# UNMASKING THE GAZE: SOME THOUGHTS ON NEW FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND HISTORY

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When I was thinking about the title I had chosen for this paper "Unmasking the gaze", I found that, unexpectedly, one of the cinema's most famous images persistently came to my mind. In the opening sequence of Buñuel/Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1928) a man's hand cuts open a woman's eye with a razor. The image seems unexpected because I am approaching my topic from the perspective of nearly thirty years involvement with feminist film theory -and that image has often been cited, rightly, by feminists, as one of sadism and misogyny. But it persisted. And I realised that, as the image is a metaphor for a shift between one way of seeing to another, it could be emblematic for this paper. Although, in *Un chien andalou*, the act of cutting implies a move away from a literal, external mode of perception to the irrational interiority of surrealism, I began to appropriate it in my imagination. Disregarding the presence of the male hand, the idea of a transformed way of seeing could become a metaphor for the changing approaches to spectatorship within feminist film theory. The woman's eye would then stand for the perception of the feminist film critic, not a single, stable way of seeing but one that must find ways of mutating. More particularly, it may stand as a metaphor for feminist film theory's search for an analytical framework, which goes beyond the question of the male gaze and its voyeurisms as such, to seeing with the mind's eye.

It is, of course, obvious that the eye is the cinema's privileged organ; the cinema is a visual medium in the first instance and is able, therefore, to build the pleasure of looking, of the "gaze", into its narrative structures and conventions. Over the years, feminist film theory has used psychoanalytic theory to underline these points, emphasising not only that looking is central to cinematic pleasure but that the pleasure of looking absorbs pre-existing biological or literal masculinity and femininity. It is gendered and the spectator loses his, and equally her, identity in the erotic dynamic of the film's way of seeing. However valuable, this approach leaves the cinema isolated and cut off from its surrounding society and culture. Ways of seeing do not exist in a vacuum. The "gaze", as many critics and theorists have argued convincingly, is a key element in the construction of modern subjectivity, filtering ways of understanding and ordering the surrounding world. While social and sexual factors outside the cinema affect its structures and conventions, the cinema has, reciprocally, played its part in streamlining, reinforcing and recycling them. It is important to keep this balance in mind. The insights provided by a psychoanalytic approach to the cinema are not irreconcilable with those provided by the historical and social. It should be possible to find, that is, a way of understanding the "audience", as a social entity, as well as the "spectator" as a psychoanalytic one. The questions raised by the idea "audience" tends to break down the isolation of cinema and the privileging of its specificities that has been so important to spectator theory. The cinema audience can be aligned with other "audiences" and cinema located within in the wider economic and

industrial structures of mass entertainment at different periods of history. In this context, theories of cinematic spectatorship are necessarily forced to speculate about its historical contexts as well as it psychoanalytically derived formation. The question may then focus on: why and how the erotics and aesthetics of gendered spectatorship evolved into a particular mode of address at a particular time which mitigates previous tendencies to extra-historical universalism.

But even in adopting an approach that prioritises the social and historical, other considerations arise which may, after all, reinforce feminist film theory's more "universalist" tendencies. That is, Hollywood cinema's presence as its central, key and pivotal point of reference. So often, when cinema and spectatorship were under debate, implicitly, the debates assumed the conventions and structures of Hollywood cinema. Many critics and theorists, myself included, referred to Hollywood not just the cinema of a particular country, the United States of America, but as cinema as such. There are, of course, reasons for this. From the end of World War I, Hollywood, due to its domination of the world film market, became, *de facto*, an international cinema. While it may have been the product of the social economy of one nation, it addressed an international constituency. From this perspective, both the psychosexual and psychosocial formations, which affect the dominant structures and conventions of popular, mass entertainment cinema, do, in the first instance, belong to Hollywood. They are specific to the film industry as it developed in the United States. Hollywood not only created an audience for its movies that could represent American identity to its own, people at home but it came to be the outstanding channel for exporting *the idea of America* to audiences abroad. Miriam Hansen has pointed out in a recent article that this "America" was, at the crucial moment of the mass diffusion of its cinema, also the purveyor and mediator of modernity. Its cinema "played a key role in mediating competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernisation because it articulated, multiplied and globalised a particular historical experience" (1999, p. 68).

There is another historical dimension to the "universalising" tendency of film theory, in this case one that points to the history of film theory itself. For the generation of cinephiliacs in the Europe of thirty years ago, taking their point of departure from the critics of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in Paris of the 1950s, Hollywood cinema became the cinema. That internationalism, and its ability to slide into the universal, can only be understood through the history of Hollywood as the film industry of the United States and its relation to the world.

Hollywood has come to stand, metonymically, for the film industry of the United States, but also for the conventions and codes of cinema it generalised. Here, I will be using *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a text which can stand metonymically for the relation between American consumer society, the cinema going audience (in the United States and elsewhere) and the questions and contradictions of gender and sexuality that haunt them. And, as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* links the 1920s and the 1950s, it allows a comparison to be drawn across the composition of the audience in both periods. But it also allows me to trace the development of feminist film theory out of its first phase, in which "gaze" and "spectacle" construct its primary binary opposition, towards its later phase. As awareness of the history of Hollywood developed, that initial theoretical emphasis on binaries has given way to an interest in the historical conditions that created and inscribed that binarism. Necessarily a move away from analysing cinema simply within its own aesthetic and psychoanalytic integrity, "Hollywood" had to be approached from a completely different angle: as the specific cinema of the United States at a particular moment of its social and economic evolution. And the simplicity and satisfaction of that original binary opposition then begins to breakdown.



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The 1953 film version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a satire which comments, as effectively, perhaps, as any feminist critic might, on the cult of female sexuality in Hollywood cinema and the female star's apotheosis as cinematic spectacle. I will return to the film's historical context later in this paper. Now I want to discuss a short sequence from the film that exemplifies, and satirises, the way that this cult of woman as spectacle produces a corresponding male gaze. Marilyn Monroe, perhaps more than any other star, has come to epitomise Hollywood's successful promotion of its own glamour through the eroticised femininity as screen spectacle. Her irony and her ability to both seem to be and to satires the dumb blonde gives the iconography an extra edge. Marilyn and Jane Russell as a double act also double the spectacle quota: both on screen, for the audience, and in the story itself they are "to-be-looked-at". The first wave of feminist theory argued that the eroticised cinematic look was constructed textually, inscribed onto the screen through its cinematic organisation, point of view, privileged screen space and so on. And I (1975) argued that this way of looking is understood as gendered "male", in keeping with Freud's naming of the pleasure of looking, voyeurism, metaphorically as active and therefore masculine. And this masculinisation of the look also responded to a feminisation of spectacle, which had emerged with particular strength in mass entertainment and its commodification in the twentieth century. The male body, on the other hand, even when on display on the cinema screen, played down its spectacular attributes. I also argued that this gendered gaze produced contradictions, especially for the female spectator, whose position would necessarily oscillate between an alignment either with the male gaze or a self-conscious detachment from it. Or she could move between different spectator positions, profiting from the loss of security to experiment with a variety of subject positions.

In this particular sequence in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe arrive at the New York dockside to board an ocean liner bound for Cherbourg, France. On the screen, they "make an entrance", with full (non-diegetic) orchestral accompaniment. Just as they had appeared on stage, as showgirls, performing for a nightclub audience, their entrance is staged as spectacle and this "entrance as spectacle" recurs several times throughout the film. On the dock, waiting to board, is the Olympic Team. Their collective attention is gradually distracted; they forget Coach's roll call. They become the spectators of the showgirls' spectacle, standing in, on the screen, for the spectators sitting in the dark in the auditorium. Their roll call grinds to a halt; the camera registers their response, pure gaze, with appropriate reverse shots of Lorelei and Dorothy as its object.

If the image of female stars are constructed as "to be looked at", the women in the audience are necessarily drawn into a complicity with the film's own inscribed "gaze". Their relation to the screen is constructed by the formal organisation of the screen space, what is shown and what gender assumptions are built into it. On the other hand, individual women might not. A woman's relation to the screen may be more complex. Breaking with the flow of the film and its erotics, she might become aware of the process, conscious of the culture of voyeurism and woman as spectacle and thus find herself in the position of "pensive" or "curious" spectator, distanced from the cinematic image at the moment of its greatest glamour. This sequence in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* satirises cinematic voyeurism, so that the voyeuristic gaze becomes visible, uncomfortable and comic. Ultimately, the conventions of comedy over-ride those of "visual pleasure" and the spectator's gaze is almost unavoidably distanced. Once the Olympic Team becomes ridiculous. They no longer provide a "relay" into the scene for spectator. The result, paradoxically, is that the male spectator is likely to find himself aligned alongside his more

"pensive" female counterpart. In this sequence, the distanciation associated with comedy meets the dissatisfaction of the self-conscious female spectator.

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A next generation of feminist theorists turned their attention to the social construction of an audience, rejecting the idea that the film text could have such an overpowering ability to construct the subject position of its spectators. Here, the significance of the codes and conventions inscribed on the screen faded before a concern for the actual aspirations and anxieties that might accompany an audience into the cinema from the real world, and which then "negotiate" with the pleasures offered by the movie on the screen. A socially orientated film theory now jostled with the more psychoanalytic. Although this phase of feminist film criticism righted the balance and brought something of the real world, the social, back to fantasy orientated psychoanalytic, this phase, too, needs to be balanced. With the polarisation between spectator theory and audience theory a new, this time theoretical, binary returns.

The static, textually orientated, psychoanalytically influenced concept of the gaze still has, to my mind, an obvious, common sense, validity. It can, however, no longer stand outside social and economic factors that might inform its particular inflection at a given historical moment. To return to my original metaphor, this "gaze" has been "unmasked" by two significant factors. First of all, our understanding of the cinema is inflected simply by the passing of time. As cinema ages, not only does academic research enormously expand knowledge of its history but also its history becomes more visible. This is, of course, on the one hand, an obvious effect of the growth of film studies. But, on the other, the autonomy and specificity that used to surround the cinema, the cult of the cinema "as such" has eroded over the years. When I first attempted to analyse "visual pleasure" from a feminist perspective, I was concerned with the cinema's specificity, with its aesthetic characteristics that separated it from other kinds of entertainment, art or spectacle. But research has now brought the cinema closer to its surrounding social and economic contexts and has given it a complexity that could never really be achieved isolated in a darkened auditorium. Secondly, feminist film historians have made a particular contribution to the "theorisation" of film history (or, perhaps, the "historicisation" of film theory). Without losing sight of those issues of gender, spectacle and so on that characterised the first wave of feminist film theory, they have built up a more nuanced and shifting concept of spectatorship that led directly to the question of audience. Most relevant here is the relationship between Hollywood and its audience in the 20s.

First of all, research into the audience of this period reveals it to have been considerably more a "female audience" than spectator theory could have allowed. And the industry itself, rather than presuming a male spectator and a traditional voyeuristic gaze, understood its audience to be predominantly female and young. Miriam Hansen work on Rudolf Valentino's star persona and cult following made a key contribution to this shift from the concept of the spectator as such, to a historically identifiable audience. Valentino's mass following was female and Hansen indicates his iconography and emblematic attributes were designed for a female gaze (1991, section III). It is here that the film theory is necessarily taken outside the limits of cinematic specificity. Why, at the formative period of Hollywood's history, was its audience predominantly female?

In addition to Miriam Hansen's work, feminist historians such as Lea Jacobs, Lauren Rabinovitz and Gayleen Studlar, suggest that to understand Hollywood and its audience in the 1920 questions of gender and sexuality and economic and social change have to be taken into account. This was the crucial, formative, period for both Hollywood and the modern United States. It is important to remember that, although the United States did not invent the relationship between femininity and consumer culture, it streamlined and politicised a "society of the spectacle". During the 1920s, a new femininity, mass production and mass entertainment emerged side by side, deeply imbricated with each other, with images of modernity and, in the words of pioneer advertiser, Earnest Elmo Calkins, "beauty as a business tool". The American film industry grew alongside, and boomed alongside, an extended period of economic expansion lasting from the end of the 1890's depression until the crash of October 1929. This was the "second industrial revolution" during which young women went into new industries in large numbers and took advantage of the expanding credit market to go into debt to keep up with new fashions. While the boom may have created the modern woman as a social and economic phenomenon, Hollywood cinema made movies for her and turned her image into an iconography and her aspirations into narrative event.



Hollywood in the twenties took on board the "new woman" phenomenon, not only iconographically but also industrially. As the number of women in the work force escalated, so did the market in female orientated consumer goods. In the nineteenth century department stores and advertisers, had pioneered the elision of femininity, commodity and desirability. But as the film industry consolidated in post-World War I United States, newly emerging "Hollywood" became the shop window of America. And the shop window offered itself to young women with spending power: since they also accounted for the majority of box-office returns, "photoplays" had to take them into account. Lary May summarises Hollywood's response to this phenomenon:

> Films that featured a new woman were usually written by female scenarists and played by one of the large number of actresses under twenty five who worked in the Hollywood industry. The female heroine was generally found in contemporary urban society and whether she was an emancipated wife or a flapper played by Clara Bow, Mae Murray, Joan Crawford, Gloria Swanson or Norma or Constance Talmadge, she portrayed a restless young woman eager to escape from an ascetic home. Seeking a new role, she could take a job in search of freedom or money but these heroines find their true emancipation in short skirts, glamour and innocent sexuality. (1980, p. 218)

The conjuncture between glamour and the cinema screen had developed in the early, pre-Hollywood, days of the film industry around the nascent star system. But in the late 20s, the stars (for instance, those mentioned by Lary May) had to be believable and recognisable to appeal to their audience of young working women.

That the importance of the female audience was well understood at the time is born out by Iris Barry, writing in Britain in 1926, who says quite simply: "Now one thing never to be lost sight of in considering the cinema is that it exists for pleasuring women. Three out of four of all cinema audiences are women". Antonia Lant and Ingrid Perez have collected commentaries and reminiscences in their study of the habits and preferences of women filmgoers. They note that the pre-talkie era had particular significance for their respondents. The following points so precisely express the privileged relation between women and the cinema at the time to be worth quoting at length:

> The extraordinary novelty of movie going, for women, cannot be underestimated... Women were there and it was this, as much as what they saw, that constituted the impact of mass culture and modernity on their lives. The cinema allowed, indeed invited, women to amass, to stare, to know pleasure in looking, to assemble in darkness, in anonymity, and to risk the chance encounter, the feeling of a new collectivity, the jostle and swim of the crowd, semi-focused, distracted, hypnotised, palidly lit in reflected light.... Cinema inaugurated a new, powerful opportunity for women to be out alone, or in groups, at night, largely without censure, "to relax unseen" and to see publicly, images

not slated for their gaze, as well as towering images of femininity (in film stars) an tales of female "derring do". In short, cinema-going, a core component of twentieth century mass culture, was a crucial site of the female encounter with modernity, and the most important way in which women participated in the urban mass culture of the first half of this century. (*in press*)

While "the new woman" and her new freedoms were celebrated on the screen the question inevitably arose: how much freedom? Most particularly: how much sexual freedom? The implications of economic independence, and the social changes that went with it, provoked a backlash. The late 20s engulfed the United States engulfed in a new moral panic. Hollywood had staved off Church campaigns for greater censorship at the beginning of the decade, appointing Will Hays as MPPDA President with responsibility for the industry's internal regulation, but battles over censorship returned to the centre of the arena. Hollywood compromised. In image and iconography the modernity of its "flapper" stars was preserved. In its narratives, their young female characters exuded energy and initiative that reflected the aspirations of their young female audience. However, in the last resort, scripts had to balance these images with extreme care. Emblematic freedom and independence stayed ultimately within bounds, traditions of sexual morality were maintained and endings could bring the heroine back to the tradition and stability of conventional marriage. Feminist film historians have pointed out that, in effect, Hollywood produced a double discourse, in which the culture of consumption played an important part. A "liberated" female sexuality was invested in image and fashion while any actual sexual involvement was postponed to the safety of The End. Lauren Rabinovitz has noted that this duality was an essential to the process of both pleasing and containing the target audience for this kind of film: "This double edged process of subjectivity and objectivity was fundamental to recuperating female desire so that it functioned in the service of patriarchy" (1990, p. 15). That is, pre-Hays Hollywood movies had to acknowledge and address the "new woman" but also defuse and contain her potential for social disruption. Female sexuality, once it had become linked to modern fashionability, could be channeled into commodification and negotiated into a more conventional relation to money and power.

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Anita Loos published her novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in 1926. In it she satirises the split between the new woman's freedom, particularly in relation to sexuality, and its re-direction towards consumption, glamour and fashion. Her charactersations of Lorelei and Dorothy perhaps reflects the doubling process. While the presence of an active, assertive female sexuality in culture and in everyday experience had to be acknowledged, the discourses surrounding it were contorted by hypocrisy and social anxiety. It is almost as though, in creating two central characters, rather than one, Anita Loos has found a way to articulate and represent the contemporary dualisms, the contrast between an excess of image and censored event. Dorothy is interested in sex and not money; Lorelei is interested in money and not sex. Dorothy represents the sexual autonomy and independence of the 'new woman'. Lorelei represents the "new woman's investment of sexuality into commodification and exchange". The question of gender relations becomes satirically tied to questions of value. The free exchange of sexual value is juxtaposed to the quantifiable exchange of commodity value.

Anita Loos, writing in the mid-twenties, draws on her own first hand experience as a Hollywood scriptwriter. The end of the novel provides a vivid backdrop to Hollywood's developing censorship pressures. Lorelei decides to move to Hollywood and produce, and star in, her own movies keeping Gus, the puritanical Philadelphia millionaire now her



husband, happy by making him responsible for "senshuring". The novel brings its characters "back home", to the prevailing obsession with censorship combined with an equally obsessive preoccupation with sex. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was an international smash hit as a novel and was first made into a film in 1929.

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During the 20s, the United States had begun to dominate international trade, protecting its own industries with high tariffs while successfully encroaching into the territories of its competitors. Hollywood had established a commanding position within the international film industry. At the same time, an equally important from an economic point of view, Hollywood films came to be an outstandingly successful shop window for American consumer goods. Hollywood's power was economic, built on its industrially organised, vertically integrated system of production, distribution and exhibition. But economics alone cannot account for its popularity. The projected image of America as a modern, affluent, freethinking and progressive society drew international audiences into the cinema. The liberated, modern stories and stars captured this image, giving it both substance and glamour and, once again, it was the above all the image of new American femininity that captured the international imagination. These stars, ordinary and extraordinary at the same time, could represent a point of resistance to local class oppressions and traditional sexual taboos.

Sally Alexander conveys the significance of Hollywood cinema for the young female filmgoer in London at the time:

> The cheap trappings of glamour were seized on by many young women in the 1920s, frustrated in their wish for further education, yearning to escape the domestic treadmill of their mothers' lives, haunted by the fantasy, not of the prostitute as in the nineteenth century, but of the glamorous screen heroine who paradoxically could be you, the girl next door.

She elaborates:

> Wanting to lead different lives from their mothers had -if education failed them- enormous impetus from the cinema... Court dress-makers continued to turn out stiffened satin and brocades... but high fashion failed to capture the imagination of the young. Mimetic images of Harlow, Garbo and Crawford paraded in the high street as they glowed on the cinema screen.... Mothers, sisters and friends hastily put together copies of their clothes with material that cost a few pence a yard... In this way the mantle of glamour passed from the aristocrat and courtesan to the shop, office or factory girl via the film star. (1994)

Although the discourse of woman and sexuality in these iconographies and narratives were addressed primarily to a female audience, the address was also generalised, looking towards youth, consumption and a celebration of the success of America, its freedom and its classlessness. Of course, the crash and the depression affected Hollywood's representation of America to itself and the outside world. In the 1950s, economic boom combined with the politics of the Cold War allowing Hollywood to re-invent its tradition of streamlined spectacle and censored sexuality. By this time, the idea that Hollywood films addressed a predominantly female audience had long since vanished; the generic presence of "women's pictures", "weepies" and "melodramas" indicated their marginalisation. Furthermore, the relationship between images of femininity and female desire had shifted.

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These changes are there, obviously and vividly, in Howard Hawks' 1952 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* this time a musical and updated to its own present. The flapper of Anita Loos' day had the streamlined, androgynous look associated now days perhaps with Louise Brooks and Clara Bow. The 1952 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* launched Marilyn Monroe as a major star, building on the iconography of the post World War II pin-up and sweater-girl and co-starring Jane Russell whose image had been established definitively with the bust obsessed publicity for Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw*. However, in spite of these contrasts, the novel and the film allow a consideration of similarity and difference across the two periods.

While the original novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* satirised the contradictory discourse of sexuality addressing young women in the United States, most of the story is taken up with Dorothy and Lorelei's trip around Europe. Their journey and their many affairs represent the modernity and glamour of America and its women for impoverished Europeans, of all classes. A literal success story of wealth and industrial strength juxtaposed with the beauty and overt sexuality of the two showgirls who come to stand for a "desire for America". In the 1952 film, most of the story takes place on the ocean liner itself, in between the opening section in New York and the concluding section in Paris. Lorelei and Dorothy's journey may be understood, metaphorically, to stand in for the United States' marketing of itself to Europe and, indeed, for European readiness to respond with desire and fascination. But not only had fashions in femininity changed between the 20s and the 50s but also the political context and the thrust of the American message to European audiences.

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Both periods were marked by economic prosperity in the United States, accompanied by a demand for consumer goods, luxuries and fashion items that affected women in particular. However, the consumer of the 20s, a young working woman with her own money to spend, had mutated into the housewife consumer of the 1950s. Newly moved to the newly built suburbs, she was responsible for fueling the US economy, buying a new generation of consumer goods: refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and, of course, television sets. While the consumer boom of the 50s was to do with staying in, the boom of the 20s was to do with going out. The Hollywood of the 20s had to appeal to the unmarried, fun loving new woman of the jazz age who was discovering cosmetics and new fashion styles of all kinds. The top stars represented the cinema's audience to itself; the young women at the movies did not feel so far removed from, say, Clara Bow or Colleen Moore. And it was these stars and their image of liberated modernity, which would, in turn, appeal to young women elsewhere in the world. By the 50s, however, Hollywood's address had shifted and split. Stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell were not promoting domesticity, or, indeed, consumer durables. They represent the power and the glamour of America for a Europe still in the aftermath of war and where most audiences would still be experiencing deprivation and rationing. This time Dorothy and Lorelei are tailored, quite blatantly, for a gaze that is presumed male and an audience in which women are presumed incidental. But this time there is another context, which gives greater point, almost a conceptual aspect to their iconography, that is, the Cold War. Whereas, Hollywood had functioned in the 20s to show case American products, this function in the 50s condensed with an implicit propaganda. Through Hollywood, the US could present itself to the world as "the democracy of glamour"; the economics and politics of capitalism could acquire the sheen of desirability and sexuality in contrast to the image of Soviet communism. Capitalism could signify the pleasure of consumption while communism represented the toil of production.



Marilyn in particular, the sex symbol of the epoch, could represent a fusion of desires: desire for the blonde and desire for the commodities that produced her. While, in 1926, William Fox had said: "Trade follows the American motion picture, not the flag" the slogan might have been reformulated in 1952, the era of the Korean War and the Marshall Plan as: "Resistance to communism follows Marilyn Monroe not the Stars and Stripes".

The culture of consumption is necessarily linked to the "society of the spectacle", in Guy Debord's phrase, and of the sexualised appeal of glamour. From this perspective, Hollywood's streamlining of female spectacle, glamour and sexuality may be an offshoot of American promotion of its own economy and society rather than an essential attribute of the cinema itself. Glamour, a concept that was popularised in 20s America, derives originally from an association with illusion or magic and would thus seem appropriately connected with the distracting and fetishising aspects of sexualised imagery that is designed "to-be-looked-at" whether it may be the screen or the star that appears on its surface. The condensation between the two slides easily together. But, in addition to promoting the United States abroad, Hollywood constructed a homogeneous image, which marked uncontroversial "American-ness" as a neutral white, of a heterogeneous, racially divided society. With the invention of glamour for the masses and "innocent sexuality" in the 20s, Hollywood may well have found a means of concealing, of "screening", rifts in society that were more socially threatening than liberated femininity. Not only was "nativism" on the rise after World War I leading to the end of free immigration in 1924, but also the politics of racism and the struggle for rights were being clearly articulated during the same period. To what extent, therefore, did the self-censorship of Hollywood, the erasure of difference and ethnicities create a cinema in which sex and glamour distracted from the underlying social divisions and struggles in the country as a whole? From this perspective, the image of woman, signifying sexuality and desirability on the screen, would refer, ultimately, not so much to male desire but to the conflicts within American society itself. Furthermore, liberated female sexuality, reasonably safely contained and censored, could promote an illusion of modernity, of a "democracy of glamour" which was essentially white and based on a near apartheid division of the races.

In retrospect, it is seems that early feminist film theory may have over invested in the psychic structures of cinematic pleasure, especially the specificity of the male gaze. However, this theoretical perspective was right to argue that sex and sexuality, however censored, were key to the American film industry. "Woman as spectacle" and "narratives of desire" were close to the heart of studio system Hollywood. Feminist historians worked to transcend early feminism's generalised analysis of Hollywood cinema's preoccupation with sex and sexuality to locate the whys and wherefores behind this preoccupation. No longer is the focus on women and cinema as such, but on the significance of gender within the American cultural and economic history that formed and molded Hollywood. And as Hollywood cinema then came to be internationally dominant, exporting its discourse of (sanitised) sexuality, the appeal of "America" then has to be relocated again within the economic and political context of relations between the United States and the rest of the movie going world. In the last resort, Hollywood is the lasting and visible monument to America's invention of itself in the twentieth century, its successful colonisation of modernity and its sexualisation of everyday life.

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