

## The Cinematic Apparatus as a Diffraction Apparatus

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses the need for a new methodology to explore feminine visions in cinema, as they have been poorly inscribed in the critical citation system. It proposes the conceptualization of the camera as a diffraction camera, shifting the focus from mirroring and likeness to observing "patterns of difference" and "effects of difference." The article argues that the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus are determined by the dominant ideology and that the concealment of technical methods brings an ideological effect. The article also highlights the need to understand films made by women as not belonging to a normative cinematic system but rather to a feminine subjectivity that reinterprets cinematic means.*

**Keywords:** *diffraction; female gaze; film theory; apparatus theory; cultural studies; gender studies;*

### Introduction

The cinematic apparatus has belonged until recently overwhelmingly to a male gaze, largely due to the high production costs that have made the industry dependent on the interests of producers, but also on meeting the needs of a patriarchal society. The liberalization of the filming process and its democratization through lower production costs as well as policies to encourage the expression of *ec-centric*<sup>2</sup>, marginal voices are leading to a change in practices that affect the whole film process.

According to *Female professionals in European film production study, 2022*, women "represent only 25%" of all directors. Just over a third (34%) of producers are women and just under a third (28%) are screenwriters. The gender gap is most pronounced among cinematographers and film composers, where women make up just 10% of working professionals. Women also account for only 39% of the leading roles in European films in this period<sup>3</sup>.

In Romania, the percentage of female directors is less than 20%<sup>4</sup>, and there are too few women working as cinematographers or sound engineers to even appear in studies.

However, these statistics show a significant increase compared to the previous period. The percentage of films made by female directors has been steadily growing, reaching 19% of

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<sup>2</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. 1990. „Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness". In *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 115-150. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177959>.

<sup>3</sup> Patrizia Simone. 2022. *Female professionals in European film production study, 2022* edition. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://rm.coe.int/female-professionals-in-european-film-production-2022-edition-p-simone/1680a886c5>.

<sup>4</sup> *Study of the emergence of a new generation of european female film directors.* 2017. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <http://femmesdecinema.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Study-of-Female-film-directors.pdf>.

European films in 2017, up from 15% in 2003. However, this growth was mainly driven by an increase in the number of documentary films.<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons, understanding films made by women as minority voices is incomplete in terms of discovering and perpetuating practices. These practices cannot be related to previous tools because in these cases classic cinematic practices are re-interpreted and put to the service of new narratives and ec-centric perspectives. Cinematic tools and styles are determined by the need to expose emotions and realities that translate on an emotional realm rather than on a rational one. They abstract themselves from a normative cinematic system. These tools belong to a feminine subjectivity in interpreting and re-interpreting canonical cinematic means.

Because films made by women have only recently and poorly been inscribed in the critical citation system, the earliest examples have been lost from public attention over time and many of the stylistic tools of female expression have not been perpetuated by the inscription of a desirable or reproducible "canon".

The need for a new methodology that explores feminine visions in cinema stems from the need to fill a gap in film studies, especially in Romanian film studies, where the feminist critical perspective is underrepresented.

Female creations are often de-contextualized by male critics<sup>6</sup>, drawn from a female history or tradition, and are subject to constant comparison with male norms of expression that do not necessarily fit the reading and interpretation system envisioned by the female creators.

This article starts from this current reality and proposes the conceptualization of the camera as a diffraction camera. Such a conceptual change shifts the focus from mirroring and likeness, to observing "patterns of difference" and "effects of difference"<sup>7</sup>. The analysis can be extended to the entire cinematic apparatus, not only in the practice of using the camera in the process of filming (framing, lighting, camera movement, and angle), but encompassing all stages of production and distribution of a film product.

## 1. The cinematographic apparatus as an ideological apparatus

In the context described the first question that arises is whether the cinematic apparatus is sensitive to gender conditioning.

The cinematographic apparatus was discussed by Jean Louis Baudry in his article "Ideological-effects-of-the-basic-cinematographic-apparatus". In his argument Baudry starts from the question of the technical nature of optical instruments - their attachment to scientific practice, and the extent to which this nature ensures their neutrality or, on the contrary, conceals

<sup>5</sup> Patrizia Simone. 2019. *Female Directors in European Cinema, Key Figures*. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://rm.coe.int/female-directors-in-european-cinema-key-figures-2019/16809842b9>.

<sup>6</sup> The 2019 study by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University shows that when reviewing films directed by women, female critics are much more likely than male critics to mention female directors' names in their reviews. 31% of female critics but only 16% of male critics mention female directors' names in their reviews.

While female critics are almost equally likely to mention positively the filmographies of female and male directors, male critics are more likely to mention positively the filmographies of male than female directors.

[https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019\\_Thumbs\\_Down\\_Report.pdf](https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_Thumbs_Down_Report.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> In the essay "The Promises of Monsters" Donna Haraway takes Trinh Minh-ha's term "*inappropriate/d others*" and develops from it the feminist allegory of a world formed by diffraction in which it does not produce *a same* by dislocation as reflection and refraction do but becomes a mapping of interference, not replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction model does not map where differences occur, but rather maps where *the effects of differences* occur.

their use for the production of ideological products, but also the ideological effects caused by them.

Between "objective reality" and the camera (the recording device), and between recording and projection are the processes whose result is the finished product. The complementary processes of cutting (the frames chosen to be filmed) and editing (the editing of the filmed material) - differ fundamentally in terms of the material they operate on - script (language) and image. Between the script and the image there is a mutation of signifying material, a translation between text and image. Language is transformed into image (filmed material) by the camera (film camera) which is then transformed into a finished product by editing.

Between the finished product and its consumption is another operation, that of projection, in which the projector and screen recover the light lost in the filming process and transforms a succession of separate images into the movement of "objective reality".

Cinema is a process of transformation, and Baudry raises the question: to what extent is this process obvious? Does the consumption of the cinematic product bring a knowledge effect or does the fact that this process is hidden carry with it an ideological value?

His argument shows that to the extent that tools produce specific ideological effects, and to the extent that these are determined by the dominant ideology, the concealment of technical methods will bring with it an ideological effect.

One criteria discussed by Baudry in his analysis of the ideologizing effects of the cinematic apparatus is based on the interpretation of the screen as a mirror - thus following the concepts of *specularization* (mirroring) and *double identification*.

The projection of films in a cinema where the spectator is captive and can only look forward reproduces the mirror stage of lacanian theory in which there is an identification with the image before having an apparatus for understanding it.

Here Baudry discusses the screen as a mirror of a reality that is reflected from behind the viewer in the cinema onto the screen but is in fact nothing more than a series of rays of light on a surface.

In addition to the resemblance to the mise-en-scene of Plato's cave myth, here Baudry brings up the lacanian concept of the mirror stage, the process of identification with the image. He makes this analogy considering two conditions he considers satisfied: low mobility and centering on the visual function. Lacan describes the formation of the Ego as a result of identification with the reflected image. A process of alienation and creation of the Imaginary also takes place.

The viewer identifies with the film on two levels: once with the characters on the screen, but also with the "transcendental subject whose place is occupied by the camera"<sup>8</sup>. The spectator identifies with the something/someone who produces the performance they are watching, rather than with what is represented.

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, Alan Williams. 1974. „Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus”. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2. (Winter, 1974-1975), p. 44. Published by: University of California Press. Retrieved in May 3, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211632>.

Back to the initial question: can the consumption of the cinema product bring about a knowledge effect or is this process hidden, and if it is hidden then does it carry with it an ideological value?

The answer demonstrated by Baudry is that the cinematic apparatus does not produce a result indifferent to the dominant<sup>9</sup> ideology, which is part of its nature and has a strong influence on the viewer.

## 2. Gaze vs. Vision

Can the unveiling of the mechanism bring with it the effect of knowledge, as a denunciation of ideology?

The concept of the "Gaze", that look of the "transcendental subject whose place is occupied by the camera"<sup>10</sup> discussed by Jean Louis Baudry, is analyzed by Laura Mulvey in the essay "Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema" published in *Screen magazine* in 1975, precisely in an attempt to bring more insight into understanding the mechanisms that conspire to construct this predominant male gaze. This essay has become the starting point for most analyses of film from a feminist perspective and is fundamental to understanding filmmaking from a female perspective.

Laura Mulvey places Freud's writings on fetishism at the heart of understanding female body image and gender performativity in a culture dominated by the male perspective.

Paraphrasing Freud, Mulvey notes that women may seem to be the subjects of an endless parade of pornographic fantasies, jokes, daydreams and so on, but fundamentally most male fantasy is a closed-loop dialogue with itself. Speaking of Medusa's head, Freud states that far from being a woman, even a monstrous one, Medusa is the sign of a male castration anxiety. Mulvey concludes that Freud's analysis of the male unconscious is crucial to any understanding of the myriad ways in which the female form has been used as a mold into which meanings have been cast by a male-dominated culture.<sup>11</sup> Scopophilia is associated by Freud with the objectification of other people, which the subject turns into objects of a "controlling and curious gaze."<sup>12</sup>

Theorist Donna Haraway speaks of "the gaze" as a conquering look from nowhere<sup>13</sup> : *"This is the gaze that hierarchizes marked bodies, that causes the unmarked category to claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation"*<sup>14</sup> .

This look belongs to the white male, the unmarked position, and signifies "objectivity". In contrast to this superiorly situated *objectivity*, Haraway desires a doctrine of *embodied objectivity*

<sup>9</sup> The concept of **ideological** is used here with the meaning attributed by L. Althusser "ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Louis Althusser. 1970. „"Lenin and Philosophy" and Other Essays" - *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Monthly Review Press.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. UK, Palgrave Macmillan. p. 11 (republication of the article "Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema" published in *Screen magazine* in 1975).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p.16.

<sup>13</sup> in the original "used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere" - Donna J. Haraway. 1990. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, Routledge, p.188.

<sup>14</sup> Donna J. Haraway. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble Making Kin in the Chtulucene*. Durham - London, Duke University Press, p. 580.

that accommodates critical and paradoxical feminist scientific projects. Fixed, masculine objectivity is opposed by feminist objectivity, which for Donna Haraway simply means '*situated knowledges*'.

By assuming the embodied nature of all vision, the sensory system of looking is reclaimed, which has been used to signify a leap from the marked body: "vision is always a matter of the power of seeing - and perhaps of the violence implicit in our viewing practices"<sup>15</sup>. Only by acknowledging the power that comes from the privileged position of the one who has the right to look, does the possibility arise to open conversations about power, conversations that lead to contestable and contested knowledge rather than fixed and categorical knowledge.

From this posture of "situated knowledge" stems the new aesthetic and narrative search, which is not positioned as opposed to the masculine, but as a creative matrix based on experiential and assumed knowledge, detached from a rational, traditional knowledge. A creative matrix coming from an ex-centric position.

### 3. The cinematographic camera as diffraction apparatus

Diffraction, a term borrowed from quantum physics and used in feminist research by Donna Haraway, was later taken up in artistic practice and research by Karen Barad. In academic research and teaching strategies it is used by Iris van der Tuin as "diffractive reading".

Diffraction is used in physics to describe the behaviour of waves. As a quantum phenomenon, diffraction does not follow the rules of classical physics. In modern physics, the double slit experiment, first performed by Thomas Young in 1801, demonstrates the fundamentally probabilistic nature of quantum mechanical phenomena. In this experiment it was shown that light and matter can exhibit the characteristics of both waves and classically defined particles. The two-slit experiment demonstrates the fundamental limitation of the observer's ability to predict experimental results, but also demonstrates that the nature of anything cannot be determined without regard to the observing apparatus; the conclusion being that the apparatus participates in the nature of the thing observed.

In the same way, film, documentary, or fiction, is not a transparent and un-distorting lens that passively observes the world, which can be objectively mirrored. It requires an approach that considers how the observing apparatus (the camera) is entangled with the observer(s) and what is being observed. The emphasis is thus on this transition from the paradigms of classical physics to the indeterminacy principle of quantum physics.

Diffraction, as a metaphor for visualizing, is used by Haraway and Barad as opposed to reflection. Diffraction shifts the focus from mirroring and likeness to observing "*patterns of difference*" as Barad puts it and "*the effects of difference*"<sup>16</sup>.

Such a turn makes the shift from theoretical reflection on modes of representation to registering an interest in how cinematic practices increasingly come to matter.

<sup>15</sup> Donna J. Haraway .1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 575-599. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>.

<sup>16</sup>Karen Barad. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham-London> Duke University Press, p. 93.

What I propose is a theoretical practice to find patterns of differences that distinguish films made from *ec-centric* perspectives and the impact they have on other film products, how they influence general cinematic expression, and their effects on other disciplines such as pedagogy or sociology.

#### 4. Conclusions

If we accept there is a feminine trend that is gradually beginning to emerge in terms of style and aesthetic research, it is important for films directed by women to exist in a system of citations referencing other films directed by women, and not be reduced to comparisons with "great authors"; only in this way can the existence of a vision be tested and verified. From this dialogue, conclusions could be drawn regarding the aesthetics and stylistics of female cinema.

By outlining the above reference points, I argue for the need to organize a framework that opens from practice to theory for analysis and practice in women's filmmaking. Such an approach is especially important in the context of a historical moment, a year in which all the major film festivals have named women's films as winners.

This context can be provided by replacing in the analysis the camera as an ideological apparatus (Baudry, Jean-Louis, 1975)-which claims to constitute through reflection a fixed reality, with the conceptualization of the camera as a diffraction apparatus (Calderón-Sandoval, Orianna Sánchez Espinosa, Adelina, 2020) namely technologies that co-produce and record the processes by which filmmakers (human entities) and the camera (non-human entities) enter into intra-action (Barad, Karen, 2007) with other parts of the world, the filmed subjects as well as the viewers or screens (human and non-human elements). A diffraction apparatus, through its nature, establishes as given the principle of indeterminacy. Drawing boundaries and cuing inside phenomena is to make one part of the world intelligible to another part of the world in specific ways. A diffraction apparatus emphasizes one aspect over another, the same as the camera, and inevitably frames only part of what is in front of it. "The separation between subject/observer and object/observed is replaced by the understanding that both are permanently entangled."<sup>17</sup>

Diffraction does not determine subject or object boundaries as self-contained, "but rather investigates the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce "objects" and "subjects and other differences from, and in terms of, a changing relationality"<sup>18</sup>. Rather than 'inter-actions', Barad speaks of 'intra-actions' to emphasize that objects, processes and observing agents do not just co-exist in an inter-action relationship with each other. They are co-produced through intra-action. In other words, they mutually constitute themselves into phenomena. In this sense, apparatuses "are not passive instruments of observation. On the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena"<sup>19</sup>, they acquire agency. Using this method of analysis, I

<sup>17</sup> Orianna Calderón-Sandoval, Adelina Sánchez Espinosa. 2021. "A Diffractive Analysis of Documentary Film No existimos: Making Visible the Invisible with an Eccentric Technology of Gender", *Sociology and Technoscience*, vol. 11 no. 1, pp. 1-19. Retrieved in April 25, 2023, from <https://uvadoc.uva.es/handle/10324/48517>.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Barad . 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham-London. Duke University Press. p. 93

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p.199

think one can discuss films made by women as diffraction apparatuses that "*enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering*"<sup>20</sup> or become "*world that world worlds*"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p.148

<sup>21</sup> I refer here to an allegorical world in the sense discussed by Donna Haraway above in proposing diffraction as means of creating worlds that map the interferences and *effects of differences*.

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