

Catherine Grant: We're here today at the University of Sussex, where I, Catherine Grant, am going to interview Laura Mulvey in one of the series of Society for Cinema and Media Studies Fieldnotes interviews with foundational scholars. We're being filmed on campus by Joanna Callaghan and Heraclitus Pictures. I wanted to begin, Laura, by quoting our friend and colleague, Mandy Merck, in a really wonderful article about a piece of work for which you're possibly most famous, or certainly most famous. We're currently celebrating the 40th anniversary of this publication right now, which was published in the autumn issue of *Screen* in 1975, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema."

In her article on your work for *Camera Obscura* in 2007, in the aftermath of the 30th anniversary of its publication, Mandy wrote the following. "The most influential publication in contemporary film studies is not an academic essay. It was written by a feminist activist, part-time filmmaker, occasional bookshop worker, housewife, and mother, who had never attended graduate school or held a teaching post." It is quite an unusual background for someone who has had the career that you've had since then. Can you tell us a little bit about how this came about, this particular conjuncture?

Laura Mulvey: It's a complicated story, in a way. The first thing that has to be absolutely clear was, there was a very minimal academic environment for film. If there had been an academic environment for film, I would certainly not have been in it. I'd studied history at university, not done well. I'd always been an intellectual, always had intellectual engagements, but I'd never been very good at academic success. And so I left Oxford with a very poor degree and no academic aspirations whatsoever, not something that would ever cross my mind. Even when I wrote "Visual Pleasure" in the '70s, it never occurred to me it would be a foundational text, or that I would be a foundational scholar in this kind of context. In a sense, it came out much more from a relationship to the cinema and to politics. I could go back and explain a little bit about that. That might be sensible.

Catherine Grant: Yes, please.

Laura Mulvey: This is something I've written about a couple of times, but it might be worth just trying to condense it a bit here in these particular circumstances. The immediate background from the film point of view was the influence of Hollywood. That is, Hollywood's studio system period, which I'd discovered by going to the cinema under the influence and in the companionship of Peter Wollen, from 1963, systematically, really, through the '60s. This was the kind of cinephile activity that was common throughout the world at this period, where in every single urban conglomerate, as it were, there would always be a few intellectuals, generally on the left, strangely enough, who followed the influence of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and rediscovered, as it were, in inverted commas, the great directors of Hollywood cinema.

There was particular reasons in the UK why this was appealing to us. Perhaps I should just step back a little bit to my pre-Hollywood relationship to cinema,

which perhaps came more out of my Francophile teens, when I used to walk from Notting Hill Gate, where I lived, down to Oxford Street, or I got the bus, sometimes I walked, down to Oxford Street and go to the Academy Cinema. This was partly just out of a love of French culture, and an anti-Englishness, thinking Englishness was dreary, boring, foggy, unglamorous, and whereas France had a startling culture, and particularly a great cinema. I loved going to the Academy to see French movies.

But then one day I was going back to see a movie, and I can't even remember what it was now. I'd seen something like *Un condamné à mort est échappé*, so I'd seen Bresson movies. I'd seen *Porte des Lilas* because I loved George Brassens. Then I went to see one of these films again but didn't bother to check what was actually on. Went in, found myself watching *The Seventh Seal*, which was a bit of a surprise. That opened my eyes much more to European cinema more generally, and art cinema more generally. So although I'd grown up in my childhood, from my mother, with quite a wide sense of cinema, I became much more narrowly European in my teens, and so discovering Hollywood was a wonderful revelation.

But to go back to my intellectual context point, what was important for us at that point was still a kind of continuation of this anti-Englishness, a tiredness with the English sense of its parochial superiority, if you see what I mean, the two things at once, and looking much more to American popular culture and to French ideas, and bringing both these things, that are both anathema to traditional Englishness ... and I say "Englishness" advisedly, not Britishness. This was an English consciousness. There was something kind of subversive about loving Hollywood, and loving Hollywood via French intellectual influence, which then of course continued later with the influx of French theory.

Catherine Grant: Was the pleasure that you took in Hollywood reflected in the French cinema that you were seeing? Was that part of the pleasure of the French cinema as well?

Laura Mulvey: No, it was a complete shift. It was a more or less 100-degree, or complete shift. Although we were very fascinated by the French New Wave and Italian neorealism, Mizoguchi, we followed the *Cahiers* line, for me, it was this in-depth immersion in Hollywood that was particularly fascinating. I got to know the movies very, very well. It was a fantastic period for going to the cinema, in that the movies that had come out in the 1950s were still drifting down the distribution chain and coming out in squalid fleapits, et cetera, et cetera, so you could trace them.

It was also fun because we could buy *What's On*, which was the listing paper, news journal, whatever it is, magazine of the time. They didn't give any of the directors, so you had to be completely on the ball, and know that there was a rare Sam Fuller coming on at the Astoria Brixton. It was a kind of connoisseurship, combined with this embracing of this particular popular culture that had never been popular in our own country.

Catherine Grant: Apart from Peter, or alongside Peter Wollen, who were you sharing that with?

Laura Mulvey: Oh, a group of Oxford friends, people who Peter was working with at the *New Left Review*. Very particularly Jon Halliday, who went on to do the Sirk interview, and who we then spent a couple of years in Rome when he and Peter were working for *Problemi del socialismo*, international socialist journal, and we then went on pursuing our love of Hollywood movies in the dubbed Italian versions that apparently the American government had given the Catholic Church to combat the influence of communism. Paradoxically speaking, a lot of our movie-going was actually in small church halls, sitting on little benches, with John Wayne speaking Italian.

It was a very collective activity, and the transposition to Rome was quite interesting. But of course, when we were in London, we often went to Paris and to the Cinémathèque and see movies that were being shown in all the little Paris cinemas. We should probably keep moving. I could go on talking about this period for quite a long time.

Catherine Grant: I suppose what I'm interested in is how you came to ... well, to produce writing, but also filmmaking in that context.

Laura Mulvey: Yes, yes.

Catherine Grant: When you turned from a spectator who was a cinephile into-

Laura Mulvey: Yes. That was, again, a sudden shift, and it came very directly out of the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement. First of all, it was that, but I should also, in a moment, say something about the shift in cinema context as well. I was in a Women's Liberation reading group called the History Group or the Family Studies Group at different points. The purpose of the group was to read important theoretical works, what you could think of as the great works of great men, but read them with an eye for their blind spots, and to see how reading as feminists we could both use this theory, but also understand it as something which we could transcend, go beyond. Also, very particularly in collective discussion, rather than as individual, isolated readers.

When I joined the group, they were reading Engels, *Private Property and the Family*, then we went on to read some Lévi-Strauss, *The Exchange of Women*. Then very logically we went on to read Freud. And Freud was a revelation.

However many blind spots there were, he was specifically interested in questions of sexuality and gender and gendering, so he provided us with a vocabulary and intellectual and theoretical framework to think about the kinds of issues that we felt might be in this fall from grace that was perpetuated in every child in its introduction to society through the oedipal drama. Whether or not you, as it were, believe in the oedipal drama, we were fascinated by the kinds of political possibilities that this brought up.

This encounter with feminism and psychoanalysis enabled me to start to think for myself, but particularly to think collectively with groups, and to think collective questions. That was very much the ideology of the time. When we edited our little journal *SHREW* when it came to us, we did it on why psychoanalysis. We didn't sign our articles. There was a kind of anonymity, which I found very, very liberating. My problems with writing I can leave on one side. I think the point was that psychoanalysis gave me the vocabulary, feminism gave me the political drive and will, and Hollywood was a most beautiful goldmine of images, narratives, and visual structures around gender.

To my mind at the time, and perhaps even now, I'm not quite so sure, my "Visual Pleasure" article was really about Hollywood. I wasn't necessarily generalizing about the camera as such. I wanted to think of the way in which this particular cinema had used the spectacle of woman for its very puritanical erotic gaze. It was also important to me that this was a highly censored cinema, in which the image of woman emerged, as it were, very much constrained by the kinds of Hays Code-type limitations that surrounded sexuality in Hollywood.

One of the other reasons why Hollywood drifted into the past, or became an object of critique rather than love, was because the cinema itself was changing. This is, I think, extremely important in terms of the new horizons that were opening up, which were really political. It wasn't so much being bored with Hollywood. I went on being interested in Hollywood, but Hollywood was no longer a priority and it was no longer the most important cinema that there was. We were beginning to see films made by the American avant-garde, the new American cinema. Particularly Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Yvonne Rainer, were incredibly eye-opening, literally. Then there was the new European cinema, the shift that Godard was taking in the late '60s, Straub-Huillet.

New cinemas were beginning to emerge. There was the Cinema Novo. New third cinemas were emerging. So suddenly there was a politicization of film, which was possibly post-Vietnam, but it was also to my mind very much to do as well with post-Bandung, post-liberation movements, post-colonialism, and that sense of energy that was coming from the Third World at the time, and also the possibilities of alternative filmmaking, which involved alternative ways of thinking and seeing film that were coming out of the various European and American avant-gardes.

The key thing, I think, about this, was that it was opening up a completely new possibility in which involvement with cinema could conceivably be an involvement with filmmaking. While watching Hollywood, even while watching New Wave, there was no way you could move out and say, "I want to make a film." Move out of your cinema seat and say, "I want to stand behind the camera and make a film." It wasn't conceivable. There was this shift of possibility, and I think it also came with 16-millimeter and the way that particularly, perhaps, the American avant-garde propagandized for the importance of 16. Then it began to come in through direct cinema and be

diffused in alternative film practices through the London Filmmaker's Co-op in the late '60s.

In a sense, there was an intellectual possibility which came out of Peter's engagement with late Godard, there was a political possibility which came out of my encounter with feminism, and there was a kind of technical possibility that came out of the new 16-millimeter. But also in the UK at that time, there was possibility because there was a movement making experimental film, which ranged right the way from the most extreme structuralist materialism of the Filmmaker's Co-op, right the way through the London Women's Liberation Group, through to the collectives like Berwick Street Collective, Liberation Films, Cinema Action, Amber Films, and so on, which were making either agit films, propaganda films, documentaries, and so on.

But there wasn't a sense ... What I think was remarkable about this moment was that these different strands stayed in dialogue with each other. There was a sense of an umbrella under which we were all radical in our different ways.

Catherine Grant: Could you tell us a little bit about your first encounter with film academia?

Laura Mulvey: My first encounter with film academia was in the United States, and not personally, as it were, at one remove, when Peter went to Northwestern University, invited by Paddy Whannel. Paddy Whannel had been the head of the British Film Institute education department, and he really fostered the origins of film studies in this country, and is an extremely important and influential figure. He's one of these people whose importance is hard to signify, because he didn't write much. He coauthored a book with Stuart Hall called *The Popular Arts*, but apart from that, the mark that he left personally on film culture and film education in this country needs to be reiterated. Peter did an interview for Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson's book, which made particular tribute to Paddy, but I'd just like to do that again.

Paddy ran this department and gathered a number of quite influential young men. It was pretty much an all-male group with the young women as secretaries. It was a really extraordinary period. But inevitably, Paddy fell out with the BFI powers that were. Which issue the final breaking point was, I can't remember, but either he called it a day or he was kicked out. He was offered a position by a friend at Northwestern. One of the first things he wanted to do was get Peter out there.

Peter had written his book, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, and I think it's important to note that he, unlike ... Put it like this. For me, writing was a struggle, and I had to relearn it coming out of university. Peter was an actual writer, in a sense, from the very word go. He was a poet, he wrote political journalism, he wrote stories. He was primarily an essayist. Even *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* is in a way three essays put in a rather elegant triptych together. But his book, *Signs and Meaning*, had meant that he was employable in the university, which wasn't as strict as it is now. But he, like me, had left

Oxford with absolutely no academic aspirations, not a very good degree, not ... for other reasons that I won't go into, but not because he wasn't very academically gifted, but he kind of couldn't be bothered.

But in a strange way, film studies was beginning to pick up and offer opportunities for people to work in universities, which they wouldn't otherwise have dreamt of. Peter going to Northwestern was a very, very important step, and Paddy was a brilliant head of department. It turned out that Peter wasn't only just a very gifted writer, he was also a gifted teacher and a gifted lecturer, and he really flourished in the academic environment. I think it's important that I say a couple of things about him and his background, so we can feed that in here as well.

But as I said, cinema was changing. I think it was after our first year there, when Peter and I went back to London for the summer, met some of our younger friends, who was beginning to tell us about the new cinemas, what was happening. I think it might've been then that Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury said to us, "You've got to watch Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*." That was a kind of a bit of a landmark experience. It caught Peter's imagination, because in his pre-Hollywood days he'd been a follower of surrealism and the avant-garde of all kinds, and even throughout the '60s he'd been one of the people who went back to the Soviet avant-gardes of the 1920s. Not only interested in film, but in its poetry, its literature, and its interest in semiotics and theory, which of course fed into *Screen* in a very important way.

And so Peter flourished at Northwestern. But to get back to my anecdote, when we got back, Peter said one day to Paddy, "I'd like to teach a class on avant-garde cinema." As Peter and Paddy's friendship, professional collaboration, had all been based on this commitment to Hollywood, Paddy was a bit shocked, but then he never interfered with anything that anybody wanted to do, so he said, "Go ahead." Then I think it was quite soon after that he said to both Peter and me, he said, "Okay, if you're both so keen on the avant-garde now, just think, invocation time, there are several cupboards full of 16-millimeter equipment sitting in our department that are not being used. Why don't you make a film?"

And so that brought Peter and me to that point when the theoretical work that we'd been doing could perhaps be extended into theoretical work about cinema, within cinema. And so we then made our first film, *Penthesilea*, in Northwestern, precisely out of the conditions that Paddy had suggested, and with the help of very, very brilliant and wonderful graduate students of the department there.

Catherine Grant: You were at Northwestern until '74?

Laura Mulvey: Yes. That was also the period when I started to work on "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." Our son, Chad, was probably three. He became three during our first year. He was going to Tom Thumb's Nursery School, so that meant I had

some time in the morning, and went on with my reading of Freud, building on the essay I'd written on Allen Jones.

Catherine Grant: *The Spare Rib?*

Laura Mulvey: Yes. It was actually ... My friend Tim Hilton had asked me to review the Allen Jones notebooks, but my writing was so slow and painful, I missed the deadline by so many weeks that even Tim couldn't fix it. *Spare Rib* said they'd like to publish it, so it was really nice that it went out in *Spare Rib*. But there, I'd found that I could use the vocabularies that psychoanalysis offered us, in this case it was what I think of as the vernacular of fetishism, or the kind of semiotics of fetishism, to do a reading of Allen Jones's work.

I think perhaps that that was still very much my framework of thinking when I went on to "Visual Pleasure." The first draft of the essay I gave as a short talk at Madison in the French department, when Peter was invited over as a visiting lecturer. Because of the solidarities of feminism, they were embarrassed not to ask me to do anything, so asked me to give a talk, so I gave a little draft of this, though I still was a very, very unconfident ... I didn't think of myself as an academic. I was still very committed to the idea of myself as a dilettante, not being serious about anything that I did, but doing it out of love, affection, political commitment, and so on.

Catherine Grant: Some great things come out of those feelings, though. Yeah.

Laura Mulvey: Yeah. But anyway, the work that Peter had done under Paddy Whannel at the BFI in setting up film departments in the UK was beginning to bear fruit, and various film departments were getting going under the auspices of different kinds of disciplines. Peter applied for the job at Essex and got it, so we came back to the UK in 1974. Then my "Visual Pleasure" article came out in '75.

Catherine Grant: How did that happen? Because you described how the *Spare Rib* publication came out of an accident, almost.

Laura Mulvey: Oh, yes. Yes.

Catherine Grant: But how did the *Screen* publication come out?

Laura Mulvey: Well, I'm sure Peter was on the board of *Screen*. We were friends with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, who were also on the board, and Ben Brewster. I must've sent it in, or they must've encouraged me to send it in. Ben was a very brilliant and very supportive editor, and didn't interfere with this rather strange visual structure that I had for the essay, which I was very committed to, that it had to have this kind of symmetry and a pattern to it, so that it was comprehensible as a kind of visual concept as well as a written argument, which I still think is one of the important things about that essay, perhaps one of the

reasons why it's lasted. And so Ben worked on it with me. He came up with the title, and as I say, was an extremely helpful editor.

Of course, I had no idea that this essay was going to have the impact that it did, but I actually enjoyed writing it. I think it was the first time ever that I'd ever really enjoyed writing anything, so that was breakthrough. Then, although I still had no academic aspirations, people were beginning to ask me to do the odd class or the odd seminar, and this in a sense indicates that film studies existed within the context of art schools and filmmaking practice, and was developing a bit out of that world. For instance, Stuart, who had invited me to go and do a series of seminars at the Royal College of Art, James Leahy invited me to do a seminar on melodrama, in fact, at the Slade, and Ian Christie invited Simon Field and me to go to Darby College of Art where he was setting up film studies.

All of us at that time gained a considerable amount of learning experience about what it was to teach film through the British Film Institute, University of London extramural department, which ran a series of evening classes in Royalty House.

Catherine Grant: Yes.

Laura Mulvey: That was a very, very important site of both learning to teach and people learning about film, who then went on to teach film. At the same time, the BFI had been organizing for some years summer schools through which a number of people of that generation first encountered film as a subject of study. The BFI, as generating work around film education on all kinds of different levels, because this was in schools as well, was really important. And its support for *Screen*, its support for the Edinburgh Film Festival, and the kinds of pioneering work that was happening around the Festival, which was also very important.

Catherine Grant: And we didn't mention that, because in 1972 you did some programming at Edinburgh, didn't you?

Laura Mulvey: Yes.

Catherine Grant: On a program of women filmmakers.

Laura Mulvey: That was probably one of the most formative moments, or most important formative influences of my life, to research in collaboration with Lynda Myles, who was the director of the Festival then, and Claire Johnston, an event on women filmmakers where we tried to trace, without any discrimination whatsoever ... It didn't matter if they made good films, bad films, boring films, fascinating films. We just wanted to put together a festival event around films made by women. There'd been a New York one a few months or even weeks earlier. But that was a very important experience for me.

I learnt that there was no history of women filmmakers. Our history is so fragmented, so incomplete, that to a certain extent it defies chronology. You

can kind of move in and out of it. I think this is something that Jane Gaines and Monica Dall'Asta have written about very beautifully, how the women's filmmaking tradition is something which can only happen out, as it were, of retrospective imagination, rather than out of a traditional historical linear chronology. I first began to intuit that then. I also learnt that women filmmakers had more opportunities to work in the margins and in the avant-garde, in the margins of the margins of the art cinema. That was another influence that pushed me towards an interest in avant-garde film. That was very important. Thank you very much for mentioning that.

Catherine Grant: When you came to make your film with Peter, the first one, *Penthesilea*, did you have a consciousness of yourself as a woman filmmaker in this lineage?

Laura Mulvey: No, because I was always against having a consciousness of myself as ... I don't know quite how to describe this. I was very hostile to the idea of self-expression. I had no interest in expressing myself. I had interests in the cinema and interests in ideas and interests in politics and in bringing them all together, but I saw myself, in many ways, both in "Visual Pleasure" and in the films, as in a sense having an intuitive, almost unconscious relationship to what was in the air at the time. That was what interested me, of how to try and capture things that were actually in people's minds and in people's discussions, and push those a little bit further.

So I never saw myself in any way as being interested in being artistic or being creative, although I loved the process of making films and loved thinking about color, camera movement, lighting, so I can't deny that there was that. But I didn't start to want to make films because I had anything that I felt I wanted to express. It was also part, I think, of the ideology of the time. If we think of Foucault, anti-authorship. You also think of, I mentioned, the ideology of the Women's Movement, of anonymity and speaking out of the collective, and just a real sense in that period that ... It was a kind of anti-Romantic period. The influence of Minimalism, I think, was very important, the influence of Conceptualism, and that, in a sense, you can't see the films that were being made at the time without thinking of those kinds of surrounding contexts.

But I could also say that the movement that we were involved with in the UK when we got back, in all its diversity, which I mentioned earlier, had this wonderful kind of blossoming, flowering period really from the mid-'70s through to the late '70s. '79, to be precise. It's important to remember that the films emerged not just out of a film tradition, but out of a kind of widespread activism around film. It was the little magazines, of which there were a number. *Enthusiasm*, *CINIM*, *Cinema Rising*, *Screen* itself, *Movie*. I've probably forgotten some, but one has to think of all these people writing and discussing.

I think this is the same for many moments when a kind of avant-garde flourishes. If you think of New York in the '50s and '60s, there was *Film Culture*, there was Anthology Archives. France, Moscow. It's always writing and activity that goes on alongside film. And the Edinburgh Film Festival seasons taking

place at the National Film Theatre. For this very short period, it was an incredibly rich moment for experimenting with film. I just wanted to emphasize that. Within that, it was very important that money was made available during this period through the British Film Institute and the Arts Council.

Catherine Grant: In the late '70s, you got your first full-time job in film academia. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Laura Mulvey: Yes. Strangely enough, it goes back once again to the group, or you could even say the gang, that Paddy Whannel had collected together in the BFI education department. One of them was Victor Perkins. Again, one of the editors of *Movie*. Very influential in his own right. He had set up film studies within the context of Bulmershe College of Education, which was a teacher's training college on the outskirts of Reading. And so the whole sense that I was trying to convey earlier of the importance of education as pushing from film studies continued with Victor's work.

He set up a very remarkable department and collected important people around him, which the one who's most ... No, I'll tell this chronologically.

Victor then was offered a job at Warwick University, which was now itself setting up film studies in the very late '70s. So suddenly a vacancy came up at Bulmershe, and Victor suggested that I come in on a short-term basis, I think it was for one term, and replace him. But I got on well there, and very shortly after that they appointed me on a more permanent basis. They also appointed Jim Hillier. But the person I learnt particularly from there was Doug Pye, another movie editor. Because it was a college of education, it was very pedagogically rigorous, so I actually learnt about film teaching for the first time. It wasn't just a matter of standing up and talking, trying to interest people in things you were interested in. You had to think how to do it.

One of the key principles of film studies at Bulmershe was textual analysis, which was one of Victor's main modes of film theory, and it's there in all his work. Doug too was a very strong proponent of textual analysis. Then, in order to carry out textual analysis properly, they'd had installed a 35-millimeter editing table called a Prevost. We would rent films on 35 and run them through, freeze on a particular 35 millimeter, single frame, or analyze a short sequence. It was the most beautiful and entrancing thing. It had its downside, which was that the machine was terrifying, and that in order to put the film onto the machine you had to take it off its proper reel and put it on a little core. This was a very frightening occupation. Task, I mean. Very frightening task. I can still remember my anxiety about the possibility that if you let the film slip, the whole thing coils, would go off the core, never to be recovered again from the floor.

But that was an amazing introduction to film teaching, and using this machine in the days before video existed. We also, in addition to this, had individual Steenbecks, and did a lot of work with 16-millimeter film analysis. Every student was expected to learn how to do 16-millimeter production ... oh, sorry,

projection. Everybody had to learn how to project. Even I, the clumsiest person in the world, had to learn how to project. Every student had to watch the film that we were working on, the films that we were working on, at least twice. There'd be two formal screenings, and there could be subsequent work on Steenbecks and so on.

It was very rigorous, quite disciplinarian. Doug wouldn't allow a student to stay in class if they arrived between five or 10 minutes late. If they came to the door, they were just sent away and told they couldn't come in. The discussions were very highly structured, but I think extremely good. This was my first real experience of film as a pedagogic tool, and thinking about the word and the image together. Jim and I did an avant-garde course together for several years, which again was an extraordinarily wonderful experience for me. Teaching Hollywood with Doug and avant-garde with Jim, and doing a certain amount of practical supervision as well, was a really, really formative experience, to say it again.

Catherine Grant: Were you able to write as well at this time? Were you inspired by-

Laura Mulvey: Was I writing? I think I was writing. I think I was writing "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure,'" and then I remember writing on Fassbinder for *Spare Rib*, because I'd worked with Jon Halliday on his Sirk ... the little booklet of essays that came out for the Edinburgh Film Festival retrospective on Sirk, which Sirk himself came to. That was another ... We've actually passed that period, because Sirk came over, the Sirk retrospective was the same year as the women's film event. It was 1972. But meeting Sirk and seeing all his films again left a lasting impression, and I went on being interested in melodrama. I think I've written about Sirk every single decade of my life from then till now.

Catherine Grant: Some of the work that you were producing while you were at Bulmershe became some of the other essays in the collection of essay, *Visual-*

Laura Mulvey: In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, yes.

Catherine Grant: Or, yeah, in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, in 19-

Laura Mulvey: I mean *Visual and Other Pleasures*, yes.

Catherine Grant: *Visual and Other Pleasures* in 1989.

Laura Mulvey: In 1989.

Catherine Grant: I'm kind of interested in ... you mentioned "Afterthoughts." If "Afterthoughts" had been written during this period, then clearly a debate about your article had reached you.

Laura Mulvey: Yes.

Catherine Grant: Yes. How did you experience that?

Laura Mulvey: I wasn't very good at it, partly because of my lack of self-confidence, partly because I felt that the essay was designed to stir up controversy. The fact that I only used the male third-person singular, I only used "he," was designed, in a sense, to make people think about the way that the world was organized around the male subject. I didn't bother to explain this. As Mandy says in "Mulvey's Manifesto," it wasn't an essay that was meant to be neatly argued or cover its tracks. It was supposed to be a shock. If it had started saying, "Well, I'm doing this for this reason or that reason," its impact would've been greatly reduced, I think.

Catherine Grant: Do you think it was, in a way, the increasing professionalization of film studies that forged the particular form of the debate about your article? You know, you're kind of alluding in a way to people's misreading it, in a sense.

Laura Mulvey: Yes. It had no footnotes. It wasn't written in an academic context. I'd had no thought even then of emerging into becoming what I am sitting here as a foundational something or other. It was written as a manifesto, precisely as Mandy puts it, and without any proper nuances. I mean, in that sense, it often makes me ... I've thought across the years that it shouldn't necessarily be taught as a film theory essay. It should be taught more as you might ... Well, I don't want to be pretentious and make it sound like a piece of literature, but it's something that can't really be understood as just working within a film studies context. It would have ... you know, as though you were studying an essay written by, I don't know, an essayist, as it were, and how that came into being.

And so in a way, its film studies content and film studies legacy is almost incidental. I mean, I wrote about film because I happened to have been absorbed in Hollywood cinema. If I'd gone into other aspects of my intellectual life, where I was in many ways as interested in art, as architecture, literature ... Most of my life I'd spend reading and absorbing literature. My mother's interest in poetry and politics ... But also, I think that's wrong. I think I should correct that. I think it was cinema that actually demanded that kind of analysis, because cinema is to do with seeing, and as I said earlier, because Hollywood is so much to do with gender, narrative and images of gender and sexuality, desire, loss, and so on, that there was a logical ... It was the right thing to do. It wouldn't have worked if it'd been something else. So ...

Catherine Grant: Yes. Of course, by the late '70s, you'd also made some more films ...

Laura Mulvey: Yes.

Catherine Grant: ... including the film you're most famous for still, *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

Laura Mulvey: *Riddles of the Sphinx*, yes.

Catherine Grant: Did you conceive of yourself as a filmmaker even then, or as somebody who was an educator?

Laura Mulvey: I think certainly within the context of the movement in London, where everybody was beginning ... Well, not everybody was beginning to think of themselves as filmmakers, but we did have a lot of filmmakers around. Then by that time, I could ... The IFA.

Catherine Grant: That's it. The group.

Laura Mulvey: Yes.

Catherine Grant: Yes, the IFA. Yes.

Laura Mulvey: Yes. So yes, I was much more prepared to think of myself as a filmmaker. And there was a certain future implication of that, in that after my Bulmershe time came to an end, partly because I wanted ... Even going on the short train journey to Reading meant, in the winter, getting up in the dark and seeing the sunrise come up over Wormwood Scrubs between Paddington and Reading, which I got quite attached to. There were things about the journey that I loved. I would go and listen to the jukebox at Reading Station while I was waiting for the bus to take me out to Bulmershe with a cup of tea. But Chad was, you know, he was only about nine or 10, and I wanted to move back to London. I was offered a job at the London College of Printing, and I decided to take this, because I thought, "This is a filmmaking practice job, and I can see myself more as a practitioner and not get sucked into being more a kind of theorist, critic, and so on."

I did that for the rest of the '80s. I should also say that a very utopian moment of the Independent Filmmakers Association, the IFA, that moment I've been trying to evoke, came very abruptly to an end in 1979, as I generally put it when I'm asked about this, with the election of our first woman prime minister. As we've seen recently, the impact of a change of policy on public funding can be very immediate. It had a ... It wasn't only the loss of funding, it was the loss of hope, aspiration, that utopian aspiration, as Annette Michelson calls it, that keeps radical filmmaking alive.

At the same time, of course, partly due to the IFA's own agitation, the bill bringing our fourth channel into existence had just gone through, and Channel 4 came on air in 1982 and opened up a whole other pathway of opportunity for independent film, for a short time. But of course, for those of us who were kind of dyed in the wool materialists ... Dyed in the wool, is it, or wool?

Catherine Grant: Wool.

Laura Mulvey: Wool. Materialists, meant that we were losing our precious medium, moving out of 16-millimeter into television and another world, and there was a much

greater level of professionalization. So although Peter and I made one film for Channel 4, that world where you could juggle different kinds of professional lives really more or less came to an end.

Catherine Grant: I know that you had some more experiences in America after the London College of Printing experience.

Laura Mulvey: Yes, but I should point out that while I was at LCP, I found the work really too demanding, too hard. I was losing my own intellectual life. I was trying to support practice students, trying to organize their schedules. I won't go into all of this, but anyone who's taught filmmaking practice knows how demanding it is and how easy it is to get absorbed into your students' work and neglect your own. But in 1986, I had a most fantastic break, which was that Annette Michelson invited me to come to NYU as she was going on sabbatical, and so to do a term, the autumn term of 1986 there.

That was probably the most important seminar experience I'd ever had, because I don't think I'd ever done graduate teaching, and I was invited to run Annette's graduate seminar on any topic that I wanted. I had to do a couple of lectures, undergraduate lectures, but mainly this seminar was my main focus of my work there. I had the most fantastic seminar group, and I decided to do it on the Oedipus complex and the Oedipus story. We just worked through all the different kinds of literature around Oedipus. I got an enormous amount out of working with NYU graduate students, and I named them all at the bottom of the essay that came out of this seminar. I remember them very, very vividly, and with a great deal of respect and affection.

That took me into another theoretical phase, where my interest in psychoanalytic theory also turned more into narrative theory and thinking about narrativity, perhaps for the first time in a more academic way than a polemical way. Most of my previous work all had been critical writing about Mary Kelly exhibitions, but it'd all been much more, as it were, spontaneous. That NYU experience took me in a sense to another level, and also was another, I think, factor that made me realize that I really shouldn't be doing this practice thing. I hadn't advanced my own practice. Peter and I were no longer working together. The environment that had made our collaboration possible was no longer there. In terms of our own relationship, we were living more and more separately, even though we were still living in the same house, and in very, very close contact. We were separate, but together.

And so it was a bad period from the point of view of, where was I going next, so the NYU thing was a brilliant and I had a wonderful time there. When I came back, I had to make a move, and I made the move, actually, by having a slipped disc and having to lie on my back for three months, unable to move, and in considerable pain. That was a wonderful moment that forced me to shift. While I was in that state, lying on my back in considerable pain, Jonathan Culler rang me from Cornell and said, would I like to come out to the Institute of the Humanities, the A.D. White House, for a term as a scholar there? That must've

been autumn '90. That was another amazing environment of intellectual encounter, which Jonathan kind of presided over with extraordinary generosity.

I ran a seminar there, which I think was on psychoanalytic theory and cinema. Again, I had amazing students and people I got very fond of and were very important to me. That pushed me once again into being more studious, as it were. As I wasn't constantly at my wit's end trying to herd practice students together, I could actually go to libraries, think, research, and I started working on the essays that became *Fetishism and Curiosity*. That was a big turning point for me there. And *Visual and Other Pleasures* had come out in the meantime.

Catherine Grant: Yes.

Laura Mulvey: Cornell was amazing. Then Judith Mayne invited me to Ohio State, so I went from Ivy League, so-called, to a huge ... I think it was the biggest state university in the whole of America. But again, I had a wonderful seminar. This time it was a staff seminar on psychoanalysis and cinema. Then Irit Rogoff invited me to UC Davis, and again I had a staff seminar there on psychoanalysis and cinema. This was a period ... Also, I should say that these American universities, between them, I could go back to the UK, be with my family, and write. These stints in American universities paid me more than I could conceive possible and bought me the free time that I then got for writing.

Catherine Grant: Yes.

Laura Mulvey: And each one was a very, very different experience, and each one is like a kind of triptych montage together of different kinds of encounters with American academia. I find them all very stimulating indeed.

Catherine Grant: Then you had a further rich encounter with British academia when you moved to a job at the University of East Anglia.

Laura Mulvey: UEA, yes. I didn't stay there very long, but there again I was very influenced by my colleagues. We were very small. It was just me and Charles Barr and Andrew Higson, so the film unit was quite small, so we worked very closely together. I think Andrew wouldn't mind my saying that he found Charles and me slightly kind of lackadaisical in the way that we didn't take to email immediately, as email was just beginning to come in then. But they were absolutely fantastic colleagues.

There's just one thing that I wanted to mention in particular about that, was, someone, one of them was going on sabbatical, and we were having dinner together or drinks together and trying to work out who would do what the next academic year to cover what ... Andrew and Charles looked at each other and said, "Well, we won't have anyone covering silent cinema." Then there was a long pause where no one said anything, and then they looked at me. I said, "Um, um, um, okay, then." Because throughout all my engagements with

cinema, I'd never really got into pre-synchronized sound. This was plunging me into the complete unknown, and out of which I got an enormous amount. Working with Charles and Andrew, again, was another whole new way of learning about teaching and about pedagogy, as they're both amazing teachers and really inspiring.

And so then I started a new phase of interest in late silent cinema. When I left UEA, when Colin MacCabe asked me to be in charge of the MA that he'd set up at the British Film Institute, so it was an MA overseen by Birkbeck, but running completely within the BFI, I then cashed in on the experience I'd had on late silent cinema and ran those classes around pivot moments in the history of film and television. The first one was the transition from non-synchronized to synchronized sound. Because I was at the BFI, no one was overseeing me, really. I could do exactly what I wanted. I thought it was, in the first instance, important to introduce these students to things they didn't know. I didn't want to teach them what they wanted to know. I wanted to teach them things that they'd never even thought about.

And we had the archive. I could order any 35 millimeter film that was in the British Film Institute archive and have it projected in the screening room. We did this first transition from non-sync to sync sound across the world as much as we could, as internationally as possible. Then we did something on the crisis of Hollywood in the mid-'50s, with the coming of Technicolor, widescreen, and then something on British television, which again had a big influence on me. British television in the '60s and the relationship between 16 millimeter and studio television.

Having that freedom was amazing. But once again, things at the BFI never really run smoothly, and just as Paddy had had his falling out with the powers that were, Colin had his fallings out and was very quickly no longer in place, to put it politely, and the MA was brought very abruptly to a close. Then Birkbeck very generously took it on, and actually I applied for the job that was going with it, and I then became a professor.

Catherine Grant: Yes, which is the post that you hold to this day.

Laura Mulvey: Exactly, yeah.

Catherine Grant: And in a way, it's been your real base in London for all sorts of-

Laura Mulvey: Yes, and Birkbeck was ... I mean, looking back on this story, I realize how fortunate I've been with my institutions, because Birkbeck has been the most wonderful place to work. My job, really, was to bring film studies to Birkbeck. Very soon, perhaps the next year after I was appointed, my very longstanding friend, Ian Christie, was appointed.

Catherine Grant: That would've been about 1999?

Laura Mulvey: I was 1999. I think Ian was 2000, and then we built up the department from there. But there we were nestled, as it were, into history of art, which we found quite appropriate.

Catherine Grant: Yes. You've done all sorts of infrastructural things since you've been at Birkbeck, including with Ian, founding bodies within Birkbeck that feel very important.

Laura Mulvey: Yes. Ian applied for an AHRB grant very soon after he first arrived to do a research project into British film and television. That allowed me to build on the interest in television that I'd acquired during my time at the BFI. Jamie Sexton and I then worked that up into a book of essays called *Experimental British Television*. That was the AHRB. Then I suppose it ended up with the freedom that one has in a proper university like Birkbeck, out of which I could write *Death 24x a Second*, which reflects our mutual interest in the digital. Then I was going to retire, and my very nice head of department and dean of school said they thought it would be very profitable for Birkbeck to have a Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image, and would I set that up? So for the last three years I was doing that, and I've just handed that over, and now moving to proper retirement.

Catherine Grant: Yes. And with that institute, we're seeing in a way the forging of a new, a different future for film studies than the one we might've imagined a decade ago, in which film is becoming as important as a medium of expression of various kinds, and a medium of connection with different subject areas.

Laura Mulvey: That's what I thought was extremely important. I wanted to think about film absolutely in its own right, with its own history and its own disciplinary integrity, but also film as something which speaks to every other discipline, and also film that speaks outside the academic world altogether, and brings together people around outside issues, whether it's human rights, whether it's other kinds of politics, whether it's thinking about art. Film has this wonderful flexibility, malleability, almost, and that's what I found very interesting in the Institute. The Institute was funded by three different Birkbeck schools, and so we've catered, as it were, on a very interdisciplinary basis across the three schools. I felt that that was a very important function of what we were doing.

Catherine Grant: Yes. In that way as well, there's a connection to the essay film, which of course has been so important to you in your life, both in your film practice, but also in recent years the founding of the Essay Film Festival.

Laura Mulvey: Yes, though I have to say, first of all, that the idea of the Essay Film Festival, which we ran through BIMl last year, came from a collaboration between Michael Temple, Birkbeck, and Kieron Corless from *Sight & Sound*, and out of Kieron's incredibly successful essay film season that he did at the NFT a couple of years ago. To tell the honest truth, I've only recently discovered the essay film. Since then, I've looked back and said, "What is all this essay film? What were we doing when we made our films in the '70s? Were those essay films or weren't they?" And that's something that I've just been thinking about recently,

just literally in the last couple of weeks, of how Peter's and my early films might fit into the topic of the essay film or not.

Catherine Grant: Yes. Obviously, we haven't talked in too much detail about *Death 24x a Second*, but it's been interesting to see how it's a book that's had ... not as big an impact as "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," how could anything have as big an impact as that? ... but it's had a very big impact, and in a way an ongoing impact. Have you been interested to see that? Did you-

Laura Mulvey: Yes, yes. But again, I don't want to sound as if I'm doing myself down. I think one of the things that I'm good at is stating the obvious in an interesting way. For instance, if you think of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," what is the most absolutely obvious thing possible? The female star in the Hollywood cinema was displayed as spectacle. I mean, it's a complete banality. You know? I mean, I can hardly bear to say it, it's so obvious. But at the same time, I found something interesting to say about it.

The same with *Death 24*. What's the most obvious thing about the coming of digital? That the spectator can now intervene with the flow of their film with their little remote control, and stop it, stop their video or their DVD and play with it. Again, it's a banality of the greatest kind, but I think I managed to say something interesting about it. I think this is one of the things that's worked, and makes those two, the early article and the book, kind of speak to their times in a way. I think that's what people like about them.

Catherine Grant: Then we're speaking from the context of today, when a dossier of essays in tribute to, but also reflecting on, the 40th anniversary of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has just been published in *Feminist Media Studies*, and I know that there's going to be a dossier hopefully coming out in the journal, *Screen*, on your essay in the context of work produced after a celebration of the essay by the BFI earlier this year.

Laura Mulvey: Oh, that we had at the BFI.

Catherine Grant: In a way, your feminist work is very much alive and kicking, and you've been involved in yet another feminist collective effort to produce some essays reflecting on film [\[crosstalk 01:14:19\]](#) culture.

Laura Mulvey: The Amsterdam University Press book, *Feminisms*, that I've just edited with ...

Catherine Grant: Rogers?

Laura Mulvey: ... Anna Backman Rogers, yes, exactly.

Catherine Grant: Yes, for Amsterdam. Yes.

Laura Mulvey: Yeah. That was in a sense a project which was very inspired by my collaboration with Anna to get a younger generation of feminists to think about how they would approach theoretical issues of today. It wasn't trolling back over the past, it was, in a sense, building out of what kinds of theoretical infrastructure there is now, but applying it to the present time.

Catherine Grant: As you look at the work of that younger generation and the work of your colleagues at Birkbeck and elsewhere in film and moving image studies and film and media studies, do you still see the importance of studying the cinema in the way that you have for your career? It's being challenged. It's just one form amongst a number of moving image forms.

Laura Mulvey: Yes, I think it's always important to study the cinema. I mean, I think it's become equal, almost, not completely, but to studying the history of art. But understanding how the moving image works and also how it's functioned within its high context of the 20th century, because after all, its reign of glory has been amazingly short, and the way that it's coincided with the 20th century, with all its optimism, the brilliance of modernity, what modernity means in terms of political hope, how socialism and socialist aspiration goes alongside it in many ways, also the catastrophes that the 20th century had to see. I mean, it's in a sense almost, as Godard points out in *Histoires du cinema*, you can't think the 20th century without thinking cinema. The two are inextricably connected.

But I also think that unlike the time when I was growing up in the '50s, when I was looking very much towards a better world and a better future ... Suez, when it happened, the Suez Crisis happened, I must've been 15 or 16. That brought my mother back into her political life, which she'd had earlier when she was at Oxford. She was a founder member of CND, joined the Labour Party, was a Labour Party activist. All during that period and into the '60s, we all thought the world was going to get better and better, and even better. Then as I was mentioning earlier, the importance of the Third World, and that distribution of political consciousness worldwide at that time, also added to the sense of optimism.

The depression, the depressingness of now, is to see young people, and particularly perhaps young women, growing up in a world in which they don't have the confidence that we had, and to look back is to see that confidence gradually eroding, really since the Thatcher period and since the rise of neoliberalism, and the erosion of, perhaps, the political assumptions of progress that we all used to make. I mean, not that I was ever very much a far leftist, but I was a kind of middle-of-the-road leftist, and I was brought up as one. That was the family intellectual environment I'd grown up in for several generations in my family. But there's no security anymore, and I think the crisis now around women that's spreading across the world, the way that the global defeat of socialism has brought a global rise of religious intolerance, is always bad for women. Religion is bad for women. Socialism is good for women, and even in not so perfect circumstances.

So we're having to face something in which the question of women, young women, women's bodies, come back, in a world which is no longer indexical but digital. The kinds of political implications of that, I think, is something that need to be thought through, and bringing women and gender very particularly back into the central point of debate. Also, I mean, I haven't mentioned queer theory. That of course has brought in whole other theoretical dimensions not only to film, but across our world.

And so those questions of gender, sexuality, I think have been brought back, not in a way ... What I'm trying to say is that I would've really liked to be able to end this interview by saying, "The question of women is no longer a central question that we have to address with political urgency anymore." It is.

Catherine Grant: Thank you, Laura Mulvey.

Laura Mulvey: Yeah.