Special section title:

REGARDING THE PLEASURE OF OTHERS

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Introduction: Pleasure? Again?

Abstract

This special section is intended to take forward a sympathetic reconceptualization of the pleasures of popular film and related forms like soap opera and pornography. The five articles contained in the special section vary in length and scope, and are followed by a response piece from a senior scholar. We hope that the dialogic mix of case studies and theoretical or survey approaches brings a liveliness to the treatment of pleasure, and indeed that it encapsulates our sense that pleasure retains a conceptual elusiveness, no matter how often discussed (or experienced). We acknowledge the elusiveness in this introduction, which we have cast in the form of a dialogue to acknowledge our individual motivations and to indicate the different academic and cultural contexts in which we, the two editors, work. We jointly describe the content of the articles at the end of the dialogue.

Author bios

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O'Leary: 'Destruction of pleasure is a radical weapon.' So, famously, says Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', one of the most influential essays in the history of cinema studies (Mulvey, 1992 [1975]: 712). I wanted to begin with Mulvey because her destruction of pleasure was articulated from a position of cinephilia, as she herself has admitted (Mulvey 2009, 2015). The purpose of Mulvey's essay (and it's an essay essential to who I am as a scholar) was to critique classical Hollywood cinema, and the apparatus of dominant cinema as such, from a feminist perspective. But it is the cinephile rather than the political legacy that presides, I think, in the afterlife of the 'Visual Pleasure' essay. After Mulvey, one of the key ways to be(come) an informed cinephile has been to (seem to) refuse pleasure. This is why so much celebratory current writing is on slow or 'feel-bad' cinema (Lübecker 2015), or why that sadist schoolmaster Michael Haneke is spoken of as the world's best living filmmaker. It's a disavowal of course: there's always cultural capital – satisfaction in one's own status as an arbiter of taste – in refusing the 'obvious' pleasures of the spectacular, the pretty or the consolatory. One way or another, pleasure is still understood as a means by which dubious ideologies are imparted, by which inequality is naturalized, and by which the individual is interpellated as an oppressed subject. As Matilde Mroz puts it (channelling Steven Shaviro), 'film theory continues to equate passion, fascination and enjoyment with mystification' (Mroz 2012: 27). This haughty consensus has often been contested, of course, but the price of pleasure is eternal vigilance against the paternalists and moralists.

Ghosh: Would it be overstating to suggest that the question of pleasure has been central to feminist cultural and film studies? Even, that it is feminist cultural studies that brought the issue of pleasure to the fore? I refer not only to Mulvey's pleasure-denying stance, but also to the more affirmative accounts of Jackie Stacey (1987, 1994) or Ien Ang (1985). The problem, of course, is that the pleasure women derive from popular forms (magazines, soap operas, Hollywood cinema) has often been seen not as affirmative *in itself*, but as consolatory or compensatory in the face of an unsatisfactory social world. And since you have flagged Mulvey's crucial essay, I must add here that her thesis seemed almost tailor-made for a feminist engagement with the Indian mainstream film (in Hindi and a host of regional languages) with its pleasure-saturated spectacle, narrative formulae, overdetermined resolutions, and what Mulvey would call the privileging of the male gaze. And we embraced Mulvey with a passion! A turning point, I would suggest, came with the work of Shohini Ghosh (1999) – interestingly, in the context of censorship debates – in which she argues the need to consider women as pleasure-taking subjects and not merely the oppressed pleasure-giving objects of the more censorial feminist imagination. She quotes Robert Stam (1989) in cautioning that we are in danger of 'throwing the baby of pleasure out with the bathwater of ideology'. But to enlarge the discussion beyond the feminist paradigm, Alan, when we first envisioned this special section, we felt that the term pleasure still needed to be theorized, historicized and 'localized'; and that it was imperative to do so in terms other than those provided by the languages of ideology critique, ethics and psychoanalysis, languages in which pleasure has typically been

articulated in terms of a hermeneutics of suspicion. We talked about the opportunity and imperative to carry out a 'glocal' rethinking of pleasure, where the distinctiveness of the entertainment provided by regional and national film cultures is recognized even as the transnational character of aesthetics, production and consumption is borne in mind.

O'Leary: Pleasure was raised as in issue in my own work because I wanted to adopt a different sort of regard for cinema – one that did not require the taste distinctions essential to cinephilia. How to study sympathetically the kind of cinema – formally conservative, supposedly, and politically reprehensible – one is supposed to disdain? How to identify and take seriously the pleasures such a cinema might allow its audiences? For me, this meant going native: not just regarding, but *sharing* the pleasure of others in the so-called *cinepanettoni* ('film-Christmas-cakes'), farcical Italian comedies that were commercially successful but culturally deplored (O'Leary 2011, 2013). I closed my book on the films with a question posed by a critic I had interviewed: 'But do these films give you pleasure?'.[1] An astute reviewer, Paolo Noto (2014), noticed that this question was unanswered in the book itself, and moreover that the book's theoretical apparatus, borrowed from Bakhtin and Bourdieu, left unanswered the broader question of the character of pleasure. As Noto points out, the word 'pleasure' nowhere appears in the long introductory essay to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984). Pleasure, it seems, is theoretically elusive.

Ghosh: For me, the question of pleasure became particularly fraught while working on Shakeela, a soft-porn star of the vilified Kerala sex-film industry (Ghosh 2016). I struggled with the lack of an adequate vocabulary and conceptual-analytical apparatus to engage the character(s) of pleasure on 'unofficial' cinematic sites. These films constituted a subterranean cultural sensorium within which non-conjugal, non-reproductive sex is accepted as a legitimate pleasure (a big deal in the Indian context, remember!). The films – often tossed off as 'quickies' with shoddy production values – address themselves to a 'knowing' audience, dismissed by aficionados as 'low-class' males. And it would seem that the initiated viewer derives pleasure from precisely those features of the genre that might be judged, from the perspective of 'legitimate' culture, as constituting aesthetic failure or as disruptive of pleasure (inconsistent visual registers, for instance, and the arbitrary insertion of stock sex-scenes from indigenous and foreign porn shorts). In a nice move that undoes the politics/pleasure antinomy, the aesthetic and genre infractions in these films seem to index the social transgression implicit in the act of consuming semi-licit cultural products. And, yet, these remain problematic texts in 'feminist' terms. In the end, my politics over-rode my own (guilty, disavowed) enjoyment in Shakeela and these films. Nicholas Dirks writes, 'That cinema is all about pleasure […] is part of the problem' (Dirks 2002: 163). I do not believe this means that the pleasure *is* the problem; rather, that the indubitable pleasures of the cinema must return to trouble any abstracted (albeit critically engaged) study. Abstracted not only from the corpothetics of the film text but also from the collective spectatorial rituals of viewers as communities of sentiment and affect.[2]

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[1] 'Ma a voi piacciono questi film?' A more idiomatic translation would be 'but do you like these films?'. Italian prefers the more indirect phrasing, which introduces a suggestive note of passivity to the question of enjoyment.

[2] Drawing upon Buck-Morss' work on aesthetics, Christopher Pinney suggests that the traditional category of aesthetics is inadequate when theorizing the pleasures of popular

O'Leary: Louis Bayman gives an excellent account in this special section of a Western tradition of thought on pleasure. Key names for me include Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills and of course Richard Dyer, who I talk about below. I'm intrigued that pleasure has been reprised as a theme in aesthetics in analytic philosophy. For example, Mohan Matthen (from Bangalore, Shoba, though now in Toronto) sets out an idea of art for pleasure's sake, or 'aesthetic hedonism', that is very appealing to me as both theory and ethos, though it seems to let a notion of art being good for you – which makes me fidgety – in through the back door. He talks about how 'aesthetic engagement leads to a sharpening of perceptual and cognitive skills, and that this is its evolutionary rationale'.[3] Does this imply that the better the art the better it is for you? Personally, I like to indulge in film that is bad for me…

Ghosh: So bad that it is good? But, seriously, I agree that to place the burden of any kind of edification upon the popular seems not only anxious but irrational. Which is not to suggest that the pleasures offered by the popular film might not be politically subversive, liberating. Yes – Dyer's work comes to mind. In the context of the pleasure-intensive popular Hindi cinema (like Maria Seijo-Richart here, I prefer that term to 'Bollywood') I was excited when I first encountered Lalitha Gopalan's (2002) insightful study on the mobilization of multiple pleasures in what she calls the 'cinema of interruptions' (the term refers to how 'items' such as song and dance sequences in the Hindi 'masala' film interrupt the narrative). Perhaps what I miss in her reading is a more *felt* rendering of the experience of those pleasures. Given the communal, near-ritualistic nature of much cinema viewing in India, I find some of Martin Barker's commentary in this special section especially useful. Firstly, the assertion that the hold-all ('lumpy') term 'pleasure' itself must be put under pressure, so as to confront its excessive, uncontainable and messy character. Another is the claim that pleasure(s) are as much about what people do with texts as the texts themselves. Underlying both these ideas is a fundamental question – is it possible to theorize and stabilize any general knowledge-claim about the experience of cinematic pleasure in the domain of the popular?

O'Leary: The cinema of interruptions is a tremendous idea, and Gopalan's work is exemplary in its attention to the glocal and as alternative to the Hollywood-centricity of so much film studies. Personally, I enjoy scholarship that treats film as still a 'cinema of attractions' (Gunning, 1990): David Bordwell (2010) when he writes about the cinematography of Jackie Chan's body, say;[4] or work that allows me to name my delight in the mise-en-scéne of *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001).[5] But, as I mentioned, a key name for me is Richard Dyer, as confirmed for me by multiple mentions in Bayman's article here. What's empowering in Dyer's work is his conviction that pleasure is not reducible to ideology, nor is it in contrast with a progressive politics, even as it finds itself instantiated within capitalism. Dyer's account of how entertainment can communicate a Utopian sense of

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cinema. He proposes the term 'corpothetics' to address the 'superfluity of corporeal affectivity' and 'sensory immediacy' through which the popular Hindi film, in particular, creates its special vectors of pleasure (Pinney 2002: 19-22).

[3] See Matthen (2017) and his website < http://www.mohanmatthen.com/> .

[4] Bordwell would be irritated by my use of 'cinema of attractions' to describe his interests: he considers the application of the term beyond early cinema to be imprecise (see for example, Bordwell 2010b).

[5] I have in mind the approach known as 'surface reading' (Best and Marcus, 2009).

joy (however circumscribed) anticipates a theme in several of the articles here – that pleasure is a social experience (see Dyer 1982, 2002).

Ghosh: Here I must mention your own work, Alan – on the heritage film, for instance. You articulate your concern to take seriously and sympathetically the 'superficial' – in the specific sense of on the surface, thin – dealing with history that 'privileges spectacle over contemplation and pleasure over engagement' (O'Leary, 2016: 65). You argue that it is in terms of this very 'thinness' and through pleasure as vehicle that the heritage film establishes a relationship with the past. The pleasurable surface, precisely, figures historical complexity. Pleasure, then, is not an alibi for, nor the gateway to, something else...

O'Leary: 'It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it': these are Laura Mulvey's words again, and she goes on to state that this was precisely her intention in the 'Visual Pleasure' article that means so much to us (Mulvey, 1992: 713). Destruction of pleasure is not the intention of this special section! I think I can speak for both of us when I say I am convinced that pleasure exceeds and survives our analysis of its forms. This is why we have felt the need to talk about pleasure, again.

The articles

It was clear from several of the original proposals we received for this special section that there is a difficulty in theorizing or stepping back from pleasure. What distinguished the submissions included here was the ability to conceptualize the question of pleasure in more generally applicable terms. Louis Bayman's article gives an expert survey and critical account of 'what film scholars talk about when we talk about pleasure'. He insists on the complexity of the 'enigmatic emotional needs' addressed by pleasure and suggests that it is perhaps the depth of emotion that counts – not its positivity. The theme of the ambivalence of pleasure is taken up in John Champagne's article on divergent portrayals of 'risky' sex: the moralizing but voyeuristic documentary *Chemsex* (Fairman and Gogarty, 2015), on sex and drugs in male homosexual culture, and so-called 'raw' and auto-porn, featuring unprotected sex filmed by those themselves engaged in the acts portrayed. Champagne finds the term pleasure inadequate to the complexities of sensibility that comprise the experience of the sexual.

Samantha Colling is also interested in bodies moving together: pleasure in her article is again a social experience exceeding the individual. Colling deals with the pleasure of girl teen films, focussing on *Bring It On* (Reed 2000) and *Pitch Perfect* (Moore 2012), in terms of how they provide an affective experience of muscular bonding. Hollywood girlhood, she argues, is made to feel pleasurable through the kinetic portrayal of collectivity, independently of the post-feminist and consumerist ideologies it may catalyse. In the fourth article, James Harvey analyses a single film, *Tabu* (Miguel Gomes, 2012), in order to defend it against accusations of 'aesthetic opportunism' in its portrayal of the colonial past. The tone of the film, for Harvey, is an apparently oxymoronic one of critical nostalgia. Ambivalence, then, is once again present, and Harvey shows how the film deploys what Robert Stam and Ella Shohat have characterized as the 'undeniable pleasures' of Eurocentric media (1994: 11). In her article, Maria Seijo-Richart compares South American *telenovelas* (soap operas) and mainstream Hindi cinema. In both, she argues, pleasure is a question of repetition that relies

on the competence, not the naivety, of the audience. Predictability becomes an arena where audiences can experience intense emotion (which may not, of course, be strictly 'pleasurable') and experiment with the flaunting of social rules.

The final piece in this special section is a response by Martin Barker to all of these articles. He finds in all of them a shared sense of frustration that pleasure has not (yet) been adequately understood or theorised. Barker criticises what he sees as the restrictive ways pleasure has been described in three major film theoretical traditions: psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, and phenomenology. Against or beyond these, he argues, we can find a richness in the way audiences themselves talk about their pleasure in cinema. And, as we say above, it is such richness that this special section is intended to signal, if not quite to grasp.

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