

Delaying cinema: an interview with Laura Mulvey Tiago Baptista¹

In May 2013, Laura Mulvey delivered a keynote address at AIM's annual conference in Coimbra. In her talk, Mulvey discussed the contradictory feelings sparked by her fascination with the misogynist, culturally imperialist and relentlessly "popular" Hollywood cinema of the 1950s that she loved as an English and intellectual cinephile during the 1960s. Her move to feminist film theory during the 1970s famously accounted for that fascination, as much as repressed it.

Mulvey's recent interest in the forms of cinephilia enabled by new viewing technologies provided her with a way to rescue the fascination with those films, while nevertheless subverting their original biases. To argue her point, Mulvey surprised her audience at Coimbra with the screening of two short re-edited sequences of *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959) and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953), which she had already analysed in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006, 172-3; 151-60). Meant less as an illustration of her talk than as a practical demonstration of her continuing engagement with the history of cinema, these clips were an enticing example of the productive intersections of personal memory, cinephilia and film theory.

Aniki: In your recent writings, when considering new technologies and media you are not necessarily interested in an aesthetic of the new or in the ontology of cinema after the digital turn. On the contrary, you are interested in transforming the problem of the new into a problem of the old. And that is where your concept of "delayed cinema" comes in. Could you tell us more about this concept and how it transforms a problem of the new into a problem of the old?

Laura Mulvey: I think there are two answers to this question. One is very obvious and straightforward, to do with my age and my experience. I was born in 1941 and it was difficult for me to engage with digital technology, conceptually and aesthetically as a new medium in its own right. As we say in English, discretion is the better part of valour! So I tried to figure out in what ways the new, the digital, could affect my relationship to the old, that is, to celluloid cinema. Secondly, there was the overarching question of spectator-

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ship. As my engagement with film theory (back in the 1970s) had been primarily concerned with spectatorship, and as digital technologies radically affected modes of spectatorship, I felt I should acknowledge the ways in which the conditions of seeing films had changed. I had to put my own thoughts and theories of the past into the new context.

But my own habits of watching films had been changed by digital technology. I found that my longstanding cinephilia could be renewed by watching films (particularly ones that I already knew and loved) by transforming them, mutating them, through the digital, into different kinds of configurations or patterns. And my ways of watching film became more and more “delayed”. I discovered unexpected new pleasures of spectatorship out of stopping, returning, repeating, and then repeating and repeating again certain scenes, sequences, fragments, moments, etc. Out of that process I discovered that there were other ways of watching movies that I knew really well — which seemed to reveal unexpected secrets.

Aniki: Apart from spectatorship, another important bridge between your past and present work is the issue of gender. You have described the spectator of delayed cinema, or the spectator that delays cinema, as either a “feminized spectator” or an “emasculated spectator”.

LM: In my “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” article, always people emphasized Hitchcock-voyeuristic spectator to such an extent that I have tended to do so myself. But in fact there was another side to it, which was the Sternberg-fetishistic spectator, perhaps more a spectatorship of the cinematic attraction. Whereas the voyeuristic spectator would be focused on the human form, and particularly the form of the woman as such, the fetishistic spectator would be engaged with the beauty of the cinema itself and the way that it fused with presence of the woman on the screen. I was interested in the way Sternberg integrated Marlene Dietrich’s beauty with light and shade and the general composition of the screen, so that the figure of the woman as spectacle was assimilated into the spectacle of cinema itself. When I was revising these old ideas about spectatorship, I wanted to pursue this fetishistic mode. Of course, in my theory, both voyeuristic and fetishistic spectatorship is not specifically gendered. “He” is gendered as male or as “one” because language was always gendered as a neutral “he”. But once the spectator is able to control the flow of the film, and in that sense, able to control the gaze, different kinds of spectatorial possibilities emerge, which could be gendered, or polymorphously perverse. These would be more individual pleasures and individual engagements, and the film no longer completely controls its flow and its discourses and modes of address. As the spectator fragments the flow of the film, the relation between male action and narrative falls into the background, the spectator’s attention becomes more focused on the

cinematic, more on the filmic detail. That was what meant by a feminized spectatorship.

Aniki: In “The Unattainable text”, Raymond Bellour (2000) regretted that the film analyst could not do away with the written word and dreamt of analysing a film with images alone. You have related the strategies and formal operations of delayed cinema with traditional forms of textual analysis, while at the same time editing short video clips. Today, video essays seem to be booming and Catherine Grant, for example, describes this practice as a form of “expanded film studies.” (2013)

LM: Certainly there is a way in which film can be used to analyse film. I think it can be done on a number of different levels. In quite a straightforward way, film analysis is a form of film writing. There is a Greek word, *ekphrasis*, the writing about art; Catherine Grant points out that film scholars can now ‘write’ film theory and criticism with and through their own medium. She integrates words into her film essays and inserts her film essays into written essays (something I would like to imitate and do more). Thus she creates an interesting fusion of thought through words and images on the screen. But the way I work film clips might be slightly different, for instance with the clips that I showed at Coimbra. My starting point is often fascination with particular pieces of film rather than the academic aspects of analysis. In terms of my two spectatorships: a possessive spectator — me — engages with a certain piece of film out of fascination and who then mutates into a more pensive spectator — also me. And the re-mix then emerges as a dialogue between pensiveness and possessiveness.

If I can use the examples of the pieces I showed in Coimbra. The Douglas Sirk *Imitation of Life* sequence, on the face of it, is more analytic and is more a traditional piece of textual analysis than the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence. I wanted to take the sequence apart to reveal its symmetries and its patterns and so on. And there might be different approaches to the actual architecture built around the stairs and the way Lana Turner uses them, and things like that. Also, the fact that there is a young African American woman hidden in the shot could be just a matter of academic revelation. But due to the politics of race in the United States in the late 1950s, the beginning of the Freedom Marches and the struggle for Civil Rights in the south, that secret moment has an emotional charge to it. Sirk seems to have constructed the shot to draw attention to political questions of invisibility and marginalisation but precisely through the invisibility of the figure concealed on the screen. Furthermore, it brings up the question of what was in the director’s mind; he invested so much in what is probably only two seconds of film that would never necessarily be consciously seen by his audience at the time. So in addition to conventional textual analysis, the sequence does involve a certain amount of mystery and enigma, and fascination.

The Marilyn piece is much more obviously a dialogue between the possessive and the pensive and, once again, goes beyond the literal images in the sequence. The mystery is in the intimation of death, and I found that I was superimposing, on a fraction of a second of her close-up, the Andy Warhol silk-screen “Marilyns” made immediately after her death as a kind of death mask memorial. This retrospective superimposition reminded me of Barthes’ comment in *Camera Lucida*. He says of a photograph of Lewis Payne who was about to be executed: “He is dead and he is going to die...” So once again it is the outside, later knowledge of Marilyn’s very strange and tragic death it that I was trying to bring to the image.



Figure 1: *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959)
© Universal Studios Home Entertainment



Figure 2: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953)
© Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

Aniki: Regarding the issue of time, it is not so much that delayed cinema allows to over-interpret specific movies and sequences, but rather that it is able to provide, as you put it, quoting from Vivian Sobchack, “an extended sense of time” (2006, 342) that encompasses the temporalities of the shooting, of the screening and of the fiction as well, and that you have considered lacking and more necessary than ever when watching cinema.

LM: The great American film critic Manny Farber had the ability to see detail in film, which other people couldn’t and, like me, had to wait for the enhanced vision of the digital. He had a very special way of looking at the image, almost as though he scanned it rather than followed it. In *Death 24x a Second*, I use Chris Petit’s tribute to Faber in *Negative Space* (1999): in *The Big Sleep*, Humphrey Bogart is crossing the street and Farber notices the way he touches the fire-hydrant and a girl wearing white ankle socks who walks past in the background. Here the film’s temporality is confused by details that are irrelevant to the narrative but relevant to the moment of filming. Something in the image suddenly makes itself felt, jumps out, catches your sensibility and takes you back to the moment of filming. Film’s double temporality is, of course, similar to the mystery and confusion of time that Barthes sees in the still photograph, the “this was now.” But I now think, more so than in the past, that fiction in film has its own dimension and its own place to offer. Originally, perhaps when I started doing these kinds of analysis, I wanted to find the temporalities of the avant-garde within Hollywood cinema and was suspicious of the illusion of fiction. But in those two final chapters of *Death 24x* (that I am still not happy with!) I felt that fiction brings something of its own to the cinematic image. This takes us back to the earlier moment in our conversation about emotion: out of fictional performance, moments of emotion and something ineffable, beyond what can be actually said, inhabits the image and overwhelms it. Gesture, detail and moments that capture something of the emotion and expressivity of performance add another dimension, to the film image, rather than taking away from it.

This interview was recorded in Lisbon, in May 14, 2013.

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