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CINEMA

and

SPECTATORSHIP



JUDITH MAYNE

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CINEMA AND SPECTATORSHIP

Cinema and Spectatorship is the first book to focus on the history and role of the spectator in contemporary film studies. Judith Mayne examines how spectatorship emerged in the 1970s as one of the major preoccupations of film theorists, particularly in relation to theories of the subject drawn from psychoanalysis and semiotics. She suggests that while 1970s film theory insisted on the separation between the cinematic subject and actual film viewers, interest in spectatorship in film studies has been characterized by a very real friction between "subjects" and "viewers". She evaluates challenges to and revisions of 1970s theory, from feminist analyses of female spectatorship to historical explorations of how the film-spectator relationship is shaped by particular cultural factors.

In the book's first section Mayne examines three theoretical models of spectatorship: the perceptual, the institutional and the historical, while the second section focuses on case studies which crystallize many of the issues already discussed, concentrating on textual analysis, genre, "star-gazing" and finally the audience itself. These include the place of the spectator in the textual analysis of individual films such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; the construction of Bette Davis's star persona; fantasies of race and film viewing in *Field of Dreams* and *Ghost*; and gay and lesbian audiences as "critical" audiences. *Cinema and Spectatorship* provides a thorough and accessible overview of this complex, fragmented and often controversial area of film theory.

Judith Mayne is Professor of French and Women's Studies at Ohio State University, where she has taught since 1976. She is the author of *The Woman at the Keyhole* (1990), *Kino and the Woman Question* (1989) and *Private Novels, Public Films* (1988).

SIGHTLINES

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Media, Brown University, USA

Cinema Studies has made extraordinary strides in the past two decades. Our capacity for understanding both how and what the cinema signifies has been developed through new methodologies, and hugely enriched in interaction with a wide variety of other disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology, linguistics, history, economics and psychology. As fertile and important as these new theoretical foundations are, their very complexity has made it increasingly difficult to track the main lines of conceptualization. Furthermore, they have made Cinema Studies an ever more daunting prospect for those coming new to the field.

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CINEMA AND SPECTATORSHIP

Judith Mayne



London & New York

First published 1993
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Mayne, Judith
Cinema and Spectatorship.—(Sightlines Series)
I. Title II. Series
791.43

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Mayne, Judith.
Cinema and spectatorship/Judith Mayne.
p. cm.—(Sightlines)
1. Motion picture audiences. 2. Film criticism. I. Title.
II. Series: Sightlines (London, England)
PN1995.9.A8M28 1993

791.43'015—dc20

92—24927

ISBN 0-203-13388-9 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-21944-9 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-03415-9 (Print Edition)
ISBN 0-415-03416-7 (pbk)

For John Bush

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to John Bush for over thirty years of intellectual companionship; he influenced this book in ways that might surprise him. Thanks to series editors Philip Rosen and Ed Buscombe for their encouragement and patience. The College of Humanities, the Department of French and Italian, and the Center for Women's Studies at the Ohio State University have provided support for which I am grateful. Thanks also to Rebecca Thomas for research assistance; to Terry Geesken of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive for assistance in locating the stills for chapters 6, 7 and 8; to Anne Friedberg for conversations at crucial moments. I am particularly grateful to Terry Moore for her detailed comments on individual chapters and for her wicked sense of humor.

INTRODUCTION

In 1913 “Victor Appleton”—one of the fictitious authors’ names created by the Stratemeyer Syndicate for an anonymous group of writers—introduced two new series of juvenile novels about the movies: the “Motion Picture Chums” and the “Moving Picture Boys.” Both series detail the adventures of male friends who have entered the business of making and exhibiting movies—the Moving Picture Boys are filmmakers, and the Motion Picture Chums are exhibitors. One year later, under the equally fictitious name of Laura Lee Hope, a comparable series was introduced about young women, the “Moving Picture Girls.” It will come as no surprise to those familiar with the history of motion pictures that the girls’ adventures evolve from their position in front of the camera, as actresses, and not behind it.

These novels are interesting for more than the classic gender division they inscribe. For the series capitalize on the enormous interest that motion pictures had inspired in the two decades of their history, and in so doing function as early primers on spectatorship, the subject of this book. Spectatorship is not only the act of watching a film, but also the ways one takes pleasure in the experience, or not; the means by which watching movies becomes a passion, or a leisure-time activity like any other. Spectatorship refers to how film-going and the consumption of movies and their myths are symbolic activities, culturally significant events.

Clearly the series of novels by Appleton and Hope respond to a perceived need to justify the cinema in moral terms. The Motion Picture Chums, in Appleton’s books, are models of middle-class respectability and ingenuity, and they are pitted against other less noble figures. In their second adventure, *The Motion Picture Chums at Seaside Park* (1913), for instance, the chums come to the rescue of a group of wealthy individuals whose motorboat has caught fire. Peter, one of the group, is foil to the Motion Picture Chums in that he embodies cowardice and narcissism and swims away from the others, while the chums assist them. That Peter represents the kind

of spectatorship to which the boys are the positive alternative is suggested more emphatically when he eavesdrops on a conversation, sneaking up on the friends unawares, all the while assuming that is his right. In contrast, Frank, Randy, and Pep are direct and forthright. One assumes not only that the books were designed to engage cinematic fantasies by offering behind-the-scenes views (in the Seaside Park adventure, the exhibition process is detailed), but also to encourage a kind of spectatorship that upheld the values of the chums while dismissing the spectatorship of one like Peter—voyeuristic, self-serving and immature.

The Moving Picture Girls—sisters Ruth and Alice DeVere—come to their cinematic adventures through a different route. Their father is a noted stage actor who has difficulty finding work. When at last he lands a part, he is stricken by a mysterious recurring throat ailment which leaves him unable to speak above a hoarse whisper. With the help of their neighbor, Russ, who is a projectionist and a camera operator, the girls convince their father that the movies provide an excellent outlet for his talents. The father's prejudices against the movies are soon overcome, and he becomes a regular actor in the Comet film company. Eventually the girls begin acting as well, and the series of novels details their adventures as the film company moves from one location to another. The Moving Picture Girls' adventures provide many opportunities to accentuate the positive moral side of motion pictures through the girls' reactions to the movies. After her first visit to the motion-picture studio, Alice describes to her sister her desire to act: "It's just lovely, I think. You don't have to act before a whole big audience that is staring at you. Just some nice men, in their shirt sleeves, turning cranks" (Hope 1914:85).

The motion pictures as defined in these novels are not only embodiments of middle-class respectability, but also serve to demonstrate the superior pluck and courage of those drawn to the movies—with keen entrepreneurial skills thrown in for the boys, and domestic devotion for the girls. Now many films of the era were similarly concerned to demonstrate, in one way or another, the same kind of superior moral values, and a preoccupation with spectatorship has been evident in moving pictures virtually from the beginning, whether it be in a child looking gleefully through *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900) or a country bumpkin visiting the cinema for the first time in *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902). Unique to the adventures of the Moving Picture Girls and the Motion Picture Chums is that spectatorship has moved outside the movie theater, and that what the novels therefore promise is a reliving of filmic adventures and a re-creation of cinematic fantasies. For spectatorship is not just the relationship that

occurs between the viewer and the screen, but also and especially how that relationship lives on once the spectator leaves the theater.

In my lifetime, there have been far more ways to extend the pleasure of the movies than the Moving Picture Girls or the Motion Picture chums ever dreamed of. I have a vague memory that when my parents took me to see my second film in a movie theater (I have no idea how old I was), I was astonished that you could see a *different* film every time you went to the movies, and the thought of how many movies must therefore exist was mind-boggling. I had the same thrill when I first discovered movie-fan magazines at the age of 10 or so, astonished that someone had thought of such a clever idea to supplement the enormously pleasurable but nonetheless limited two hours or so it took to watch a film. Thus, even though I grew up in the 1950s when more movie culture was available than in 1913 or 1914, my thrill at the possibilities of cinema spectatorship was not so unlike the Moving Picture Girls' discovery of the movies.

Since I am an academic who makes a living from studying film, I care about the quality of films as well as the myths surrounding their consumption. In that sense I perhaps share more with the Motion Picture Chums and the Moving Picture Girls than I would like, since the moral preoccupations of those novels are not so far removed from my assumption that "informed" spectatorship can only increase the desire for better-quality films. But it all depends, of course, on what kind of quality you are looking for. I may be an informed spectator, but that has not lessened my pleasure in what some consider inferior products, like Arnold Schwarzenegger films. Rather, the study of spectatorship has made me cognizant, in quite commonplace and everyday ways, of the kinds of contradictory impulses that comprise pleasure. For as much as feminism, for instance, is fully part of my everyday life, I have somewhat peculiar (peculiar, that is, to my friends and family; not to me) regressive fantasies about male adolescence which are given perfect expression by Schwarzenegger. Spectatorship is one of the few places in my life where the attractions to male adolescence and feminist avant-garde poetics exist side by side. For Chantal Akerman's particular approach to spectatorship, for instance, engages me in different but equally satisfying ways as Arnold Schwarzenegger's.

Film studies tells me that the difference between these two experiences of spectatorship is not so much that one is art and the other isn't, but rather that one kind of spectatorship is "critical" (Akerman's), engaged as it is with the relation between memory and duration, gender and address; while the other (Schwarzenegger's) is not. One kind of spectatorship makes me think and reflect, while the other makes me act out and forget. One kind of spectatorship

challenges cinematic conventions and attempts to create a new language of the cinema; the other perpetuates dominant cinematic and cultural practices.

When I became involved in film studies, this distinction between crude and sophisticated spectatorship was enormously seductive, and I embraced it wholeheartedly. As a graduate student in the early 1970s, the discovery, first, of the films of Jean-Luc Godard, and later, of Soviet films of the 1920s, was tantamount to a fundamental revision about everything I had assumed the cinema to be. The crucial dimension seemed to be the way these films addressed their viewers. I conveniently forgot the radical differences between Soviet audiences of the 1920s, struggling with the vicissitudes of socialist economic and cultural change; or a French, largely Parisian, intellectual crowd; and me, sitting in auditoriums in Buffalo, New York with mostly other students and the occasional local activist or film buff. Spectatorship became, to my mind, something a *film* or a *filmmaker* did, not something I necessarily brought to a film; it was there for me—or any cognizant viewer, whether a Russian peasant or Jean-Paul Sartre—to discover.

In retrospect, I am struck by how that perception of critical spectatorship is locked into a neat dualism with the view that was being elaborated in film studies at the time, concerning the “classical” or dominant cinema, which positioned spectators who were passive, or at the very least highly receptive to complicit, uncritical pleasures. Spectatorship was defined as an either/or proposition. At the same time, spectatorship was identified as purely a function of the individual film text, and presumably the critical spectatorship thus embodied would be identical whether you were in Paris or Buffalo or Leningrad.

It will be evident in the following chapters that I think spectatorship is at once the most valuable area of film studies, and the one that has been the most misunderstood, largely because of the obsessive preoccupation with dualistic categories of critique versus celebration, or “critical” versus “complacent” spectatorship. Many scholars working in the field share my reservations, but I am not so certain that the simple reversals that have taken place in recent years are necessarily improvements. While I do not think spectatorship of the classical Hollywood cinema is satisfactorily explained in terms of passivity and ideological indoctrination, for instance, the tendency to reverse the terms and to claim the site of viewing (clearly following the emphasis on reading in reader-response theory) as always active or contestatory is just as problematic.

While I am critical of this dualistic framework, this book is not intended as a demonstration of the error-filled ways of all of the different forms and evolutions spectatorship has taken in film studies.

I have limited the scope of my study in several ways. First, I discuss spectatorship and the cinema, without taking television spectatorship into account. While television watching is undoubtedly the most important spectating activity of the present time, film spectatorship nonetheless has a special quality given the important role motion pictures have played in the development of industries and institutions of the image and of narrative. And in any case, the way in which analyses of the spectator and spectatorship have evolved in television studies is quite different than in film. Second, I have limited my focus to mainstream, commercial film. While various independent and avant-garde cinemas take spectatorship as a major concern, film studies has nonetheless been preoccupied—and in some ways obsessed—with the “classical” models of dominant cinema. I question that preoccupation, but from within, as it were, by limiting my range of inquiry to mainstream, narrative films.

I have attempted both to summarize debates in film studies and to suggest ways they might continue more productively. When I point to limitations or blind spots in recent film theory, I have in mind a productive engagement, not a rejection from the exalted vantage point of theoretical purity or political righteousness. Theory and politics are two of the terms that have been uttered most frequently in film studies, as well as in contemporary critical theory in general. It is common, in genealogies of film studies (or contemporary critical theory), to trace their development to the political demonstrations and student-worker coalitions of May '68 in France, and to the general climate of contestation and protest that characterized the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Europe.

From the events of May '68 emerged a heightened awareness of both the ubiquity of images and commodities and the importance of understanding them critically. If the events of May '68 encouraged a rethinking of forms of political protest and an insistence on the importance of Utopian thinking, the heritage of May '68 for film studies has far more to do with what was theorized as the problem—what Guy Debord in his famous book called *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), a society, that is, in which the consumption and contemplation of images has replaced all forms of human communication—than with the various solutions that were proposed, from street theater to student/ worker coalitions to a fusion of psychoanalysis and politics. Indeed, the psychoanalytic inflection of most contemporary film studies, rather than being a theory of emancipatory or radical practice, has been a reminder that no easy politics of the unconscious is possible. The theoretical legacy of 1968 for film studies was the recognition that the seemingly innocent activities of watching a movie or reading a magazine function to create a society of complicit individuals.

Citing May '68 has become a reflex, and too often such narratives of the development of a field make it seem as if there is an easy, direct link between politics and intellectual life. In fact the connections are more tenuous and therefore less amenable to easy cause-and-effect explanations. While theorists working in France in the 1960s and 1970s, like Christian Metz and Raymond Bellour, were central to the development of film theory, their interests need also to be seen within the development of film culture in France, where cinéphilie has had a respectable history and where the relationship between film theory and film practice has traditionally been close. However, one of the more striking features of recent film theory in France is that with few exceptions (video work by Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel), few of the theorists are themselves filmmakers. And whereas traditions of film theory in the past in France were linked to efforts to reinvent the cinema—film impressionism and the New Wave being the most prominent examples—theorists like Bellour and Metz had little interest in French cinema, but rather were more committed to analysis of the classical Hollywood cinema. Yet even this simultaneous attraction to and distance from the Hollywood model has a long history in French cinematic culture, in which Hollywood has always provided a model both to emulate and to reject.

To be sure, French film theory, while usually identified as the source of current thinking about film, is but one aspect of film studies. For there would have been no contemporary resurgence of film studies were it not for the British and the North American influence; the first, most present through figures like Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, and Stephen Heath and through institutions like the British Film Institute; the second, most apparent in the changes brought about in American universities after social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the civil rights, anti-war, women's and gay/lesbian movements—whereby more opportunities were created for exploration of contemporary forms like the cinema. While the events of May '68 in France were particularly important for their concern with forms of representation, the political climate of contestation and change existed across Western Europe and in the US.

The particular interest in spectatorship parallels the shift toward the reader, in literary criticism, and toward the subject, in philosophy. The generation of film scholars who contributed to the growth of film studies in the 1970s had lived through various stages of the "society of the spectacle," from the rapid growth of consumer culture in the 1950s to the understanding of historical events, like the war in Viet-nam, from the literal vantage point of a spectator watching television. Many found in the study of the cinema a way of understanding a shared past of images, myths, and narratives, and the particular focus on the

spectator foregrounded the importance of comprehending not just the cinema, but the cinema as it has shaped and defined the fantasies of generations of spectators.

This book is divided into two sections; the first, "Theories of Spectatorship," examines the major paradigms that shaped inquiry into spectatorship in the 1970s, as well as the models that have emerged as critiques and alternatives to those theories. Chapter 1, "The Subject of Spectatorship," sets out the major definitions that shaped the inquiry into spectatorship in 1970s film theory. In chapter 2, "Spectatorship as Institution," I examine the central notion of the cinematic *apparatus* as it developed in 1970s film theory. In chapter 3, "Spectatorship Reconsidered," I foreground three approaches to spectatorship which have evolved from criticisms of the apparatus model—empirical approaches, which focus on the need to displace the "subject" of apparatus theory and to study real people instead; historical approaches, which focus on specific forms spectatorship has taken rather than global definitions of the cinema as institution; and feminist approaches, which in foregrounding the female spectator examine the difference that gender makes. I suggest that what is most crucial to the critical understanding of spectatorship is the collision of and tension between seemingly opposing terms, and in chapter 4, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship," I examine particular modes of analysis that are fruitful for such an understanding, from the non-coincidence of address and reception, to the study of fantasy, to the negotiation of different discourses.

I have attempted, in Part I, to provide an overview of the field that is both comprehensive and critical. But it will become obvious by chapter 4 that I see some approaches to spectatorship as more useful than others. One of the controversies in film studies today concerns the value of cognitivism, the study of knowledge and perception, in relation to spectatorship. For many of the proponents of cognitivism, an entire redefinition of the field of film studies, away from psychoanalysis and toward psychology, away from interpretation and toward schemata, is at issue. While some of the criticisms made of film theory in the name of cognitivism are accurate, others seem to me to involve a classic case of apples and oranges, in that the "spectator" envisaged by cognitivism is entirely different than the one conceptualized by 1970s film theory. I discuss cognitivism only in chapter 3 (as one empirical model); in the remaining chapters of the book, I am more concerned with how the valuable insights of 1970s film theory might be revised, not rejected wholesale.

Part II, "Readings of Spectatorship," includes four case studies of spectatorship. In each of these chapters, I have brought together an approach to spectatorship with an area that has not been explored

quite so extensively. In chapter 5, "Textual Analysis and Portraits of Spectatorship," I draw upon textual analysis, which in the 1970s was the preferred mode of analysis of the cinema, and the classical Hollywood cinema in particular. I discuss a film (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1945]) which is visibly preoccupied with spectatorship, but which does not follow the predictable patterns excavated by practitioners of textual analysis, particularly insofar as the figure of woman and heterosexual coupling are concerned. In chapter 6, I look at the construction of Bette Davis's star image across a range of texts, including magazines and star biographies as well as her films. My concern in this chapter is with how female spectators are addressed, not in relationship to the ubiquitous "male gaze," but through variations on the theme of female rivalry. In chapter 7, "White Spectatorship and Genre-Mixing," I consider how and to what extent the model of spectatorship in film studies has been concerned specifically with white spectators. I connect this exploration of white spectatorship with two recent films, *Field of Dreams* (1989) and *Ghost* (1990), both characterized simultaneously by a mixture of genres and a peculiar use of racist stereotypes.

In all three of these case studies, my focus is on how spectators are addressed, but I do not assume that spectatorship can be adequately analyzed in terms purely of individual films. Thus, I consider, in chapter 5, the influence of Oscar Wilde's persona on expectations about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; the connection between different kinds of texts, in chapter 6; and the relationship between film reviews and films insofar as questions of race are concerned, in chapter 7. It will become apparent in these chapters that I do not think the study of spectatorship is well served by rejecting altogether the structure of individual film texts and the tools of textual analysis. What is needed, rather, is a recognition of the flexibility of different modes of address, as well as the hypothetical quality of any spectator imagined by film theory. In my last chapter, "The Critical Audience," I examine the concept of the audience, and I take as an example gay/lesbian viewers. As I have already mentioned, the notion of critical spectatorship has relied too much on a facile opposition of being "inside" dominant ideology and complacent, versus being "outside" ideology and critical. It is hard to imagine many US audiences of recent years more politically charged than gays and lesbians, so this particular example provides the opportunity to examine critically the notion of the "critical audience."

I stress throughout this book that the relationship between the "subject," the position supposedly assigned to the film viewer by the institutions of the cinema, and the "viewer," the real person who watches the movies, has never been resolved. For 1970s film theory,

INTRODUCTION

the “viewer” was bracketed altogether, with attention concentrated rather on how discursive positions are established textually and ideologically. Revisions of 1970s film theory have tended to focus on the “viewer” as an active creator of meaning, thereby bracketing in turn many of the assumptions about the cinematic apparatus. The study of spectatorship in film theory has always involved some complicated negotiations of “subjects” and “viewers,” despite claims that the two are incompatible terms. My aim in this book is to evaluate those complicated negotiations as the horizon of film spectatorship.