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Classic American Cinema

MULVEY on Duel in the Sun

Duel in the Sun (King Vidor, 1946)

AFTERTHOUGHTS ON 'VISUAL PLEASURE AND NARRATIVE CINEMA' INSPIRED BY 'DUEL IN THE SUN' (KING VIDOR, 1946)

So many times over the years since my *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* article was published in *Screen*, I have been asked why I only used the *male* third person singular to stand in for the spectator. At the time, I was interested in the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinisation' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer. The in-built patterns of pleasure and identification seemed to impose masculinity as 'point of view'; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person. However, the persistant question 'what about the women in the audience?' and my own love of Hollywood melodrama (equally shelved as an issue in *Visual Pleasure*) combined to convince me that, however ironically it had been intended originally, the male third person closed off avenues of inquiry that should be followed up. Finally, *Duel in the Sun* and its heroine's crisis of sexual identity brought both areas together. I still stand by my *Visual Pleasure* argument, but would now like to pursue the other two lines of thought. First, (the 'women in the audience' issue), whether the female spectator is carried along, as it were by the scruff of the text, or whether the pleasure is more deep rooted and complex. Second, (the 'melodrama' issue), how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a *female* character occupying the centre of the narrative arena. So far as the first issue is concerned, it is always possible that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its 'masculinisation', that the spell of fascination is broken. On the other hand she may not. She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides. It is this female spectator that I want to consider here. So far as the second issue is concerned, I want to limit the area under consideration in a similar manner. Rather than discussing melodrama in general, I am concentrating on films in which a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity.

There is an overlap between the two areas, between the unacknowledged dilemma faced in the auditorium and the dramatic double-bind up there on the screen. Generally it is dangerous to elide the two separate worlds. In this case, the emotions of those women accepting 'masculinisation', while watching movies with a male hero, are illuminated by the emotions of a heroine of a story, *in a different genre*, whose resistence to a 'correct' feminine position is the crucial issue at stake. This oscillation, this inability to achieve stable sexual identity, is different, clearly, from the masculine 'point of view' mentioned earlier. The differences are

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given depth and thrown into relief by Freud's position on femininity.

I. The female spectator's pleasure.

A. Freud and femininity.

For Freud, femininity is complicated by the fact that it emerges out of a crucial period of parallel development between the sexes; a period he sees as masculine, or phallic, for both boys and girls. The terms he uses to conceive of femininity are the same as those he has mapped out for the male, causing certain problems of language and boundaries to expression. These problems reflect,very accurately, the actual position of women in patriarchal society (suppressed, for instance, under the generalised male third person singular). One term gives rise to a second as its complementary opposite, the male to the female, in that order. Some quotations:

"... I will only emphasise here that the development of femininity remains exposed to disturbances by the residual phenomena of the early masculine period. Regressions to the pre-Oedipus phase very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which femininity or masculinity gain the upper hand." (*On Femininity*).

"In females, too, the striving to be masculine is ego-syntonic at a certain period – namely in the phallic phase, before the development of femininity sets in. But it then succumbs to the momentous process of repression, as so often has been shown, that determines the fortunes of a woman's femininity." (*Analysis Terminable and Interminable*).

Written at the very end of his life, this statement is interesting, and moving, as it is part of Freud's backward look at his life-time's work and thought, his attempt to establish the actual bed-rock of neurosis. The second statement seems to take 'masculinity' out of fixation, returning possibly as an irruption later in life, and allows it a longer existence which conforms more closely with women's actual empirical, conscious experience.

To continue the quotation from *On Femininity*:

"We have called the motive force of sexual life 'the libido'. Sexual life is dominated by the polarity of masculine-feminine; thus the notion suggests itself of considering the relation of the libido to this antithesis. It would not be surprising if it were to turn out that each sexuality had its own special libido appropriated to it, so that one sort of libido would pursue the aims of a masculine sexual life and another sort those of a feminine one. But nothing of the kind is true. There is only one libido which performs both the masculine and the feminine functions. To it itself we cannot assign any sex; if, following the conventional equation of activity and masculinity, we must not forget that it also covers trends with a passive aim. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition 'feminine libido' is without any justification. Furthermore it is our impression that more constraint has been applied to the libido when it is pressed into the service of the feminine function, and that, to speak teleologically, Nature takes less care of its (that function's) demands than in the case of masculinity. And the reason for this may lie – thinking once again teleologically – in the fact that the accomplishments of the aims of biology has been entrusted to the aggressiveness of men and has been made to some extent independent of women's consent."

One particular point of interest in this passage is Freud's shift from the use of active/masculine as *metaphor* for the function of the libido to an invocation of Nature and biology that appears to leave the metaphoric usage behind. There are two problems here: Freud introduces the use of the word *masculine* as 'conventional', apparently simply following an established social-linguistic practice (but which, once again, confirms the masculine 'point of view'); however, secondly, and constituting a greater intellectual stumbling lock, the feminine cannot be conceptualised as different, but rather only as *opposition* (passivity) in an antinomic sense, or as *similarity* (the phallic phase). This is not to suggest, on my part, that a hidden, as yet undiscovered femininity exists (as is perhaps implied by Freud's use of the word 'Nature') but that its structural relationship to masculinity under patriarchy cannot be defined or determined within the terms offered. This shifting process, this definition in terms of opposition or similarity, leaves women also shiftin between the metaphoric opposition 'active' and 'passive'. The correct road femininity leads to increasing repression of 'the active' (the 'phallic phase' in Freud's terms). In this sense Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the *active* point of view, allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis.

B. Cultural convention and trans-sex identification
Narrative grammar

The 'convention' cited by Freud (active/masculine) structures most popular narratives whether film, folk-tale, or myth (as I argued in *Visual Pleasure*) where Freud's metaphoric usage is acted out literally in the story. Andromeda stays tied to the rock, a victim, in danger, until Perseus slays the monster and saves her. It is not my aim, here, to debate on the rights and wrongs of this narrative division of labour or to demand positive heroines, but rather to point out that the **'grammar'** of the story places the reader, listener or spectator *with* the hero and that the woman spectator in the cinema not only has her own memories but an age-old cultural tradition adapting her to this convention, which eases a transition out of her own sex into another. In *Visual Pleasure* my argument was axed around a desire to identify a pleasure that was specific to cinema, that is the eroticism and cultural conventions surrounding the look. Now, on the contrary, I would rather emphasise the way that popular cinema inherited traditions of story telling that are common to other forms of folk and mass culture, with attendant fascinations other than those of the look.

Freud points out that 'masculinity' is, at one stage, ego-syntonic for a woman. Leaving aside, for the moment, problems posed by his use of words, his general remarks on stories and day-dreams provide another angle of approach, this time giving a cultural rather than psychoanalytic insight into the dilemma.

He emphasises the relationship between the ego and the narrative concept of the hero:

'It is the true heroic feeling, which one of our best writers has expressed in the inimitable phrase, 'Nothing can happen to me!' It seems, however, that through this revealing characteristic of invulnerability we can immediately recognise His Majesty the Ego, the hero of every day-dream and every story.' (*Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming).*

Although a boy might know quite well that it is most *unlikely* that he will go out into the world, make his fortune through prowess or the assistance of helpers, and marry a princess, the stories express the male phantasy of ambition, as Freud describes it, implying perhaps, something of an experienced dominance (the active). For a girl, on the other hand, the cultural and social overlap is more confusing. Freud's argument that a young girl's day-dreams concentrate on the erotic ignores his own position on her early masculinity and the active day-dreams necessarily associated with this phase. In fact, all too often, the erotic function of the woman is represented by the passive, the waiting, (Andromeda again) acting above all as a formal closure to the narrative structure. Three elements can thus be drawn together: Freud's concept of 'masculinity' in women, the identification triggered by the logic of narrative grammar, and the ego's desire to phantasise itself in a certain, active, manner. All this suggests that, as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.

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II. A heroine causes a generic shift.

A. The Western and Oedipal personifications.

Using a concept of character function based on the work of V. Propp, I want to argue through a chain of links and shifts in narrative pattern, showing up the changing function of "woman". The Western (allowing, of course, for as many deviances as one cares to ennumerate) bears a residual imprint of the primitive narrative structure analysed by Vladimir Propp in folk tales. Also, in the hero's traditional invulnerability, the Western ties in closely with Freud's remarks on day-dreaming. As I am interested primarily in character function and narrative pattern, not in genre definition, many issues about the Western as such are being summarily side-stepped. For present purposes, it provides a crucial node in a series of transformations that *comment* on the function of 'woman' (as opposed to 'man') as a narrative signifier and the sue of sexual difference as personification of 'active' or 'passive' elements in a story.

In the Proppian tale, an important aspect of narrative closure is 'marriage', a function characterised by 'princess' or equivalent. This is the only function that is sex specific, and thus essentially relates to the sex of the hero and his marriageability. This function is very commonly reproduced in the Western, where, once again 'marriage' makes a crucial contribution to narrative closure. However, the function's presence also has come to allow a complication in the Western, its complementary opposite 'not marriage'. Thus, while the social integration represented by marriage is an essential aspect of the folk-tale, in the Western it can be accepted...or not. A hero can gain in stature by refusing the princess and remaining alone.(Randolph Scott in the Ranown series of movies). As the resolution of the Proppian tale can be seen to represent the resolution of the Oedipus complex (integration into the symbolic), the rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence. Just as Freud's comments on the 'phallic' phase in girls seemed to belong in limbo, without a place in the chronology of sexual development, so, too, does this male phenomenon seem to belong to a phase of play and phantasy difficult to integrate exactly into the Oedipal drama.

The tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism, generates a common splitting of the Western hero into two, something unknown in the Proppian tale. Here two functions emerge, one celebrating integration into society through marriage, the *other* celebrating resistence to social demands and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and the family, the sphere represented by woman. A story such as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* juxtaposes these two points of attraction, and spectator phantasy can have its cake and eat it too. This particular tension between the doubled hero also brings out the underlying significance of the drama, its relation to the symbolic, with unusual clarity. A folk-tale story revolves around conflict between hero and villain. The flash-back narration in *Liberty Valance*, seems to follow these lines at first. The narrative is generated by an act of villainy (Liberty . rampages, dragon-like around the countryside). However, the development of the story acquires a complication. The issue at stake is no longer how the villain will be defeated, but how the villain's defeat will be inscribed into history, whether (Ranse) the *upholder* of *the* law as a symbolic system will be seen to be victorious, or (Tom) the *personification* of law in a more primitive manifestation, closer to the good or the right. *Liberty Valance,* as it uses a flash-back structure, also brings out the poignancy of this tension. The 'present tense' story is precipitated by a funeral, so that the story is shot through with nostalgia and sense of loss. Ranse Stoddart mourns Tom Doniphon.

This narrative structure is based on an opposition between two irreconcilables. The two paths cannot cross. On one side there is an encapsulation of power, and phallic attributes, in an individual who has to bow himself out of the way of history. On the other, an individual impotence rewarded by political and financial power, which, *in the long run,* in fact, becomes history. Here the function 'marriage' is as crucial as it is in the folk-tale. It plays the same part in creating narrative resolution, but is even more important in that 'marriage' is an integral attribute of the upholder of the law. In this sense Hallie's choice between the two men is pre-determined. Hallie equals princess equals Oedipal resolution rewarded, equals repression of narcissistic sexuality in marriage.

B. Woman as signifier of sexuality

In a Western working within these conventions, the function 'marriage' sublimates the erotic into a final, closing, social ritual. This ritual is, of course, sex specific, and the main rationale for any female presence in this strand of the genre. This neat *narrative* function restates the propensity for 'woman' to signify 'the erotic' already familiar from *visual* representations (as, for instance, argued in *Visual Pleasure*).

Duel in the Sun

Now I want to discuss the way in which introducing a woman as central to a story shifts its meanings, producing another kind of narrative discourse. *Duel in the Sun* provides the opportunity for this. While the film remains visibly a 'Western', the generic space seems to shift. The landscape of action, although present, is not the dramatic core of the film's story, rather it is the interior drama of a girl caught between two conflicting desires. The conflicting desires, first of all, correspond closely with Freud's argument about female sexuality quoted above, that is: an oscillation between 'passive' femininity and regressive 'masculinity'. Thus, the symbolic equation woman = sexuality still persists, but now rather than an image or a narrative function, the equation opens out a narrative area previously suppressed or repressed. She is no longer the signifier of sexuality (function 'marriage') in the 'Western' type of story. Now the female presence as centre allows the story to be actually, *overtly,* about sexuality: it becomes a melodrama. It is as though the narrational lens had zoomed in and opened up the neat function 'marriage' ('and they lived happily ...') to ask 'what next?' or onto the figure of the princess, waiting in the wings for her one moment of importance,

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Stella Dallas

to ask 'what does *she* want?'. Here we find the generic terrain for melodrama, in its woman orientated strand. The second question ('what does *she* want?') takes on greater significance when the hero function is split, as described above in the case of *Liberty Valance*, where the heroine's choice puts the seal of married grace on the upholder of the Law. *Duel in the Sun* opens up this question.

In *Duel in the Sun* the iconographical attributes of the two male (oppositional) characters, Lewt and Jesse, conform very closely to those of Ranse and Tom in *Liberty Valance.* But now the opposition between Ranse and Tom, (who represent an abstract and allegorical conflict over Law and history), is given a completely different twist of meaning. As Pearl is at the centre of the story, caught between the two men, their alternative attributes acquire meaning *from* her, and represent different sides of her desire and aspiration. They personify the split in *Pearl,* not a split in the concept of *hero,* as argued previously for *Liberty Valance.*

However, from a psycho-analytic point of view, a strikingly similar pattern emerges. Jesse (attributes: book, dark suit, legal skills, love of learning and culture, destined to be Governor of the State, money, and so on) sign-posts the 'correct' path for Pearl, towards learning a passive sexuality, learning to 'be a lady', above all sublimation into a concept of the feminine that is socially viable. Lewt (attributes: guns, horses, skill with horses, Western get-up, contempt for culture, destined to die an out-law, personal strength and personal power) offers sexual passion, not based on maturity but on a regressive, boy/girl type mixture of rivalry and play. With Lewt, Pearl can be a tom-boy (riding, swimming, shooting). Thus the Oedipal dimension persists, but now illuminates the sexual ambivalence it represents for femininity.

In the last resort, there is no more room for Pearl in Lewt's world of misogynist machismo, than there is room for her desires as Jesse's potential fiancée. The film consists of a series of oscillations in her sexual identity, between alternative paths of development, between different desperations. Whereas the regressive, phallic male hero (Tom in *Liberty Valance*) had a place (albeit a doomed one) that was stable and meaningful, Pearl is unable to settle or find a 'femininity' in which she and the male world can meet. In this sense, although the male characters personify Pearl's dilemma, it is their terms that make, and finally, break her. Once again, however, the narrative drama dooms the phallic, regressive, resistant to the symbolic. Lewt, Pearl's masculine side, drops out of the social order. Pearl's masculinity gives her the 'wherewithal' to achieve heroism and death. The lovers shoot each other and die in each other's arms. (Once again, yet again, emotional identification is concentrated on the regressive and, perhaps, in *Duel,* the erotic relationship between Pearl and Lewt also exposes a dyadic interdependence between hero and villain in the primitive tale, now threatened by the splitting of the hero with the coming of the Law).

In *Duel in the Sun* , Pearl's inability to become a 'lady' is highlighted by the fact that the perfect lady appears, like a phantasmagoria of Pearl's failed aspiration, as Jesse's perfect future wife. Pearl recognises her and her rights over Jesse, and that she represents the 'correct' road. In an earlier film by King Vidor *Stella Dallas* (1937), narrative and iconographic structures similar to those outlined above make the dramatic meaning of the film *although it is not a Western.* Stella, as central character, is flanked on each side by a male personification of her instability, her inability to accept correct, married 'femininity' on the one hand, or find a place in a macho world on the other. Her husband, Stephen, demonstrates all the attributes associated with Jesse, with no problems of generic shift. Ed Munn, representing Stella's regressive 'masculine' side is considerably emasculated by the loss of Western accoutrements and possibility for action (it should also be said that the fact that Stella is a mother, and that her relationship to her child constitutes the central drama undermines a possible sexual relationship with Ed). He does, interestingly, retain residual traces of Western iconography. His attributes are mapped through associations with horses and betting, the racing scene. However, more importantly, his relationship with Stella is regressive, based on 'having fun', most explicitly in the episode in which they spread itching powder among the respectable occupants of a train carriage. Here too, a perfect wife appears for Stephen, representing 'correct' femininity Stella rejects (very similar to Helen, Jesse's fiancee in *Duel in the Sun.*)

I have been trying to suggest a series of transformations in narrative pattern that illuminate, but also show shifts in, Oedipal nostalgia. The 'personifications' and their iconographical attributes do not relate to parental figures or reactivate an actual Oedipal moment. On the contrary, they represent an internal oscillation of desire, which lies dormant, waiting to be 'pleasured' in stories of this kind. Perhaps the fascination of the classic Western, in particular, lies in its rather raw touching on this nerve. However, for the female spectator the situation is more complicated and goes beyond simple mourning for a lost phantasy of omnipotence. The masculine identification, in its phallic aspect, reactivates for her a phantasy of 'action' that correct femininity demands should be repressed. The phantasy 'action' can only find expression, its only *signifier* for a woman, is through the metaphor of masculinity. Both in the language used by Freud and in the male personifications of desire flanking the female protagonist in the melodrama, this metaphor acts as a straitjacket, becoming itself an indicator, a litmus paper, of the problems inevitably activated by any attempt to represent the feminine in patriarchal society. The memory of the 'masculine' phase has its own romantic attraction, a last ditch resistance, in which the power of masculinity can be used as postponement against the power of patriarchy. Thus Freud's comments illuminate both the position of the female spectator and the image of oscillation represented by Pearl and Stella:

> *'....in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which femininity and masculinity gain the upper hand.'*
>
> *'....the phallic phase....but it then succumbs to the momentous process of repression as has so often been shown, that determines the fortunes of women's femininity.'*

I have argued that Pearl's position in *Duel in the Sun* is similar to that of the female spectator as she temporarily accepts 'masculinisation' in memory of her 'active' phase. Rather than emphasising the success of masculine identification, Pearl brings out its tragedy. Her 'tomboy' pleasures, her acceptance of her sexuality, are not echoed by Lewt, except in death. In this sense, following the metaphor through further, the female spectator's phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes.

Laura Mulvey

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