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TOP SCHOLAR



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Scholarship 2024 Media Studies

Time allowed: Three hours
Total score: 24

ANSWER BOOKLET

Check that the National Student Number (NSN) on your admission slip is the same as the number at the top of this page.

Answer all THREE questions from Question Booklet 93303Q, and write your answers in this booklet.

Begin your answer to Question One on page 3, your answer to Question Two on page 11, and your answer to Question Three on page 19.

If you need more room for any answer, use the extra space provided at the back of this booklet.

Check that this booklet has pages 2–28 in the correct order and that none of these pages is blank.

Do not write in the margins (XXXX). This area will be cut off when the booklet is marked.

YOU MUST HAND THIS BOOKLET TO THE SUPERVISOR AT THE END OF THE EXAMINATION.



Page 1

INSTRUCTIONS

Answer all THREE questions. Plan and write your answers below.

For EACH question:

- You should refer to a wide range of specific evidence to support your analysis.
- You may respond by agreeing or disagreeing with your chosen quotation or statement, OR by considering a variety of points of view.

Do NOT use the same material to answer more than one question.

QUESTION ONE: The relationship(s) between media and wider society

With reference to ONE of the quotations below, **analyse the development** of a medium / media industry and / or the factors that shape it.

Quotations (Choose ONE)

1. "I feel that AI can still be a very powerful tool for us ... But we have to view it as a tool. The person who wields it still has to maintain responsibility for wielding that tool." *Christopher Nolan*
2. The biggest problem in movies [or other media industries] is too many formulas. There is a lack of originality, and that's why the industry isn't performing." *Jonathan Taplin*
3. "A healthy democracy relies on the ability of experienced journalists to decipher, in depth, the state of our country, our identity, and to hold power to account." *Sunday Team, TVNZ*
4. "Artists always get [exploited], no matter what time period or technology is prevalent." *Rosanne Cash*

SELECTED QUOTATION

Copy and paste the quotation you have chosen into the space below.

2. The biggest problem in movies [or other media industries] is too many formulas. There is a lack of originality, and that's why the industry isn't performing." *Jonathan Taplin*

PLANNING

B *I* U | | |

- Streaming service context
- Weberian rationalisation
- Parameters and metrics
- Commodity fetishism
- Western formulas and post-colonialism - Said and Spivak

ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question One** in the space below.

B *I* U | | |

The biggest problem in movies [or other media industries] is too many formulas. There is a lack of originality, and that's why the industry isn't performing.

With the recent development of the streaming service industry, the film industry has cycled back on itself and returned to a Old Hollywood era dominance of formulaicness and itinerancy. The vagaries of capitalist development, the relentless pursuit of profit, and the modern prevalence of globalisation has led the hegemony of the streaming service industry to influence the film and tv industry into a mould orienteered not only for profit, but for westernisation. This essay will examine the statement in the context of the streaming service *and* film industries, using Marxist sociology and post-colonial theory to critique the lack of originality in modern film and tv as a byproduct of formulaicness. We would, however, disagree with the statement's assertion that the "industry isn't performing". Through the streaming service industry, film in an industrial context is absolutely performing with a surfeit of profit and innovation - film as an *art form* is not, however.

In Max Weber's Marxist sociology, he details the trend of capitalism towards what he describes as "Rationalisation" - the increasing tendency to turn abstract, emotional, or social values into quantifiable, routinized, and metrical quantities. Everything in the modern day is considered, economically, in a series of formulas, numbers, data points, and figures. In a filmic context, this has been the effect of the streaming service industry on film and tv - the necessity for content algorithms, tailored recommendations, and profit calculation has led to the ability of streaming services and media corporations to characterise films in a context of categories, audience effects, and genres. Netflix, for example, outsources its data collection to third parties, who track user engagement with certain films or tv shows on the platform - the films and tv shows being *rationalised*, considered not in terms of artistic value but in a series of parameters. Through this, Netflix is then able to track engagement with art in a context of numbers and metrics - *rationalisation* in its purest form. This is not just limited to Netflix, of course - Amazon Prime video uses in-house AI algorithms to determine this. Their market research has shown a 30% increase of engagement since this change was implemented. So in terms of marketing and data collection, the onset of the OTT (over-the-top) streaming service has allowed for the excessive quantification of art.

If we then transfer this to a *production* context, it is not a big leap to see how this could influence the production of film and tv shows under a hegemony of streaming services as a distribution method. Before the streaming service, when films were primarily released in cinemas, the capacity for market research was comparatively far more inhibited. There had to be some amount of generalisation occurring in terms of orientation towards target markets. In the modern day, however, corporations are able to know in explicit detail what the target audience will want or demand - leading to, in essence, a *formula* for film creation. Endless criticisms have been levelled at the modern film industry, as in the statement, for being repetitive and formulaic - and this arrives precisely out of generalisation. If large studios are able to predict precise target market metrics, why is there a need for *originality*? We can see this with some of the technologies employed in the modern day film industry, especially with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence into the mix. ScriptBook is an AI technology employed in pre-production, which essentially serves the function of a script editor, analysing submitted scripts, determining the expected response, and suggesting optimisations using AI. This technology has been used in films such as Logan (2017), performing script revisions in order to ensure maximised appreciation. There is no better exemplification of the dying of film as an 'art' and its rationalisation into a 'formula' than this technology. If one visits the website, the main page is immediately confronting with an air of rationalisation. The hero image is a photo of Audrey Hepburn, overlaid with a series of pointers with statistics like "68% Romance Genre" or "70% male Audience". The slogan of the company is "Hard science. Better content". Note the use of "content" - film is no longer an "art" as such, it is a profit method that disseminates "content". If this seems to stray away from a streaming context, it should be noted how much streaming contributes to this general industry trend. Without a method to distribute content in such a personalised manner to such a globalised and diverse audience, there would be no calling for this level of rationalisation as it would not be deemed possible in praxis to extract profit from. Streaming has provided the catalyst of this rationalised dissemination even if these formulaic films are being released in cinemas.

This fact can be noted with a more positive byproduct of the streaming industry, and one that ostensibly negates the statement, which is the increase in content diversity during the streaming age. The efficacy provided by these data collection methods allows for a far more targeted method of content release, meaning studios incur less risk by making more marginalised and less generally relatable films. Since these films and tv shows, on streaming services, are able to find the audience required (which can be pre-emptively calculated) some producers have strayed away from generalisation. The progenitor of this trend is independent cinema, exemplified by distribution companies such as A24 and Neon. The mere fact that independent film was far less prevalent in a Hollywood context *before* the streaming era points to the impacts that this targeted method of data collection has had on the industry and its modes of distribution. So does this suggest a negation of the statement's assertion that there is a "lack of originality" in the industry due to formulaicness? Not necessarily. While the amount of independent films has certainly increased with distributors like A24, it essentially relies on a trust model of cult status - independent films are far less profitable than the "formulaic" big-budget Hollywood films, meaning the only thing stopping A24 and Neon from switching to these formulas is brand image - they have constructed their images entirely on their giving light to independent filmmakers - even though these films earn less money. A24 films rarely make above 100 million - some of their best successes have been films like Lady Bird, making 80 million USD on a 13 million budget - which pales in comparison to the billions of dollars raked in by big budget Hollywood films. And there is large pressure towards this big-budget formulaicness. Already A24's latest film, Civil War, has a budget of \$50 million - the company itself having recently been valued at 2.5 billion USD. There is a large question of whether A24 can maintain the low-budget charm which its entire brand image has been built on, as it consistently gains more and more traction in Hollywood. It is not uncommon for independent film studios to sell out - in the 60s, after a long run of independent films, United Artists was bought by Metro Goldwyn Mayer and remains one of its properties today. So we are effectively seeing a dichotomous route for the independent film industry - either they can succumb to the (markedly large) pressure of 'formulaic' big-budget films, or they can continue making 'original' low-budget films for less profit. In 2009, over 280 independent films were released in Hollywood, but they only made up 1.2% of the box office revenue, compared with 9 years earlier, when 120 films made up 5.8%. The question of whether independent films can retain their place in the industry as streaming and data collection consistently demands formulaicness is a grim portent for the place of 'originality' - and while the big-budget films will certainly continue to 'perform' in the industry under a consistent streaming hegemony, it is uncertain and precarious whether or not 'original' films will continue to be valued. The success of original auteur films like Oppenheimer in 2023 (grossing over 1 billion dollars) point towards a more optimistic route, but it is important to note that the very definition of it as 'original' means it defies the formula - Oppenheimer by no means fits the expected characterisations of what a mass-market audience would appreciate - and there remains the looming question of whether or not deviations of the formula, risky as they are, will be allowed or appreciated in the future of the industry. For every 100 'original' films, there may only be 1 Oppenheimer.

This has hitherto examined the context of 'formula' in an industrial/economic sense, but there is also a large issue with the streaming service industry in terms of *cultural* 'formulaicness', which is that the imposition of streaming services on the global market (Netflix being operational in over 190 countries currently) can consistently subordinate 'original' film and tv productions (considering original in the sense of a deviation from the western formula) to a westernised idea of a target market. Globalised platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have consistently preached rhetoric of 'glocalisation', where their large dominance in foreign countries is justified by their accommodation of content availability towards the audiences of those countries. Despite this, Netflix and other OTT platforms have been accused continuously (most famously by the the Canadian Broadcasting Committee in 2019) of 'media imperialism', where a globalised monopoly will impose the values of its own milieu into foreign cultures. The dissemination of Western media doesn't necessarily interest us here, since the statement only discusses a productional 'formulaic' context - what is far more concerning is the way Netflix subordinates local producers to western values. Despite protectionist policies, like the EU requiring 30% of content to be European, a large danger still remains in the *exporting* of locally produced media to a western context. 60-80% of the titles in foreign countries' Netflix catalogues are also present in the *United States* Netflix catalogue, and with this there is the latent tendency for Netflix to always be accommodating for this market in its foreign production.

For example, productions like *Sex Education*, a British show, have been critiqued for appearing too Americanised, altered to fit an American formula. When similar accusations were levelled at *Elite*, a Spanish Netflix original show, the director claimed that the so-called 'westernisation' of the Spanish setting was only done to 'make the themes and visuals more universally accessible' - note that 'universally accessible' means 'accessible by Americans'. The Western formula has infested foreign production and stifled the expression of 'original' local content. We can further examine this using South Korea as a case study. There is a tripartite division of TV production in South Korea, where 1/3 of production costs are paid for by TV stations, 1/3 by brand deals, and 1/3 by the selling of broadcasting rights to foreign countries. The latter 1/3 used to come from Japan until political relations soured in the '00s, it was then replaced by Chinese broadcasters until Korea's foreign policy became too close to the US and China severed ties. With the introduction of Netflix into Korean TV production, pledging 500 million dollars in 2022, the market was effectively 'rescued' by Western saviours. The caveats of this rescue meant that Netflix essentially upended the entire South Korean TV Production industry. Some shows were funded with 110% of their budgets in exchange for exclusive streaming rights - some shows were created in partnership with local TV stations, with Netflix funding 50-60% of their production budgets, and some were licensed to Netflix for *foreign* streaming, while local terrestrial stations would continue to air them nationally. What this meant was that the entire industry was subsidised for Netflix's streaming rights to foreign countries (namely, the US). Local producers could no longer access top talent without Netflix subsidies due to the salary inflation, nor could they compete with Netflix-subsidised shows. Some producers attempted to maintain their streaming rights in order to stream their shows on WAAVE, the local Korean streaming platform, but most were essentially forced into Netflix partnerships lest they financially collapse. KTV interaction skyrocketed in the US following *Squid Game* in 2020, and this was a direct response to the demands for more Korean content in the west. Many producers have stated that they view a trend of westernisation following this partnership - which does exactly as the statement says, subordinating previously 'original' local content in a supplication to a foreign market, creating more 'formulaic' content. In his seminal post-colonial critique *Orientalism*, Edward Said details the fetishisation of Asian culture that occurs in the west, continuously demonstrating (in a literary context) the extraction and transformation of local culture, moulded into a context palatable for the west, and disseminated to appease their desire to interact with the Other. This is essentially what occurs here, with Netflix continuously expropriating local markets for a Western Audience. K-dramas are immensely popular in the US, but the very label of K-drama speaks to what Said critiques - the homogenisation of the Other simply by merit of it being the Other. Netflix categorises (in a *formula*, so to speak) Asian content under their own tags and content headings in its interface - "Japanese TV Shows" "Korean TV Shows", etc - while European and American shows are separated by their genres, the Asian market is distanced by country. *Orientalism*, Said says, is a 'systematic discipline of accumulation', and accumulation is what Netflix does more than it disseminates - 60-80% of foreign catalogues are included into the US catalogue, while only 36-44% of the US catalogue is included in most foreign catalogues. The stifling of 'originality' is occurring on an imperialist level as the subalterns - producers of local media - are continuously transformed by the imposition and requirements of Western discourse. By placing all financial reliance on a Western market (Korean TV stations without Netflix subsidisation are known to collapse), they are required to acquiesce to the same aforementioned principles of rationalisation and target market orientations as Western producers are - for a *Western* audience far more than for a Korean audience.

So while the industry is absolutely 'performing' - all of the mentioned actions have been explicitly done with the goal to create profit - the expression of 'originality' is absolutely being overshadowed by formulaicness. Perhaps this transformation hasn't occurred completely yet, but the globalisation of streaming services, the hegemony of rationalisation and profit-oriented formulas, and the increasing riskiness of 'original' productions (either independent films, or non-Western-oriented foreign films) spells a grim portent for the future of the industry. When viewed in the context of the intersection between the streaming service and film/TV industry, the statement appears quite essentialising (there is absolutely 'original' content being produced) - but the sentiment is generally agreeable, that film and TV productions are being consistently subjected to principles that transform them away from art and individual expression, and towards a maximisation of the correct parameters in order to appease the calculated and quantified whims of a (Western) audience.



Page 2

QUESTION TWO: Media production

With reference to ONE of the quotations below, **demonstrate critical understanding of one medium and its production context**, including reference to your own production experience.

Quotations (Choose ONE)

1. "Film-making [or other media] is not about the tiny details. It's about the big picture." *Ed Wood*
2. "Forget the audience, make what you want to see." *Sofia Coppola*
3. "The most personal is the most creative." *Bong Joon-ho*
4. "Nobody knows what you have in you until you've done it, so I just keep pushing those boundaries, and I figure it will all come out in the wash." *Greta Gerwig*

SELECTED QUOTATION

Copy and paste the quotation you have chosen into the space below.

3. "The most personal is the most creative." *Bong Joon-ho*

PLANNING

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ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question Two** in the space below.

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The most personal is the most creative." *Bong Joon-ho*

The filmic medium is, of all artistic mediums, the most subject to *concreteness* - principles of factorisation, production, allocation, and physicality. In sight of the sheer amount of impersonal processes, detached and inexpressive steps in the production of films, it seems daunting to attempt any modes of personal expression in such a routinized production process. Bong Joon-Ho's statement "The most personal is the most creative." applies to my experiences creating my short film, *Masquerade*, insofar as we attempted to bypass the concrete rationalising tendencies of the filmic medium towards personal voice - but we came to realise along the line that while creativity is *conceptualised* and *abstractly formed* through personality *to begin with* - the actual praxis, the actual *realisation* of this in a filmic context, is not at all personal.

My short film, *Masquerade*, was conceived in the attempt to express an abstract, personal concept - that of social anxiety - through the artistic medium of film. When faced with the necessity to squeeze an abstract concept into such a physical medium (one that is, so ostensibly impersonal), creativity through 'personality' seemed off the table. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson* dichotomises between "art that involves through empathy" and "art that distances, provokes reflection", adding that "great reflective art is not frigid - rather, it mediates its emotional power." In the construction of a short film, the former, empathic and *personal* style, relied on far greater creative capacities than I had available - we elected instead to achieve emotional resonance through what Sontag terms the 'reflective' style - emotional mediation. This way, we would be able to imbue personal voicing through a more 'mediated' context - creativity realised not through direct personal expression, but through indirect, impersonal reflection.

The short film follows a socially anxious man who, waking up one day, does not recognise his face anymore, and follows a series of conversations and events as he increasingly dissociates with his own identity in response to those around him. In this case, him ceasing to recognise his face was an allegory for social anxiety - the dissociation with one's own identity and the ceasing to recognise oneself emblematic of the constant changes undergone in an attempt to fit into surroundings. This was already a largely personal endeavour, and we figured the best way to exemplify this effect was through two 'creative' *impersonal* theoretical concepts. The first was what T.S Eliot calls an 'objective correlative' in his literary criticism. This essentially means a situation that corresponds or correlates to the desired emotion we wished to invoke. In this case, rather than directly interrogate the effects of social anxiety (which would have been more *personal*) we attempted a more *impersonal* use of the aforementioned allegory. This not only gave us more narrative license, since we were able to explore a *situation* rather than a *personal trait*, but we frankly deemed it more creatively interesting to examine such a situation - an unexpected event - than a mere character study of somebody with social anxiety. So this would seem to negate the statement in this context - where the creativity is located not in the *personal*-ness of the entire subject-matter, but in the more impersonal way we attempted to convey it through the short film medium.

The second impersonal 'mediated' method of creative conveyal we used was a Brechtian Distancing Effect - drawing on the theatrical theory of Bertholt Brecht, who consistently subjected his plays to *formal disturbances* - breakings in the flow, continuity, and sensibility - in order to distance the audience. We employed these impersonal effects in service of our overall goal of expressing the personal concept of social anxiety. For example, the film is repeatedly interrupted by sudden cuts to the exact same scenes and dialogue playing out on a spotlight stage (the drawing on theatrical theory was not unintentional here) in order to convey the sense that the main character's expressed personality was theatrical in essence, a charade or an act (hence the title *Masquerade*). These cuts are supposed to be deliberately jarring in order to distance the audience - which is a creative, but *impersonal* method of conveying this. Rather than being able to resonate and 'involve' (as Sontag says) themselves empathically, the audience experiences the main character's issue through the *form* of the short film. Another distancing effect was the repeated breaking of continuity - we had the main character constantly switch costumes between shots to match the costumes of the other characters in the films, in order to express not only the volatility of his personality but the vampiric mirroring of other people which he undergoes in his experience with social anxiety. Again, this was an upfront and impersonal, rather than involving, method of creative expression. Thus, with the two aforementioned considerations, we conveyed most of our creative ideas through impersonal methods that 'mediate emotional power' - but this shouldn't distract from the fact that the motivations and overall 'big picture' were largely done in a personal context. The subject matter of the film, social anxiety, was personal, it was just 'creatively' expressed in an impersonal manner. Regrettably, this led to a form vs. content conflict where we essentially attempted to avoid too much personal expression in the script - we viewed, in acknowledgement of our perhaps inadequate writing techniques - that *personal* expression could never creatively occur directly through the script and that any attempts to do so would appear manufactured and ersatz. Our opting for these impersonal formal methods were essentially a refuge from our own inability to personally express through a script, not for any inherent superiority of impersonal creative expression - for all we know, the film could have been more creative had it been more personally involving, adopting the first style that Sontag mentioned instead of the second. But overall, this ostensibly negates the necessity for personal-ness in creative expression, as we found it far more suited to the dictations of the short film medium to opt for an impersonal method of conveyal.

But this talk of the 'short-film' medium is precluded by the fact that we did not incorporate much of the short film medium into our conceptualisation process at all. Far from personal voicing, we drew on much exterior inspiration from other mediums. Feature films like those of Ingmar Bergman and David Lynch, literature like Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*, theatre like August Strindberg's *Dream Play* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; we hardly considered the conventions of the 'short film' medium at all. We can actually attribute this, in a sense, to personal voicing - we opted to disregard conventionality or formulas and went blindly through the conceptualisation process guided precisely and exclusively by personal resonance. Rather than rote studying short film conventions we, for better or for worse, drew on art that resonated personally with what we were trying to creatively express. This isn't to glorify it as avant-garde, but rather to point to the fact that we were in a manner dictate by our personal voicings while navigating the creative processes. The inspiration we drew from the most - Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, was done so purely because it resonated with so much of the thematic expression we endeavoured for. *Persona* deals with many similar themes - expression, self-identity, vampirism, etc. - and it also includes many Brechtian formal disturbances just as we aimed for. *Persona* follows a stage actor who suddenly stops speaking one day, and the nurse that is assigned to take care of her, and follows them as they converse throughout the movie and gradually begin to mimic and transform into the same person. Both our short film and *Persona* involve a sudden change, an inability of self-expression, the mirroring of other people, and both are essentially entirely constructed by conversations. This last point - the prevalence of conversations - defy short film conventions, which tend to typically rely on as little dialogue as possible due to their short runtime. Our 15 minute short film has a 15 page script and revolves entirely around conversing because we felt that was more in-line with what we were aiming for than what short film conventions would dictate to us - a film about the effects of socialising would naturally involve a lot of socialising. So in the sense that we avoided any of the formulaic dictations of conventionality and instead opted for a more personal connection with our inspiration texts - Bong Joon-ho's statement is correct. This is what I expressed in the introduction - while the abstract formation and consideration of influences in the film's conceptualisation are largely based on the dictations of personal expression and resonance, the actual script-writing, storyboarding, and filming processes involve the inclusion of impersonality and distance. Creativity is not necessarily subordinated to personality in *praxis*, but it is in *abstraction*.

This is why I've hitherto focused so much on the pre-production and conceptualisation process - once this is completed, 'personality' essentially goes out the window - that is, of course, if pre-production is complete. We ended up inadvertently testing this assertion by the fact that half our short film was not storyboarded when we entered the production process. What we had in the unstoryboarded scenes was the opportunity for personal expression not dictated by any prior planning from pre-production - but this turned out far worse than the scenes that we *did* plan in pre-production - proving that personal expression and by extension creativity should remain relegated to the pre-production process, and that the production (filming) process can be considered to be *completely impersonal*, merely an assembly line of pre-selected shots. For the half of the film that was rigorously storyboarded, we had a surfeit of creative and meaningful shots, which conveyed personal creative expressions and flowed together in a considered manner - in this sense, the 'personality' of preproduction was absolutely conducive to creativity. This segment of the film came out cohesive, with most of the shots not only being interesting but also largely thematically relevant. In the half of the film that we *didn't* storyboard, meaning that all personality and creativity in the filming process would be occurring *during the filming process*, the end result was far more bland, devoid of personality, and non-creative. Because we were essentially thinking of shots spontaneously and then going to shoot them, we were not considering to such a great extent the relation of these shots to the big picture, nor to each other. This led to far less personally relevant shots, and a far less cohesive sequence - nearly all (unintentional) continuity errors in the film were located in this portion. However, the segment we didn't storyboard was filmed far faster than the segments that we did. This does not necessarily negate Bong Joon-Ho's statement - in fact, it would affirm it in this case - since the portion of filming that was (or rather, *should have been*) devoid of personal involvement was also devoid of opportunities for creative expression - all of which should have been relegated to the pre-production process. I will also extend this to the post-production process, which is extremely compartmentalised and separated - essentially precluding personal expression in the process entirely. I handled color grading, while another group member handled editing, while another handled music, and so on.

Thus, Joon-Ho's statement would suggest that the locus of personal expression is entirely pre-productive, and, furthermore, our experiences would suggest that even pre-production should not be *entirely personal*. Our inclusion of impersonal 'mediating' effects in pre-production is a testament to the possibility of creative expression sans personal involvement. What *should* include personality, however, is the big picture that all these movements are responding to. The conceptualised idea that all of these processes are working towards, the overall of the film - it's effect and resonance with the audience - *should be personal*. While one can creatively emotionally mediate with impersonal techniques, these must be done in service of a personally resonant idea - lest the end result be entirely frigid and devoid of emotion at all.



Page 3

QUESTION THREE: The close reading of media texts

With reference to ONE of the quotations below, **analyse media texts (from any medium)** that you have read closely.

Quotations (Choose ONE)

1. "There is a different kind of vulnerability when a woman is directing." *Jane Campion*
2. "Cinema [or other media] is not only about making people dream. It's about changing things and making people think." *Nadine Labaki*
3. "My job is not to give you all the answers. My job is to ask the questions." *Taylor Sheridan*
4. "Whatever your style or subject matter, in the end, film-making [or other media] is about searching for authenticity – that is what the audience will divine*." *Paul Greengrass*

*divine to discover something by intuition or guessing

SELECTED QUOTATION

Copy and paste the quotation you have chosen into the space below.

1. "There is a different kind of vulnerability when a woman is directing." *Jane Campion*

PLANNING

B *I* U | |

ANSWER

Type your answer to **Question Three** in the space below.

B *I* U | |

"There is a different kind of vulnerability when a woman is directing." *Jane Campion*

Laura Mulvey's seminal feminist essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' investigates the latent modes of female subjugation that occurs in patriarchal Hollywood cinema. Mulvey calls Hollywood cinema the 'unconscious structured as a language', and suggests that it semiotically subordinates women in a discourse of visual pleasure, positing them as sexualised objects of male desire. Campion's statement absolutely resonates with this sentiment - while male directed films are historically incapable of escaping the language of visual pleasure that Mulvey testifies to, female directors, especially those involved in the feminist movement, are able to use the 'destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon' (in Mulvey's words) and open up the film to *vulnerability*. This essay will use feminist, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist theory to investigate the disparate languages of filmic representation when a male is directing, versus when a female is directing. I define vulnerability in this context as the deconstruction (in the Derridan sense) of power binaries and a levelling of the playing field, destroying the precession and valorisation of the male signifier in the male/Other split. This opens up the film to a polysemic reading, meaning it is vulnerable to multiple interpretations of the binary relations rather than an explicit privileging of the male as subject and the female as Other.

We can examine the male discourse of pleasure, the non-vulnerable and privileging semiotics of subjugation, with recourse to a Hollywood film, just as Mulvey does in her essay. For this, we can use the 1950s Zsa Zsa Gabor flick *The Queen of Outer Space*, which tells the story of a group of male astronauts that discover a colony of females on Venus, lead by a despotic, man-hating Queen who aims to destroy earth. The film ends when the Queen is killed, all the Venusian females realise their inherent attraction to men, and fall in love with the astronauts. Using Mulvey's framework, we are able to look past the more blatantly misogynist lines such as "Of course they can't aim [their space laser]. Have you seen women drive?" and reveal the subconscious language of visual pleasure that Mulvey denotes using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. She posits that all female characters are designed to be viewed through the scopophilic, fetishising lens of the audience, who subordinate her as the object of desire; and that all male characters play the role of phallus, or ego-ideal, who the male spectators can identify with as a "screen surrogate" and thus assert masculine dominance over the female in two different ways - her subordination for the spectator's pleasure, and her identificatory subordination as she becomes the object of desire through the male character. We can see this in *Queen of Outer Space* through Zsa Zsa Gabor's character, Talleah, who falls in love with the astronaut captain. Other than the fact that Gabor is always wearing slim-fitting dresses and jewellery, constantly shot in sexualised poses, we can also see the position of ego-ideal or phallus in the Captain, who is: sexually promiscuous (not only does he have a girlfriend on earth, he becomes romantically involved with many of the Venusians including the Queen), handsome, and a representative of the patriarchal Order by virtue of him being a government agent. The male spectator can identify with him as their surrogate, and thus subjugate all the female characters as objects of desire via his gaze. There is absolutely no vulnerability here, the film rigourously asserts the subordination of women to men - there is no room for polyvalence or shifting. This entrenchment of the binary and the privileging of the male signifier is further seen by the very fact that all the women in the film are aliens - they are literally the Other. On top of this, they are aliens who have revolted against the patriarchal order - "I hate men!", the Queen repeatedly exclaims, and thus it is no surprise that the film ends with her being shot to death. The film asserts the privileging of this patriarchal male/female binary from which the women are attempting to escape as the unequivocal truth of gender relation - women must exist in relation to men in this film, and so their assertion of themselves as existing in a context outside the patriarchal order (both through their revolt and through their nature as aliens) must be quickly reconciled - and in fact this is the entire plot of the film. Whatever has occurred, the strength of male dominance must be protected at all costs, and thus when the Queen tries to revolt against men, the men arrive, change the minds of the women ("Women need men!" - Talleah shouts at one point towards the end), and then kill the queen for her transgression. It might also be noted that the Queen, who is the only character to die, is also the only character not able to be included in the binary of visual pleasure, since her face is horribly scarred. To begin with, she is the object of desire since she wears a mask, but once her mask is taken off to reveal her scarred face in a moment of abjection, she is no longer reconcilable and thus must be killed. All of this is done to fully strengthen the male/female, subject/object binary - there is *no* room for movement or, as Campion states, 'vulnerability' in the patriarchal Hollywood context. As Mulvey proves, Hollywood films from Hitchcock to Rossellini are all imbued with this privileging and entrenchment of the gender binary with no vulnerability. In fact, we might wish to disagree with the implication that there can be any vulnerability of the gender binary when a male (which we can consider synecdochally as the entire patriarchal Hollywood order) is directing - the subconscious focus is on affirming the gender binary through the subjugation of women as visually pleasurable objects to the male spectator.

This changes, of course, when you have ideological filmmakers specifically working towards the deconstruction of this binary, towards equality and vulnerability in the semiotic relationship and economy of signs between the male as 'subject/identity' and the female as 'other/difference'. This is embodied in the cinema 2nd wave feminist movement. Mulvey herself made a film that exemplifies this, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, but, for brevity's sake, the best exemplification of this opening up (vulnerability) of the binary is in Chantal Akerman's 1970s French short film, *La Chambre*. Now that there is a female directing, not operating through any institutional discourse and instead with a feminist ideology, this essentialist binary can be made vulnerable (and indeed, the profligate dominance of the spectator can be made vulnerable too). *La Chambre* consists of 15 minutes of a camera rotating around an apartment room on a 360 degree swivel. On the bed, a woman lies in an Olympia-esque pose, **gazing directly at the camera**. Every time the camera rotates to the bed, the woman (played by Akerman herself) is looking directly into the eyes of the spectator. In order to read this, we can bring in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan (whom Mulvey draws on), who describes his theory of the Gaze in his Seminar XI. The gaze is that which perceives the subject - what views them from a position they can never attain (as one can not view themselves from outside their own position), and is thus a *lack*. The gaze is an unconscious, unrecognisable anxiety, which entails the fear that one might be the object of the gaze and the desire to view themselves from that position to complete the lack. The female on the bed represents this in *La Chambre*, where suddenly, the object of perception has become the subject of perception, and vice versa - the spectator is being spectated. Lacan calls that which reveals the existence of the gaze as the **stain**, and this is what the female functions as. It signals to the subject that they are also an object, and creates an unassimilable lack (a trauma) as they are no longer the sole subject able to subjugate the woman as the sole object. *It destroys the privileging of the male as the necessary subject in the binary*. While the spectator of *Queen of Outer Space* could safely view all the Venusian women as objects of desire, and identify with the male characters as surrogates, this is not possible here - there is vulnerability: since there is no male character to identify with and as the spectator treats the woman as an object he is aware that he too is being made an object by her. This is exacerbated by the fact that the camera is located in a stationary point and swivels on the same spot - the stationariness makes the spectator feel more spectated than the woman does. The existence of a female director, in this case, has created the literal vulnerability of the spectator - rendering their incontrovertible existence as subject vulnerable by signalling to them that they can be the object of a female gaze.

We can take a post-structuralist approach to this idea of vulnerability. Jean Baudrillard describes 'ideology' as the privileging of one side of a sign/structure over the other, asserting one part of the binary with more power over its obverse. This is what occurs in the identity/difference binary, the subject/object binary, and most importantly, the male/female binary. There is no inherency to this privileging - rather the ideological constructs of society tend to privilege, concretely, one side over the other. Thus, where this dominance exists virtually untouched in a societal hegemony that is able to disseminate it (like Mulvey's description of the Hollywood system as the 'patriarchal unconscious structured as a language', which constantly asserts through its male directors the necessity of the male privileging), if there is some ability to counter the notion of this privileging as necessary, through the act of *deconstruction*, one can render the binary vulnerable. This vulnerability means that 'man' has no inherent or necessary power over 'woman' in the binary, and the binary is thus vulnerable to multiple meanings. In this context, what is required is the assertion of the female as subject, since she has so long been semiotically relegated to being the object (viz. Mulvey & the Queen of Outer Space). So taking a psychoanalytic and post-structuralist standpoint, because the male as creator of discourse only *affirms* an *already concrete* advantage over the female in the binary, the ability to create vulnerability in this dichotomy is only available to a woman, like Akerman, who asserts herself as subject and creator of discourse (i.e. director). We can disagree that this is a 'different kind of vulnerability', since it is the *only* kind of vulnerability. The rendering of the male as object by the woman only levels the playing field and creates an ambivalence, or vulnerability; the reverse is not true.

How does this apply to a societal context? As Baudrillard and Lacan would both argue, we perceive our society through a symbolic realm, structured by signs, and by destroying and rendering vulnerable the male/female binary, the female subject is opened up to an opportunity to assert her own positions and create discourse. If we remained in a Hollywood position, the real-world perceptions of women would correspond to how they are perceived on screen - objects of pleasure. And, no doubt, the feminist movement has enabled large progress in asserting the female as subject, no longer as the object or the Other of men. The most important part of Akerman's film is her contest to the necessity of the male privilege in the binary, and one that was replicated by many other counter-culture feminist filmmakers (such as Agnes Varda, Vera Chytilova, or Mulvey herself), who in turn inspired Campion's films herself. Campion's assertion that a 'different kind of vulnerability' is created is too lenient - the only way for these filmmakers to render the semiotics of subjugation vulnerable and thus destroy their own discursive subjugation was to assert themselves as subjects and use 'the destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon'. Vulnerability means ambivalence, and ambivalence means the lessening of oppression - by rendering the semiotics of filmic subjugation vulnerable, female directors render the semiotics of societal subjugation vulnerable, and open them up to critique and deconstruction.