevated social and economic position). The narrative quickly establishes lack (her world is sexually repressed and obsessed simultaneously, offering only impotent elderly companionship – Harvey – or exploitative lechery – Howard). She then discovers love and a potentially physically and emotionally satisfying country way of life in Ron Kirby, her gardener (whose resonance shifts from that of the socially unacceptable in the Country Club world to that of the independent man in harmony with nature out by the old mill where he grows trees). Cary's transgression of the class barrier mirrors her more deeply shocking transgression of sexual taboos in the eyes of her friends and children. Her discovery of happiness is then reversed as she submits to pressure and gives Ron up, resulting in a 'flight into illness'. The doctor puts her on the road to success through self-knowledge and a happy end, but, by an ironic *deus ex machina* in reverse, their gratification is postponed by Ron's accident (caused by his joy at seeing Cary in the distance). A hidden shadow is cast implicitly over their perfect, joyful acceptance of love, although as the shutters are opened in the morning, the cold, hard light of repression is driven off the screen by the warm light of hope and satisfaction.

Jon Halliday points out the importance of the dichotomy between contemporary New England society – the setting for the movie – and

'the home of Thoreau and Emerson' as lived by Ron. 'Hudson and his trees are both America's past and America's ideals. They are ideals which are now unattainable. . . .'⁷ The film is thus posited on a recognised contradiction within the American tradition. The contemporary reality and the ideal can be reconciled only by Cary moving, as it were, into the dream which, as though to underline its actual ephemeral nature, is then broken at the end by Ron's accident. How can natural man and woman re-establish the values of primitive economy and the division of labour when the man is bedridden and incapable? How can a mother of grown children overcome the taboo against her continued sexual activity in 'civilised society', when the object of her desire is reduced to child-like dependence on her ministrations?

In other films, particularly *All I Desire*, *Imitation of Life* and *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk ironises and complicates the theme of the continued sexuality of mothers. The women perform professionally (from the depths of Laverne's parachute jump in *Tarnished Angels* to the heights of Lora's stardom in *Imitation of Life*) and attract the gaze of men and the curious crowd. Their problems are approached with characteristically Sirkian ambiguity as they try to brazen out their challenge to conformity as best they can. Cary, on the other hand, has no heroic or exhibitionist qualities, and the gaze and gossip of the town cause her agonies of embarrassment. It is only very occasionally that the setting and the narrative move away from Cary and, when they do, it is significant. The gaze of Cary's friends at Sara's party is established in a scene before Cary and Ron arrive. The camera takes in the prurient voyeurism which turns the sexual association of a middle-aged woman with a younger man into an act of public indecency (this view is then expressed and caricatured by Howard's drunken assault on Cary).

Melodrama can be seen as having an ideological function in working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form. A simple difference, however, can be made between the way that irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas are finally resolved in, for instance, *Home from the Hill*, and are not in, for example, *All That Heaven Allows*. It is as though the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that escape is closer to a day-dream than to fairy story. Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind tell a story of contradiction, not of reconciliation. Even if a heroine resists society's overt pressures, its unconscious laws catch up with her in the end.

Notes

1. Paul Willemen, 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 2. Paul Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System', *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 4. Stephen Neale, 'Douglas Sirk', *Framework*, no. 5.
2. Helen Foley, 'Sex and State in Ancient Greece', *Diacritics*.
3. R. B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).
4. Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', *Monogram*, no. 4.
5. R. W. Fassbinder, 'Six Films by Douglas Sirk', Halliday and Mulvey (eds) *Douglas Sirk*, Edinburgh Film Festival Publication (Edinburgh, 1972).
6. Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971).
7. Ibid.

6

Fassbinder and Sirk*

* Written as a review of *Fear Eats the Soul* for *Spare Rib* in 1974.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder is proving to be one of the most important directors of the 1970s, and his film *Fear Eats the Soul*, which launches London's new art cinema, the Gate, is a good example of his recent work. Fassbinder's films are not specifically feminist but they are of interest to women because they deal consistently with themes in which women have an independent importance, and have been emphasised by the women's movement: the family, hysteria, and the contradictions between the oppressed and the oppressor within a class. His particular interest, the individual's desire that finds itself in direct conflict with class and family ideology, links him to the Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s. Fassbinder acknowledges his debt to Hollywood. His understanding of the Hollywood melodrama, the way its greatest directors built up a picture of ideological forces and the insoluble problems of sex and desire within them, contributes to the complexity he achieves in his own work.

Fassbinder came to the American cinema through the influence of the French New Wave and its acknowledged debt to Hollywood. (His first feature was dedicated to Chabrol, Rohmer and Straub, showing in itself a sense of history and of heritage.) But much more than they, he has looked back to Hollywood melodrama in its own right. He takes it further along its own path, transposing and bringing out its essential themes with a clarity that comes from both the passing of time and freedom from studio supervision, and a bitterness that comes from his perception of contemporary German society. There are two important ways in which Fassbinder develops the American melodrama. First, he focuses on hysteria or the symptoms of repression in the oppressed. Although hysteria has traditionally been considered a female phenomenon, Fassbinder has brought out its meaning in men, by dealing with men who are in an ambiguous and oppressed situation (most particularly in *Merchant of Four Seasons*) in relation to their class and family, men who are trapped, as women are, in a way they can neither grasp nor articulate.

Fassbinder uses role reversals and sex confusions in his own manner, but particularly to expand the American melodrama in a second direction, to take it outside the confines of the bourgeoisie. While Hollywood in the 1950s dealt above all with the oppression and frustrations of the