

Issue 12: Book Reviews

Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On

By Michele Aaron

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A Review by Sarah Arnold, National University of Ireland, Galway

In *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On*, Michelle Aaron re-examines the various theories that have emerged in the field of spectatorship, with the agency of the spectator as the central focus. Aaron seeks to reconcile considerations of audience as subject and audience as spectator, and sets about achieving this through an assessment of the various theoretical frameworks included in spectatorship studies. This seems a bold task, considering the world of cultural studies, cine-psychoanalysis and sociology vary rarely find common ground. The first half of the book is dedicated to a historical account of the development of spectatorship studies and the remaining half concentrates on textual analysis, where Aaron proposes her "counter model of spectatorship."

In the first chapter Aaron traces the origins of interest in spectatorship to the Paris Riots of 1968, which she sees as having led to the emergence of structuralism. The brief explanation of structuralism and its relationship to film that follows proves surprisingly concise and here, and throughout the book, Aaron reduces huge amounts of theory down to digestible pieces. The emphasis in this chapter is on the process of illusion, and so Aaron takes the reader through Althusser's Apparatus Theory through Baudry and Metz and beyond, finally closing with an introduction to Laura Mulvey. Although the chapter is brief, it does provide a who's who in the field of spectatorship, and clearly outlines the origins of various theories. Aaron takes pains to explain the connection between psychoanalytic theory and cinematic identification. Sometimes the chapter can feel a bit hurried but perhaps this is to avoid repetition of work already done on the subject, as well as self repetition later in her own book, where the same issues are explored in further detail.

Chapter Two moves on to a discussion of gender and spectatorship, although this seems largely dominated by female spectatorship. Taking up where she left off in the first chapter, Aaron details the influence of psychoanalysis in spectatorship debates, primarily Laura Mulvey in both 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (*Screen*, 16(3), 1975) and 'Afterthoughts' (in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, 1989). While she gives a detailed account of how Mulvey's theories work in film analysis by looking at *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) and other films, she makes clear her scepticism of psychoanalytic film theory, which she feels universalizes women's experiences and position as spectator. Mention is given to other dominant players in feminist film theory such as Doane and her account of the female masquerade, Modleski and her reading of

Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), as well as Williams and multiple identification. With psychoanalysis as a method of examining spectatorship proving limiting and problematic for Aaron, the focus is then shifted to spectatorship and the social subject. Television and Reception studies are cited as moving the spotlight from psychoanalysis to the spectator as agent and, so, issues of difference are raised, albeit never explored in great detail. Although Aaron seems to favour reception studies and the social subject, it reads more as an afterthought, as does the short piece on male spectatorship at the chapter's end.

In Chapter Three Aaron concentrates on masochism in relation to the film text and spectatorship. She returns to Freud to explain how and why people take pleasure from pain, but moves beyond Freud to argue that there is active engagement in pain or "pleasure in unpleasure" (57). Relating this to *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), Aaron suggests that the protagonist engages in a fulfilling masochistic fantasy. The bulk of this chapter concerns film noir and its genre successors. Aaron discusses more how masochism is constructed and represented in the text, rather than how it is experienced by the spectator. The contemporary erotic thriller is examined, and here the spectator's masochism is directly linked to the sadomasochism of films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Bound* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1996). Interestingly, the emergence of this genre is related to what Aaron feels is a change in patterns of spectatorship. She connects the blatant masochism of contemporary films to the growth of mainstream masochism (tattooing, body piercing) in 1990s culture, as well as the rise of the internet and VCRs which enabled private viewings in the home.

Chapter Four moves on to a discussion of the ethics of spectatorship, and asks what it means that the spectator can watch acts in films that would otherwise be considered abhorrent or unconscionable. She asks if there is any kind of responsibility involved in spectatorship, particularly when modern films appear more explicit, sometimes immoral, and can often blur the line between the real and the unreal. Aaron states that, usually within film, spectators can engage in a suspension of disbelief, but that this is often made difficult by certain contemporary films or film practices. She cites a number of self-reflexive films that break this by disrupting conventional filmmaking practices and stretching the borders of what is morally acceptable (for example, *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) and Kathryn Bigelow's 1995 film, *Strange Days*). The self-reflexive text, she says, draws attention to the distance or lack of distance between spectator and image. A discussion of a few Dogme '95 films follows, a movement which tries to seek a truth not found in mainstream cinema. The unconventional filmmaking of Dogme highlights the role of the spectator, and in some of the Dogme films, spectatorship of uncomfortable events is a key theme. Again, as in previous chapters, Aaron does not delve into what outcome this might have for film spectatorship. In the last part of the chapter Aaron continues with the ethics debate, which she feels has been neglected in cultural studies. She views the Dogme films as ethical because the spectator must acknowledge their position and relationship to the text. For her, films that lack ethics are those that do not encourage responsibility (she mentions Stephen Spielberg's 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*). These may be moral films, but the emotional response activated by the film denies the viewer any sense of complicity or responsibility. Aaron is particularly interested in spectatorship of the real (news) and the unreal (film) and the implications this has on spectatorship. She closes by suggesting that contemporary postmodern culture makes necessary a case for further debates on spectatorship.

The book works well as an introductory guide to spectatorship, and navigates the last forty years of the subject in a very coherent and readable manner. Aaron makes some interesting points along the way, and avoids taking the easy route of selecting primarily canonical films. Her inclusion of recent independent, popular film is an attempt to bring spectatorship into the new millennium, although at times Aaron has a habit of raising interesting and provocative questions and then moving on all too quickly. Ultimately, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* is recommended reading for undergraduates or as a starting point for anyone interested in the topic.

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