

**Zack Snyder's Impossible Gaze: The Fantasy of 'Looked-at-ness' Manifests in
Sucker Punch (2011)**

Alexander Sergeant, King's College London

Writing in the introduction to her edited collection *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey is moved to reflect on her contribution to the field of feminist film theory with the following observations:

The articles and essays published here were not originally intended to last. I often sacrificed well-balanced argument, research and refinements of style to the immediate interests of the formative context of the moment, the demands of polemic, or the economy of an idea or the shape and pattern of a thought. Until recently there seemed no point in collecting my articles together; on the contrary, to publish them between two covers seem to contradict my perception of my writing as essentially and necessarily ephemeral.¹

These self-aware comments succeed in demonstrating the vital characteristics of Mulvey's work that have ensured its ubiquity to the theoretical study of cinema, particularly in the case of her most influential essay: "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Originally published by the *Screen* journal in 1975, Mulvey's widely cited analysis is an article about a specific form of cinema, written in a specific circumstance, with an explicit polemic agenda to destroy the subconscious patriarchy of mainstream Hollywood cinema by exhibiting a psychoanalytic model of the spectator as inhabiting a "male gaze" (19). Following its publication, the piece has

been systematically celebrated, complicated and deconstructed by individuals such as Kaja Silverman, Jackie Stacey, Mary Ann Doane and Teresa de Lauretis, with the debates raised through such works advancing our collective understanding of the intricacies of the film-going experience as well as gradually divorcing Mulvey's original text from the circumstances in which it was written.² Far from the ephemeral piece Mulvey originally intended, Michele Aaron's critical introduction to the topic of spectatorship finds examples of the male gaze in a broad range of film examples stretching from classical Hollywood to the Oscar-winning musical adaptation *Chicago* (2002).³ Despite the best intentions of its author, it seems that the concept of the male gaze is not some transient affair but is instead alive and well in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

This patriarchal form of spectatorship, however, and indeed the concept of patriarchy in general, is a fantasy of the highest order. This does not mean to suggest that it does not exist, only that it exists as fantasy: as a pervasive form of impossibility rendered possible as it is hidden and supported by various prevailing symbolic constructs. With the release of a film like *Sucker Punch* (2011), a mainstream action film with a central premise revolving around a group of women dressed in military uniforms, tightly-fitting office attires and school girl outfits, it seems that this fantasy has reached a somewhat hysterical level of affirmation. Largely derided by critics upon its release as a film that, in the words of Richard Corliss writing in *Time Magazine*, "plays like an adolescent's Google search run amok", *Sucker Punch* was the first film by writer-director Zack Snyder – whose previous works include the similarly male-orientated action pieces *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009) – to be based on an original screenplay. On the surface, his conjured story of Babydoll (Emily Browning), Sweetpea (Abbie Cornish), Rocket (Jena Malone) and Blondie

(Vanessa Hudgens) and their elaborate attempts to escape a brothel through a combination of shooting and striptease seems to represent a nightmarish example of phallogentric visual pleasure. Yet, fantasies are not persuasive by being overt in their nature; they are persuasive when they are not revealed as such.

The link between phallogentrism and fantasy is paramount to understanding both the functioning of the male gaze and how one might use psychoanalytic theory to disrupt its function. Mulvey acknowledges this link through the distinctly Lacanian model she utilises to theorise the male gaze, a model which draws attention to such imaginary structures within the psyche. However, her rhetorical desire to attack a form of patriarchy perhaps more easily concealed at the time of her writing prevents her work from fully articulating the explicitly phantasmic spectatorship with which she deals. Phallogentrism does not exist in the manner of a tree or a piece of paper but instead as something far more illusive and, potentially, far more dangerous. To deconstruct its power through psychoanalysis, it must be deconstructed not as something empiric but as something imaginary.

This analysis of *Sucker Punch* seeks to illuminate the crucial role fantasy plays in the perpetuation, as well as the potential deconstruction, of the form of patriarchal spectatorship first explored in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Whilst Mulvey’s work emphasised a quality of “looked-at-ness”, in which the female image is denied meaning by both the film form and the inherently dominating gaze of the spectator, this analysis will instead argue for the male gaze to be considered as the projection of the implicit fantasy of that looked-at-ness. Contextualising Snyder’s work against the post-Lacanian film theory of Todd McGowan and Slavoj Žižek, both of whom theorise fantasy as a crucial device in the support of dominant ideological structures and the functioning of reassuring visual pleasure within cinematic

spectatorship, it will argue that *Sucker Punch*'s overt implausibility serves to deconstruct the very visual pleasure its fetishised imagery purports to exhume. By placing the fantasy act up on screen within a narrative that consistently dramatises the multifaceted dream worlds of its protagonist Babydoll, *Sucker Punch* invokes rather than supports the symbolic structures of patriarchy, objectifying its female protagonists not in a manner that supposedly renders them as possible objects of a male scopical desire but instead in a manner that transmits their status as impossible objects of an impossible desire. Rather than being an example of the male gaze, *Sucker Punch* manifests the fantasy of that male gaze, with its latex costumes rendered as impossible as its high-kicking action and folkloric imagery. This argument seeks to deconstruct the perhaps assumed phallogocentric visual pleasure of *Sucker Punch* not in order to argue for a deconstruction of the male gaze but instead to illuminate its inherently fantastical nature in the hope that, if such fantasies are explicitly located, then that location allows for the destruction of their power.

Relocating the Male Gaze: The 'Looked-at-ness' of the Spectator

It is important to remember that Mulvey's theorisation of the male gaze was never constructed as a direct lamentation on the eroticisation or objectification of women in Hollywood cinema. Instead, it was the precise manner of this objectification that her work sought to deconstruct, a manner which positioned women for the visual pleasure of a "controlling and curious gaze" that reaffirmed phallogocentric discourses by promoting men as active imposers of meaning and burdening the on-screen female with the simplistic and passive qualities of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (19). Utilising psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's famous articulation of the mirror stage – a process by

which the subject recognises themselves in the mirror for the first time as a young child, and thus establishes a scopophilic relationship to reality in which conscious identity is supported by various imaginary and symbolic structures – Mulvey theorised cinema within a similar context as a device that the spectator looks to master in the manner that an infant masters its own reflection.⁴ According to Mulvey, Hollywood provided that sense of scopophilic mastery by employing narrative and visual tropes that merged “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters of the film”, thereby positioning cinema-goers as occupiers of a phallogocentric, male gaze (19).

Articulating a relationship between a theorised screen and a theorised spectator, Mulvey’s work represents a strand of psychoanalytic film theory prevalent throughout the 1970s that has subsequently been rejected by numerous scholars for failing to consider the specifics and contrasts of the empiric film experience and audience.⁵ Partially in response to such criticism, recent Lacanian film scholarship has chosen not to reject the psychoanalytic mode of analysis proposed by Mulvey outright but instead to make such analysis “more Lacanian” (28).⁶ Informed by a much broader context of Lacan’s writing than Mulvey’s devotion to his essay on the mirror stage – a piece that itself represents a burgeoning example of his extensive psychoanalytic theory – the writings of Todd McGowan and Slavoj Žižek in particular have promoted a new understanding of spectatorship that considers not only the role of symbolic and imaginary constructs but Lacan’s equally important, yet far more traumatic, order of the Real: the repressed gap between the unconscious and the conscious that lies beyond the signifying process.

In the particular context of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, McGowan’s *The Real Gaze* has argued Mulvey’s understanding of the gaze as representing a misreading of its original, Lacanian conceptualisation.⁷ Rather than

something the subject utilises to see, Lacan instead envisioned the gaze as something that is seen, with its basic function being to alert the looker to the fact that “we are beings who are looked at”.⁸ Taking these concepts back into the field of cinematic spectatorship, McGowan’s work emphasises the gaze according to Lacan’s latter understanding as the scopic form of the *objet petit a*: the unconquerable object of desire created at the mirror stage’s split between the recognised ideal image of the conscious sense of self and the repressed misrecognition of the as yet not fully functional corporeal child (15-18). McGowan’s spectator does not look at the screen in as much as he or she is looked at by the screen, and it is the manner they are looked at, the manner in which their own looked-at-ness is exhumed, that forms the heart of the cinematic experience. This does not mean that voyeuristic or fetishistic impulses are not still part of the attraction of watching movies, but that such impulses must be indulged not simply by allowing the filmic female to be looked upon but, equally importantly, by preventing the filmic female from looking back at the spectator. As Lacan himself states, the pleasure of the voyeur is not an act of scopic domination, as Mulvey articulates it to be in her use of the term, but is instead an act of retreat, an attempt to escape the symbolic force of the phallus through visual pleasure:

What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete. What he is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus – but precisely its absence (182).

The male gaze is a patriarchal avoidance of the *objet petit a*, a phallogentric example of McGowan's cinematic "taming of the gaze" (109). The spectator seeks looked-at-ness in the cinematic image to avoid being looked at himself.

With this sense of disguise or escape in mind, it seems fitting that McGowan's work turns to the role of fantasy within this cinematic taming of the gaze. Far from sharing a transgressive relationship with reality, McGowan's Lacanian understanding of the term articulates fantasy's supportive function in masking the inherent traumas of the Real, encouraging spectators to transform the inherently unattainable *objet petit a* into objects of desire by fantasising their attainability (24-25). Indeed, with specific relation to representations of gender, the work of Elizabeth Cowie has also argued that cultural representations of women form part of a public fantasy of desire, embedding the female with the task of solving that desire in a manner that frames phallogentric discourses.⁹ Yet, whilst Cowie's work discusses fantasy in relation to its cultural impact, her work does not bring its analysis back into the spectatorship process. She considers the role fantasy plays in the generation and sustainability of patriarchy, but does not consider the role of fantasy within patriarchal spectatorship, a move that, when placed in the context of McGowan's theoretical realignment, might help to explain the functioning of the male gaze *as* fantasy rather than *because of* fantasy.

In Slavoj Žižek's work *The Plague of Fantasies*, a similarly Lacanian mode of understanding is used to scrutinise the various paradoxes that lie beneath this relationship between fantasy and desire. As his analysis elaborates, because fantasy is by its very nature an essentially impossible notion, its supportive role is repressive rather than progressive. It gives the subject a sense of clarity, turning their essential lack into something tangible and temporal, but must hide its own impossibility in

order to achieve this. In Žižek's words, it "conceals the horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference" (6).¹⁰ It masks the gaze, but it replaces it with its own impossible gaze, recognising implicitly both the ultimate unattainability of desire and the subject's own role in the creation of that desire it pertains to satisfy. If that impossible gaze is ever made overt, then "the means in which the subject is already present" at the conception of this object of desire is also revealed (21–24). McGowan makes a similar point in his own discussion of the notion of a cinema of fantasy – a term he divorces from generic notions of fantasy cinema typified by works such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) – as a type of filmmaking that, devoid of the necessary symbolic support, succeeds in rendering "the gaze visible" precisely by exposing the role fantasy plays in the formation of reality out of the real in everyday social existence (23–29).¹¹ Fantasy can mask the gaze, but only by masking itself and, without this implicit quality, with only explicit fantasy as fantasy on the screen, "the spectator must bear the weight of fantasy and experience its ultimate vacuity" (64). In order to present looked-at-ness, cinema must hide the fantasy of that looked-at-ness. It must hide the impossible male gaze beneath its symbolic assertions, otherwise, like the unseen dust lurking in the perhaps less than sanitised auditorium, the fantasy process involved in the pleasure of the spectator will be lit up as it becomes part of the projector's halo.

The Impossible Gaze of Babydoll: The Objectified Woman as *Objet Petit a* in the Fantasy of *Sucker Punch*

If the male gaze is a fantasy of looked-at-ness, there seems to be little that is implicit or hidden about the phallogocentric discourses presented in Zack Snyder's *Sucker*

Punch. Its narrative, telling the story of Babydoll, a troubled young woman who fantasises her way out of an insane asylum and into a stylised burlesque house and brothel, is a story that showcases the fantasising process proudly up on screen. Its *mise en scène* is caked in layer upon layer of implausibility and impossibility – travelling from a quasi-Dickensian world of gothic hysterics through a Russ Meyer-like realm of suspenders and lingerie to a Tolkien-esque space of dungeons and dragons – embracing an iconography designed not to establish a sense of a stable, symbolic-rendered reality but instead to present an overt fantasy.

Its opening sequence – an extended musical montage that displays various stylistic excesses including an exaggerated colour scheme and the use of slow-motion effects – is, paradoxically, the film's only brief acknowledgement of an even vague sense of reality. In this section, the character of Babydoll is introduced as a young woman suffering at the hands of her sexually abusive foster parent. Dressed conspicuously in pyjamas and pigtails, Babydoll is looked at by this man, with his reactions to her scopical identity often mediating the rather objectifying shots of the camera, and a world of male domination is supposedly established. Whilst Babydoll does ostensibly fight back against this imposition by threatening the man with a gun, this act ultimately only dooms her to greater passivity as he then utilises this act to have her committed to an insane asylum, where it is arranged for her to undergo a lobotomy. However, as the surgery is being performed, a shift occurs in the *mise en scène* that immediately problematises the dynamics of looked-at-ness that seem so overtly established in these opening sequences.

Zooming in on a close-up of Babydoll's heavily painted eyes, these objectified and fetishised body parts become the basis of a graphic match that shifts the action from this stylised reality to a world of her overt fantasy. Suddenly, the

operating theatre is replaced with an actual theatre, the doctor replaced with performers dressed as doctors, and Babydoll herself shifts her position to become an audience member watching the scene unfold: her own role in the scene replaced by Sweetpea, another member of the female ensemble to whom we are about to be introduced. Stopping the performance, Sweetpea reacts angrily to the situation to which Babydoll had previously been forced to succumb. She asks them to switch off the music, abruptly ending the soundtrack the spectator has until now assumed to be an extra-diegetic part of the film's symbolic structure, and shouts exasperatedly at the ridiculousness of the scenario. She is aware of the manufactured nature of the world, the set design, the costume, and indeed her own role in the performance to turn the audience on. She states openly that she "gets" the schoolgirl outfit she wears, and indeed the fantasy scenario of male dominance created by the on-screen set of the asylum, but that the fake lobotomy makes no sense, and thus takes off her wig of pigtails and jumps down from the stage. In this shift from reality to Babydoll's imagination, an off-screen negotiation of eroticism is now placed on screen and, rather than spectators watching theatricality, we become spectators watching fantasy spectators watching theatricality who, like Sweetpea, are aware of our role in the process. Žižek's impossible gaze of fantasy is made apparent, and the spectator's own role in masking that impossibility is thus made equally apparent.

The use of this interrupting fantasy scenario, in particular as a replacement for a potentially erotic display of visual pleasure, represents far more than a knowing deconstruction of its potential phallogentrism. By placing fantasy in the forefront of the spectator's considerations at the very moment a sense of looked-at-ness is invited from the female form, the two modes become not supportive but synonymous. Fantasy and scopophilia are placed in an overt dialogue with one another, and this

dialogue features throughout the rest of Snyder's increasingly impossible plot. The film proceeds to play out the majority of its narrative within this conjured burlesque house, a realm that performs various *Wizard of Oz*-styled juxtapositions as characters in Babydoll's fantasy world resemble grotesque imaginings of the characters left behind in the asylum. It is within this world that the basic escape narrative of the film is established, as the group of women hatch a plan to distract their male prisoners through their talents in striptease in order that they might be able to steal various items to aid their getaway. It is discovered quickly that Babydoll possesses a particular talent in this area, and so it is she who is tasked with the job of performing the numerous erotic dances required by the plan. Her ability to please her male spectators visually forms a crucial part of the narrative, yet it is also a part of the narrative left unrepresented on screen. Each time she is required to perform, Babydoll proceeds to fantasise her way out of her already fantasised world, escaping into even more impossible iconographies of action and spectacle. Rather than lingering on each erotic dance, Snyder takes the spectator further down his own particular rabbit holes, escaping into military campaigns in pseudo steam-punk incarnations of World War I or into epic battles involving guns, swordplay and mechanised guards on runaway trains, mapping the visual pleasure of special effects over the visual pleasure of the female form.¹² Placed intermittently throughout the narrative, it is these moments that ultimately destroy the potential pleasure for the male gaze in *Sucker Punch*.

Mulvey argued that the positioning of female characters as objects of desire often occurs at the moment that male characters assume the role of on-screen audiences, a device which fuses the camera with the voyeur to allow the spectator access to the privileged position of "active controllers of the look" (21). These formal strategies undoubtedly occur throughout *Sucker Punch*. At the first instant in the film

in which Babydoll discovers her talent for striptease under the supervision of Madame Gorski (Carla Gugino), an audience of men gathers to watch her perform as the camera cuts between shots of their objectifying looks at Babydoll and her own body on display. However, although the spectator may indeed possess the look in this sequence, they do not possess the gaze. Instead, what they possess is a desire to escape the gaze and a fantasy that the gaze is somehow escapable. As the film performs yet another shift from fantasy world to fantasy world, this time replacing suspenders with samurais and striptease with stunt work, a sense of impossibility is invoked. Babydoll suddenly inhabits a world we know does not really exist; its iconography is too impossible and the shift between realms too overtly psycho-orientated within the *mise en scène*. The ramifications of this impossibility travel even further. Babydoll also does not exist, not in this world, nor in the burlesque house, nor in the insane asylum. She is an image, a collection of light and colour. The voyeuristic spectator can objectify her, can fetishise her, they can deny her meaning and fill her with their own phallic imposition, but this act has about as much ability to ultimately attain the unattainable object of desire as a towel has of damming a river. As the scene returns to the satisfied glances of the watching males after the action sequence, it is not juxtaposition that is invited in the edit but comparison. The action sequences displayed on screen were impossible, but so too is the satisfaction we return to, so too is the satisfaction of desire itself. Rather than providing a phallogentric reassurance, the sequence in fact draws attention to the impossibility of such an endeavour. Babydoll is objectified to become not an object of desire, but a manifestation of the *objet petit a*.

By the time of her second dance, Babydoll's previous efforts have given her somewhat of a reputation and an even larger crowd of male characters gathers in the

dancing studio. Standing all alone in the performing space, Babydoll begins to present her body as spectacle, swaying and gyrating her hips in time with the rhythm of the music. This is then quickly juxtaposed with the next scene as the film travels from the landscape of the dance studio to a war-torn land of rubble in a supposedly single, impossible tracking shot: the fantasy of one world replaced with a more overt fantasy of another. Later on in the film, Babydoll makes her stage debut in the burlesque house for the pleasure of the visiting mayor. Standing on stage dressed in lingerie, this world of lookers is replaced with a world of dragons and orcs, representing perhaps the most overtly fantastic sequence of the film.

In the final use of this motif, *Sucker Punch* presents perhaps its most overt invocation of the fantasy of looked-at-ness to the spectator. Dancing in the kitchen in order to distract an overweight male chef long enough to steal a knife, Babydoll constructs a platform for her performance out of the kitchen's preparation table whilst her confidante, Rocket, whispers into his ear: "You're gonna want to watch this". The address seems deliberately direct, speaking to the spectator's presence in the scenario and telling them simultaneously they also will want to watch this. Indeed, perhaps they do. Perhaps they crave the visual pleasure of phallogocentric scopic imposition; they cannot have it. Crucially, it is not on screen, replaced instead with an image of a cloud-filled, sun-drenched sky with a conjured map of stars alien to our solar system. A greater, far more traumatic truth, however, is contained within that image than a simple denial of the male gaze. 'You' may have wanted to watch Babydoll take her clothes off, but that image – and the pleasure gained from it – would have been just as far-fetched as the one currently on screen; a fantasy of the dominated female conjured to appease a patriarchal mindset of meaning. Babydoll's movements that seem to delight the cook do not showcase her looked-at-ness as much as they display his, with

the spectator shying away from the grotesque image of phallocentrism he presents, and perhaps actually relieved this time to have escaped such a scenario in favour of *Sucker Punch*'s impossible fantasy.

Conclusion: The Future Fantasies of the Male Gaze

This analysis of the workings or, more precisely, the failings of phallogentric visual pleasure in *Sucker Punch* and the role of fantasy within the psychic machinery of the male gaze has not sought to reclaim Snyder's critically derided work as a feminist text, nor has its argument been presented in order to advocate a deconstruction of Mulvey's theory as a viable theoretical concept. It has not attempted to demonstrate the film as being anything other than the problematic work that critics and audiences alike rejected upon its release, in large part due to the "interminable sequences of overscale mayhem" that deny the viewer "the sight of Ms. Browning's gyrations", as one reviewer articulated in *The New York Times*. It is precisely the lack of visual pleasure presented in such comments in such an apparently phallogentric form of cinema that highlights the interesting challenge the film issues to assumed notions surrounding cinematic looked-at-ness and the male gaze. By scrutinising such challenges, *Sucker Punch* has been utilised as a case study not to illustrate that the male gaze does not exist but that, if it does exist, it is a fantasy: a fantasy that, to fulfil its ideological function, must remain implicit. The film may utilise many elements of Mulvey's looked-at-ness, but without this hidden phantasmic support, such efforts do little to mask the *objet petit a* of its objectification.

Mulvey believed the polemic ambition of her work meant that it possessed an ephemeral quality that would not allow it to last. Contrary to these predictions, it seems it is precisely this aspect that has ensured that it is still debated to this day.

Inspired by this useful function of rhetoric, this analysis chooses to end on a similar, deliberately provocative note. The visual pleasure of the male gaze is a fantasy, and should be acknowledged as such. A cinema of the male gaze may be voyeuristic in nature, it may promote a sense of objectification or fetishisation of the female form, but, above all else, it is a ludicrous fantasy that promotes an essentially impossible agenda. It is a cinema that proposes that woman are denied meaning when their scopical role is highlighted, which is, of course, a fantasy. It is a cinema that finds meaning only through its pursuit and understanding of the male and denial of the female, which is, of course, a fantasy. It is a cinema that perpetuates phallogocentric discourses that bear no relation to a search for the Real but instead seek to hide from it, which is, of course, a fantasy. Where the fantasy of patriarchy remains implicit, it gathers its insidious strength, but by making that fantasy explicit, its power is rendered ineffectual. A task of feminist film criticism should be to find such fantasies in order to render them precisely what they are: absolutely impossible.

Notes

¹ Mulvey (1989). All subsequent references to “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” refer to the edition reprinted in this collection.

² My reference to the work of such individuals is intended only as the briefest acknowledgement of this invaluable field of research, of which countless other names could also be added. A more thorough introduction is provided by Janet McCabe (2004) in her own cogent summary of the field of feminist film theory.

³ Aaron (2007).

⁴ Lacan, (1966).

⁵ The best summation of this argument is perhaps still provided by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996).

⁶ McGowan (2003).

⁷ McGowan (2007).

⁸ Lacan (1979).

⁹ Cowie (1997).

¹⁰ Žižek, (1997).

¹¹ The separation McGowan makes between the generic category of fantasy and his cinema of fantasy is slightly ambiguous. McGowan’s cinema of fantasy has the effect of rendering the gaze more visible, yet fantasy cinema, as a medium of comforting entertainment, would seem to perform the opposite function: an example of McGowan’s ‘Cinema of Integration’ (113-159). However, given the fact that the fantasy genre’s techniques are often similar to those proposed by McGowan in his own category, both of which depict the act of fantasising on screen, this separation does not seem quite as clear cut as the solution offered. These somewhat conflicting

and contradictory strands of enquiry are beyond the remit of this analysis, but future scholarship should do well to consider it.

¹² In numerous interviews, Zack Snyder has declared *Sucker Punch* to be “*Alice in Wonderland* with machine guns”, and there are various references to Lewis Carroll’s mythology found throughout the film, most notably in a sequence in which Babydoll dances to Jefferson Airplane’s ‘White Rabbit’. This rather crass comparison speaks less of the proximity of theme or style of the two works and more of *Sucker Punch*’s desire to align itself to an explicitly fantasy mode of cinema.

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