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The dominance of the male gaze in Hollywood Films

Patriarchal Hollywood Images of women at the turn of the Millenium

Lizentiatsarbeit
Universität Basel
Philosophisch Historische Fakultät
Abgabe Juli 2004
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Woman are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the "ideal" spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

- John Berger, 1972
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I. INTRODUCTION

The way in which media systems reflect our social environment and specifically how they represent and disseminate gender role models and have a lasting effect on the construction of identity is of long-standing interest both in Gender Studies and in the literary and the visual arts. In order to examine in particular the representation of women in the visual art of popular cinema, *The Dominance of the Male Gaze in Hollywood Films* will thus focus on the image of women in mainstream Hollywood films.¹

Although media and specifically television and films are often considered to act “largely as a social mirror” (Humm, 1997: 13 or Coppock, 1995: 111), films in fact often distort social reality and continue to reflect traditional stereotypical gender constructions. In fact, these traditional gender images are not simply mirrors of real life, but also ideological signifiers: In many mainstream films that pretend to depict reality a time lag separates true social circumstances from the film reality the movie produces.

Consequently, this time lag also manifest in filmic representations of gender roles means for the women’s movement that feminists have hardly been able to enact new images of women outside the patriarchal context of popular films or change female stereotypes and incorporate feminist thought into mainstream films. Thus, mainstream films do not propagate an image of emancipated women, quite the reverse: women are subordinate objects of the male gaze. This general assumption has led to this thesis, which will deal with the question of whether Hollywood² films, as representative of

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¹ Three common terms refer to the subject: cinema, movie (motion picture) and film. In this thesis the term film will be preferred, but the other terms will be reserved for occasional variation.

² Hollywood, an “American film city, nominally a suburb of Los Angeles, was founded in 1912 […]. By 1913 Hollywood was established as the film-maker’s Mecca, and continued so for forty years. Several factors combined in the late 40s to affect its unique concentration […]. The consequent break-up of many big studios […] weakened continuity of product […]. So began the world-wide trekking now evident in American production.” (Walker, 1993: 382)
mainstream culture, still disseminate patriarchal images of women dominated by the male gaze even though feminist thought has been part of our society for some decades now.

Located at the intersection of Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, and Gender Studies, this thesis will mainly follow the theoretical approach of the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey who developed the concept of the male gaze in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Mulvey’s concept shall contribute to the analysis of the thesis that the images of women in Hollywood films still correspond to conservative patriarchal stereotypes.

Within the scope of this still valid thesis, one of the major restrictions was to narrow down the film analysis to merely Hollywood film production. The reason for this restriction is first of all that Hollywood films, representative of popular taste, are globally consumed and thus have an undisputed impact on an international audience. The films’ far-reaching dissemination is also due to Hollywood’s economic resources and power, clever marketing strategies, commercial exploitation of their films, and star hype. As a consequence, Hollywood films are the most lucrative and internationally successful in comparison to, for example, European or Bollywood productions. Secondly, Hollywood has been ceaselessly perpetuating the so-called “American Dream,” which not only the American people still likes to believe in and aspire to. However, maintaining the myth of the “American Dream” also means propagating patriarchal ideology, including a hierarchical social order and traditional female roles. Also, in view of the fact that Hollywood presents these patriarchal role models in the guise of the ideological “American Dream” as desirable to the audience, I consider

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3 The “American Dream” stands for the human dream of mobility, independence, beauty and success, for the importance of self-reliance and individuality (see Traube, 1992: 127,129) and for the value of human virtues such as strength of will, courage and hard work.
Hollywood’s conception and representation of the female sex especially problematic. To sum up, Hollywood films, predominantly box-office hits all over the world, are undoubtedly most effective in perpetuating the dominant patriarchal ideology and dissemination of traditional female gender roles, which contribute to the limitation of the ways in which women are depicted in culture and society.

Consequently, I will restrict myself to the analysis of Hollywood films and postpone a more elaborate account of the image of women in film productions other than Hollywood films to a later point. Additionally, it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to statistically prove the assumption that Hollywood still disseminates demeaning images of women, as for such a venture an analysis of at least about 250 Hollywood films would be required in order to be representative. However, on the basis of a reasonable selection of films and use of a film analysis codebook, my personal goal is to point out at least a statistical tendency which shall finally underpin the qualitative analysis of five films selected according to pre-defined criteria.

Following the outline of my thesis, the first of the three core chapters will deal with the topics of feminism and film theory. It is useful to commence with a discussion of feminist criticism versus patriarchal ideology in order to trace the patriarchal conceptions of women in the female film characters of the selected Hollywood films. This first chapter will conclude with the subject of feminist film criticism and will finally introduce the theoretical foundation of this thesis, namely the psychoanalytical approach of Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) and her concept of the male cinematic gaze. Subsequently, the feminist critique of Mulvey’s approach will be discussed against feminist film theorists such as Elizabeth Ann Kaplan and Teresa de Lauretis. This first main chapter about feminism and film
theory will conclude with a short statement, of why I still adhere to Mulvey’s theory in
order to examine my thesis.

The second main chapter will chiefly deal with the analysis of Hollywood films. After introducing film as a narrative genre, a short outline of the procedure of film
analysis (how to read a film) as well as the film analysis codebook will be provided and
the film selection will then be legitimated, before finally presenting and discussing the
quantitative and qualitative results of the film analysis.

In the third main chapter, numerous questions which have emerged during the
film analysis will be examined; for instance, the consequences of film alternatives such
as feminist film-making for the cinematic image of women and the influence of female
directors in Hollywood. Finally, the synthesis and conclusion will summarise the most
important findings and will dare to venture an outlook.

This thesis will provide evidence that, in spite of more than three decades of
feminist film criticism, the male gaze continues to dominate the image of women in
Hollywood films well into the 21st century. Hopefully, the film selection will help to
illustrate how patriarchal female role models are still perpetuated, yet more latent
manifest than at the time when Mulvey’s pivotal article was first published.
II. FEMINISM AND FILM THEORY

The challenging of the dominant ideological representations of femininity and the negative images of women as objects of the male gaze and desire in the visual conventions of both high art and popular culture was a cornerstone of second wave feminist theory and remains so in the age of post-feminism. Therefore, in feminist film theories, feminists criticised and continue to criticise the role of women in the film industry where they are reduced to being packaged as trivial images such as the victim, whore or housewife. These trivial and traditional female stereotypes enable men to oppress women and to perpetuate patriarchal ideology. As a consequence of these grievances, feminists as well as feminist film theorists declare the ideological struggle against patriarchal representation of women to be continuingly important for women’s liberation, since the female dilemma lies in the powerful and confining relationship between idealised or denigrating filmic images of women and the internalisation of these by female consumers.

2.1. FEMINIST CRITICISM

FEMINISM VERSUS PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

Films are always imbued with meanings which extend beyond the simple function of entertainment and are thus an expression of dominant ideological assumptions within culture. For instance, Hollywood films incorporate the ideology of mass culture by addressing as large an audience as possible and by attempting to please the popular desire for “light entertainment”. In addition, Hollywood’s second ideological guideline is patriarchal ideology, which is responsible for the conservative cinematic stereotypes of women\(^4\) in mainstream Hollywood films and which implies innately misogynistic

\(^4\) Male filmic stereotypes surely exist as well, but they are not the focus of the present thesis.
female images. By following these two ideologies, Hollywood supports the global dissemination and perpetuation of the powerful patriarchal discourse which continually reinforces stereotypes about femininity, including sexuality, appearance and appropriate behaviour. Thus, in a Hollywood film text which is composed of a variety of different discourses the structural coherence arises from the interrelations of its discourses while ideological hegemony is gained by the power of the discourse carrying the dominant patriarchal ideology. Consequently, within patriarchal culture the various discourses that interweave through a specific (Hollywood) film text are organised along gender lines as to give priority to the male (patriarchal) discourse. A feminist analysis of exactly this ideological male discourse will be provided in the following paragraphs.

According to Kaplan and Vicki Coppock, ideology is defined as follows:

It is clear that individuals live their lives through an inheritance and development of common-sense assumptions, often based on prejudices, images and reputation, but it is when those ideas and beliefs cohere and become institutionalised that they become ideologies (Coppock, 1995: 17).

Furthermore, ideology, in much recent cultural analysis, is understood in Althusser’s terms as ‘a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society’. […] If ideology is to be defined as a system of representations that have a material organisational force in society, the issue for film theory is the role in this of art as a practice specifically developed for the purposes of aesthetic representation and distinct from other forms of signifying practice (Kaplan, 2000: 70).

Ideologies are thus passed on through religion, education, media systems, the legal system, culture and other social institutions and reinforce the predominant discourses constructed by prevailing institutions such as patriarchy: “Patriarchy defines the personal, physical and institutional power that men exert over women” (Coppock, 1995: 18).

I define patriarchy as a system of interrelated social structures through which men exploit women. […] The definition refers to a system of social relations rather than individuals, since it is presumed that it is at the level of a social system that gender relations may be explained, not that of individual men, nor that of discrete social institutions (Walby, 1986: 51).