

Still Life: An Interview with Laura Mulvey

MARIA H LOH

Thinking about Laura Mulvey's new book, *Death 24x a Second*, I am reminded of Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004). There is a wonderful scene at the centre of this film where the director, playing himself, speaks at a conference on European Literary Encounters on the subject of text and image in cinema. In explaining the way subjectivity is crafted between characters within a film and between the film and its viewer, Godard holds up two photographs of Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell, black and white film stills from Howard Hawks' classic *His Girl Friday* (1940). Shuffling the one image over the other in front of the camera, he explains 'shot', 'counter-shot', 'shot', 'counter-shot'. Towards the end of the conference, one of the participants in the audience asks the director whether digital cameras will save cinema, to which Godard does not respond. The essence or rather the body and heart of cinema lies, so it seems, in the stilled image set in motion before the spectator's gaze rather than in the transformation of movement into millions of disembodied pixels that can be loaded onto the screen. Like Godard's exercise, Mulvey's book conveys the specificity of cinema's affective powers and material presence. The theoretical crux of the argument circles around the doubled sense of mortality and immortality that is invoked by and in cinema. These themes are also developed through Mulvey's careful visual analysis of works by Alfred Hitchcock, Roberto Rossellini, and Abbas Kiarostami as well as Douglas Sirk, Jean-Luc Godard, and Michael Powell, among others. Questioning the so-called 'death of cinema' in the age of video and digital technologies, Mulvey reveals how the prognostic may have been premature and the causes misidentified. Whereas previous authors have looked upon contemporary culture as one based on televisual ubiquity and excessive speed, or on the convergence of new media, Mulvey reminds us to look again at old films, but in new ways. In fact, new technologies, she argues, provide us with the very means to better grasp the aesthetic specificity of pre-digital cinema. To pause a frame on screen not only engenders a 'technological

canny', but also a 'technological curiosity', and curiosity is the drive that can build a new kind of interactive spectatorship. I had occasion to speak with Mulvey on her new book, on the resistance and resilience of cinema, and on one's sense of time in the duration of a film and on our perception of film with the passage of time.

ML: *One of the things that I found engaging about your book was that it did not look upon new technologies as part of a macho aesthetics of speed and fragmentation. Instead, focusing upon the potentiality of new formats, such as the DVD, you present us with a sustained look at film and in doing so you give film an embodied presence, a new materiality derived precisely from new possibilities. This is an especially refreshing approach at a time when people are proclaiming the death of cinema and the demise of film spectatorship.*

LM: That was my starting point. I wanted to resist the idea of the death of cinema, but at the same time I did not want to be unrealistic about how it would be affected by the arrival of new technologies. This goes back to the mid-1990s. The emotional, even sentimental, date of the centenary of cinema, 1995, combined with a practical, material change as old movies were released on a digital format in 1997. This seemed to me to suggest a point of transition, a particular moment, in which a dialectical relationship between the old and the new could develop. A new, specifically digital aesthetic will doubtless develop out of its own specificity, however I was interested in using the digital to look backwards in time, to the celluloid cinema as refracted through new technologies. The ability to slow down and stop old films could create a new way of seeing and then thinking about the image. In my book, I concentrate very much on this conjuncture and I don't really discuss the importance of video as a pre-figuration of this ability to manipulate the image. A lot of video art had been using play with time, but I wanted to signal something very specific about a particular moment of time.

ML: *You do mention Douglas Gordon's 24-Hour Psycho in Chapter 5.*

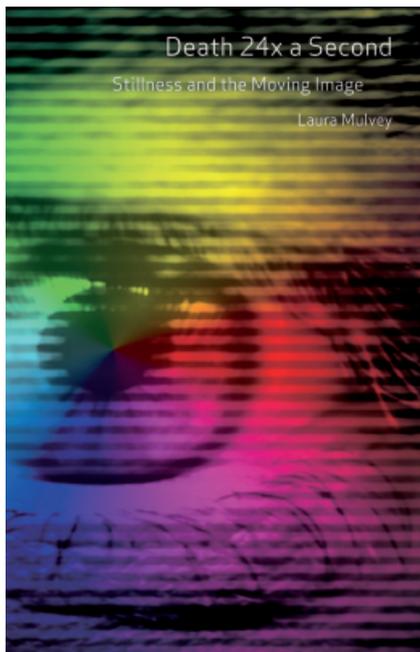
LM: Yes, and *24-Hour Psycho* certainly draws attention to the graphic nature of Hitchcock's cinema, its emphasis on the design of each frame. There is a resistance to casual movement in Hitchcock's films, born out by his preference for studio shooting over location. And of course, as I argued in that chapter (and the book more generally), behind the movement of cinema is the stillness of the individual frame and its resonance of death, so crucial to Hitchcock's thematic preoccupations. But once I began to be interested in the presence of stillness in the moving image, this basic paradox (in many ways an obvious one) seemed to emerge, more strongly than I had imagined, as an aesthetic concern of the cinema quite generally. So once one could still the image arbitrarily, something that was already there became infinitely more visible. Of course, these themes were already there, consciously, in the avant-garde tradition, but I came to see the tension between movement and stillness more clearly across the history of cinema. And this basic tension led to others . . .

ML: *One of the things that you point out is that with DVDs, you have all these extra-diegetic add-ons such as commentaries, interviews, documentaries, picture galleries, etc., which enable a larger number of spectators to gain access to a critical view on the film. This effectively transforms anyone who has access to the DVD into a cinephile, which creates a new kind of educated spectatorship.*

LM: It gives cinephilia more democratic possibilities. People who are interested in the background to a particular style or production circumstances can now find that information on new releases with the director's or other commentaries. And many old films now come out with different add-ons, including critics' comments.

ML: *Have you had this opportunity?*

LM: For the bfi I did a commentary on Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954)



and for Criterion I did Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). The commentary can only come into its own once the viewer knows the film quite well, but then the critical voice can come in and provide some historical background as well.

ML: *This gives a different type of visual pleasure, which is about knowledge gained through repeated viewing rather than about the story or the aesthetic quality of the image.*

LM: One can also see this as part of the ageing of cinema. People are more prepared to see films as cultural objects, rather than just as a means of mass entertainment. Time's passing affects the way commercial movies of the past are now seen. In the 1960s, when I first watched Hollywood movies as a cinephile, following the lead of the French critics of the *Cahiers du cinema*, one had to catch the movies by special, interesting directors in ordinary commercial distribution sectors, very often at the end of their commercial life. By now, these directors (who were not valued or widely known at the time) have a cultural context and have been completely transformed into the iconic figures of the history of cinema. Passing of time as well as the arrival of new technologies affects cinema a lot. Now its history seems defined and much shorter than one might have thought. That is, the moving image came into existence in 1895, then with the gradual arrival of new televisual and video technologies and the DVD, the period in which celluloid

film was supreme is actually quite short. So the movies made over an 80-year period have something very special about them.

ML: *Celluloid does have a presence that differs from video and digital images. It was very much a specialist's occupation and films were quite fragile and vulnerable to time. Video and digital, however, have expanded the means of production, in a sense. That is, there is also now a different system of production in which anyone with a computer can now make a movie and anyone on the Internet can now distribute a film.*

LM: New technologies have democratised filmmaking in the same way that they have democratised cinephilia, but one must also remember that there has always been a tradition of personal cinema: 16 mm filmmaking was a pre-figuration of new digital possibilities, but new technologies have infinitely simplified and personalised production and, as you say now, the new distribution mechanisms are truly revolutionary.

ML: *This is very true about 16 mm and I hadn't thought about that. In your book, you demonstrate a careful approach towards the new and the old and in the development of a history of new viewing practices. I like the subtlety of your argument because it doesn't map out a unidirectional history for film in which one technology surpasses another, but one that is more reflective.*

LM: My real point of interest is in the way the new affected the old. There is also a political rhetoric. I wanted to emphasise the importance of going back in time to try to keep alive the progressive, utopian aspects of the cinema that existed throughout the twentieth century. Going back to the cinema through the aesthetic of stillness allows thought about the image itself to emerge in the first instance, then the presence of the image in time and then about the wider context, historical or aesthetic, in which it exists.

ML: *Temporality and the embodied experience of film is a theme that you develop at length in your book.*

LM: There is a long tradition of textual analysis in film theory and criticism in which the critic segments and fragments a

movie to extract a much fuller meaning. I was trying to go beyond the question of meaning, although it's still there, into the question of how cinema relates to temporality, both in terms of the instant and the duration that always encloses it. Although one can find the individual frame and examine it as though it were a still photograph, and apply the aesthetics of the still photograph, it is always incorporated back into the flow of the shot, which can then be incorporated back into the wider fiction of the movie in general. There are different levels of time in the cinema.

ML: *Stillness brings the viewer back to the historical moment when the filmic image was made.*

LM: The process of stopping and stilling gives the spectator the space for thought about time. That is, it's historical and leads out to the contextual moment in which the movie was made; it's indexical, preserving the moment of registration; but it also includes duration as the single frame mutates into the flow of the single shot. And then, superimposed, the time of fiction provides a dimension of its own, which disappears under the presence of the index, and the duration of film, but continually re-asserts itself.

ML: *As with photography, which also has an important role in your book (especially in Chapter 3).*

LM: Yes, but unlike photography the indexical instant is always incorporated back into the continuum, so that there is an oscillation between different perceptions of time. Of course, these temporal relations have always been there but they are now more available for contemplation. Film shares the indexicality of the photograph but its instant always leads to the forward flow of time, to the visualisation of the passage of time itself. From this perspective, celluloid has a poignancy that is not shared by other media.

Maria H Loh is a Lecturer in History of Art at University College London

Death 24x a Second. Stillness and the Moving Image by Laura Mulvey is published by Reaktion Books, London 2006 (distributed in the US by University of Chicago Press) 216 pp. 37 halftones. £14.95 \$24.95. ISBN 1861892632