

Vibeke Pedersen:

Male and Female Spectator Positions in the Big Sleep (Hawks 1946)

In her article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema"¹ Laura Mulvey discusses how classical Hollywood cinema is structured to satisfy a male spectator by allowing for identification with a powerful hero, and offering a gaze at the women as an object. One of the points of Mulvey's article is that the Hollywood Cinema offers the male spectator two avenues of escape from the castration anxiety, either voyeurism – that is investigation or punishment of the guilty object – or fetishism – disavowal of castration.

Anette Kuhn maintains in her article: "The Big Sleep – a disturbance in the sphere of sexuality"² that this dual attitude towards women, the rejection of the female as dangerous and morally inferior or the acceptance of the femaleness that can be subjected to male standards, is the main theme of *The Big Sleep*.

I am interested in *The Big Sleep* as an object of analysis for several reasons. First of all I have been wondering why not only men, but also women are still very fascinated by the film. It clearly has something to offer women as well as men, and therefore it can be seen as an illustration of Mulvey's theory as well as a challenge to it. It certainly demonstrates the necessity of a discussion of female spectatorship – a discussion that was not yet the purpose of Mulvey's article.³

Secondly, the interesting thing about Film Noir in general is that the male/female dichotomy is not static, but a process. Women have some subjectivity, which also is represented in the visual style, as pointed out by Janet Place:

The strength of these women is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting. They are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground, or pulling focus to them in the background. They control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero's gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move.⁴

According to Mulvey, in the classical Hollywood cinema, the man is represented as a figure in a landscape, while the woman is an icon, put up as a spectacle for the male gaze.

But it is already obvious from the Place quotation, that women in Film Noir are not only represented as passive icons, but that the representation is more ambiguous.

Anette Kuhn says that *The Big Sleep* is about the riddle of the feminine, and that this is the riddle the detective has to solve. While in the beginning both women are shown as degenerated and enigmatic, a differentiation soon takes place. Carmen represents the menacing aspect of female sexuality, while Vivian represents the femaleness to be integrated into the male morality. Carmen (the name is probably not a coincidence – as a symbol of the destructive woman) is associated with the imbalance, which is the conflict of



the film: decadence, homosexuality, narcotics, pornography, that threatens the patriarchal order, the heterosexuality. Psychoanalytically speaking, she does not accept the patriarchal order, she is childish, sucks her thumb, and refuses to talk. Carmen cannot be recuperated for the symbolic order, she is literally being kicked out of the narrative (in the first script she was to be murdered, but this was changed for censorship reasons).

On the other hand Vivian can be recuperated into the symbolic order. From the beginning she has the same facility with language as Marlowe, in the end she is integrated in the patriarchal order as a sexual object. The normal heterosexuality is established in the end, but at the cost of the subjectivity of Vivian.

In the following I will analyze some scenes to see how subjectivity is represented – and especially how Vivian develops from subject into object, and how the women are subjected to fetishistic and voyeuristic mechanisms.

The relationship between women and men in *The Big Sleep* is one of competition and rivalry. Marlowe is all through the film involved in competitive dialogues with women and men. Together with coolness and intelligence, verbal smartness is highly valued. But in the relationships with women also a fight about the gaze takes place, i.e. about who is the visual subject.

In the first scene Marlowe is introduced as the visual and narrative subject. From Marlowe's p.o.v. we see his shadow on the entrance to the Sternwood house,

and we hear his voice presenting himself before we even see him (on the contrary we see Carmen before we know who she is). Marlowe is established as the figure of identification for the spectator and the mask behind which the narrator hides.⁵

But the objectivization of the women is not as easily established, as the placing of Marlowe as the main character. In the two scenes where Marlowe is introduced to Carmen and Vivian respectively, it is already hinted in the visual representation how the split between the two women is going to be set up, and how their relationship to Marlowe is going to develop. Both women try to establish themselves as visual subjects, to authorize a gaze⁶, and to turn Marlowe into an object.

Carmen is introduced coming down the stairs, the classic locus for the exhibition of women. Marlowe looks at Carmen's legs, and Carmen verbally comments on Marlowe's looks: "You are not very tall, are you?" – "Not bad looking, but you probably know?" Both start out with a sexual evaluation of the other – Marlowe visually, and Carmen verbally. But it is notable that none of them is represented as sexual objects for the spectator. Marlowe's gaze at Carmen's legs is not shown to us, we only see that he looks, in other words the conventional close up of a fragmented body is not there.⁷ Following Carmen's remark is a long shot of Marlowe looking up and down himself. That is, he is not represented as a passive object of Carmen's gaze. Likewise Marlowe's surprised look at

Carmen, as she is trying "to sit on his lap, while standing up", is not followed by a close up of her face. Carmen is representing herself as a sexual object, but an active one, by the way she dresses, speaks and gazes. It is characteristic for this scene, however, that not only is Carmen unable to turn Marlowe into an object for her gaze, but neither does Marlowe accept Carmen as a desirable sexual object. Marlowe's gaze at Carmen is almost from the beginning the voyeuristic gaze of the detective, the devaluating, punishing gaze.

On the other hand there is, although rather discretely, a fetishistic gaze at Vivian in the first scene between them, but still the investigating gaze of the detective is the dominating one. Also Vivian is commenting jokingly, but rather rudely, on the looks of Marlowe, and as there was almost no dialogue between Carmen and Marlowe, Vivian and Marlowe are at once involved in a verbal ping pong. The visual representation of the two is rather identical, but there are some close ups of Vivian that hint to something besides the detective's investigative gaze, anyway we do not see Marlowe in similar close ups. Also one of the compositions, where the two are standing with Vivian's impressive double bed between them, hints at the future erotic attraction. Vivian is not representing herself as an aggressive erotic object like Carmen, on the contrary she is represented like a phallic woman in the way she speaks and dresses in trousers and priest like dress.

The visual representation of Carmen does not change during the film. She is the childwoman, with whom one can hardly communicate verbally. As said before she represents all the vices, that Marlowe has set out to fight. She does not control anything and on the other hand her body is in Marlowe's control, as he carries it and almost throws it around.

On the other hand the visual representation of Vivian changes a lot during the film. Even though it is difficult for Vivian to establish herself as a visual subject, in the beginning she is in control of herself and the room, and does not function as a passive object for Marlowe's gaze. The representation of Vivian here is very much like the one Janet Place describes for the women of film noir as quoted. But when Vivian has given in to Marlowe, and he has guessed her secret, she loses her control of the room, and is left passive with nothing to do. Maybe the final dialogue is funny, but it is also an index that she has given up her own subjectivity: "You have forgotten one thing – me! – What's wrong with you? – Nothing you can't fix!"

In the scene in the restaurant, where Vivian has made a date with Marlowe to pay him off the case, she is very brusquely deprived of her control of the situation, the room and herself. In the beginning she is controlling the situation by arriving late, having reserved the table, ordering her own drink and flirting violently with Marlowe. She is in control, and female spectators will probably identify with her and feel her power. But it is remarkable, that she does not authorize the gaze. Marlowe still holds the gaze. The frame shifts between a two shot from the front and one from his point of view. Even though she flirts with him, we do not see her gaze at him, he is still the one who is looking at her with his investigating gaze. The mood of the scene changes suddenly as he starts to express his doubt in her motives. She then loses her self-confidence, the camera draws back and becomes more distanced. If female spectators had identified with Vivian, they are abruptly torn out of this identification. Marlowe does not let himself be seduced, and Vivian loses her sexual attraction and her power.

In the scene in Eddie Mars' house it is explicitly demonstrated, that Marlowe wants to control the gaze and the room, and wants to have Vivian as his loved object. Even though his hands are tied behind his back, he controls the situation, orders Vivian to move

a lamp, that blinds him, and figures out a plan to escape. He orders Vivian to cut the rope, twice expressing his doubt whether she is able to do so without hurting herself or him with the knife. Later, after she has helped him escape, and they are driving away in the car, he praises her with the words: You looked awfully good. The case was actually that Vivian *looked* good – in the active sense of the word. But he turns it around so that she becomes the object of his gaze. In the following love scene her face is obviously fetishized, in a beautiful close up in soft focus. Even though their feeling is mutual, we are not offered a similar close up of Marlowe's face. In the final scene Vivian is reduced to Marlowe's passive assistant: She is told to keep quiet and watch the backdoor, while Marlowe does the thinking, the talking and the shooting.

Both women have been turned into objects, and have been deprived of their subjectivity. Carmen has been eliminated from, and Vivian has been integrated into the patriarchal order, which has been reestablished by the end of the film.

While the male spectator is offered a rather one dimensional spectator position in the classical Hollywood cinema, Mary Ann Doane says in her article: "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the female spectator"⁸ that the female spectator has several options: Either a narcissistic or a masochistic identification with the offered image (relating to Mulvey's object position and fetishistic and voyeuristic gazes), or a transvestitic identification with the male hero, or the position, which Doane proposes as a strategy: The masquerade. Doane maintains that it is necessary for the female spectator to create a distance to the representation of the female in order to be able to see it as a cultural construction.

I think that women's pleasure in *The Big Sleep* comes from a mixture of all four kinds of spectator positions.

I think that women as well as men identify with Marlowe's project, but the problem for women is, that they then have to accept the masochistic and narcissistic identification as well, accept the p.o.v. of Marlowe and the film, that women either have to give in to male standards or disappear. Of course there is a gratification in this identification with Vivian as an object: As Marlowe's woman she is loved and protected by a powerful man, who is at the same time kind and competent. As the analysis has shown, the subjection of women is not presented as a fact in *The Big Sleep*, but as a process. This means that there are strong women to identify with. As the analysis also has shown, however, this identification is rather unstable and unsatisfactory (e.g. in the scene in the restaurant).

But as Doane has pointed out there is also the possibility of looking at the film as a play, and analyzing the represented construction of masculinity and femininity and it may be that *The Big Sleep* with all its ambiguity, it's playing with words and gazes, very much invites to this kind of pleasurable reading.

Notes

1. Screen 16/3 1975
2. Wide Angle IV/3 1980
3. Mulvey has later discussed female spectatorship in "On *Duel in the Sun*: Afterthoughts on Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." Framework 15-17 1981
4. Janet Place: "Women in film noir". In: Women in Film Noir. ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London 1978
5. Nick Browne, *The Rhetoric of Filmic Narration*. USA 1976
6. Browne op.cit.
7. Mulvey op.cit.
8. Screen 23/3-4 1982