

11 Playing with Vision

The Panoramic Shot in Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx*

It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favor of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.

—Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975)

CINEMA AS A RADICAL WEAPON

In 1975 Laura Mulvey published the essay that would define feminist film theory for decades. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” taught a generation of film students to enter the cinema cautiously. The Hollywood film, according to Mulvey, contained within it all the elements of capitalist patriarchy. Every time one of Hitchcock’s blondes offered herself up to our gaze, the cinema confirmed that men were active and women were passive—that, as John Berger famously put it, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”¹ Mulvey’s essay popularized the notion that, from social practices down to our unconscious, masculine language structures our psyches. And the cinema, born of masculine language, shores up those structures.

This was, at least, what many readers remembered from Mulvey’s essay. One critic described Mulvey’s criticism of gendered looking relations as “so all-encompassing that no form of narrative or visual enjoyment or engage-

ment is exempt.” Martin Jay has suggested the Lacanian-Althusserian tradition of film theory that the “Visual Pleasure” essay embodied was essentially “cinophobic.”² Many still read—and teach—it as a pessimistic essay: an indictment of cinema, even of vision itself.

But these characterizations account for only one part of Mulvey’s project. “Visual Pleasure” is surely a polemic, but it is also a program: a rallying cry for radical, avant-garde revisions of cinematic language. Rather than wallowing in “intellectualized unpleasure,” Mulvey urges us instead to feel the “thrill” that might come from imagining “a new language of desire.”³ Mulvey practiced what she preached: her own films give us a better sense of what the risks and thrills of experimentation might be.

This essay examines *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), one of several films Mulvey made during the 1970s and 1980s with her husband at the time, Peter Wollen. Though the film has five distinct parts, I will focus on its central, longest section, which comprises thirteen panoramic shots.

In each, a camera mounted on a central tripod rotates slowly, taking in a 360-degree view of the *mise-en-scène*. As we are immersed within this visually disorienting style, we follow Louise, a mother who leaves her husband, gets a job, and undergoes a psychic and political transformation. Louise becomes involved in union politics; she fights for better child care at work; she rejects the patriarchal family structure in favor of coparenting with a close female friend (who may have, by the end of the film, become Louise's lover). All the while, a female voice-over asks unanswerable questions about motherhood, politics, and sexual difference. The story is complex, entertaining, and—dare I say—quite pleasurable.

A rich literature has praised the film's content: its musings on gender, labor, and language. And many critics have understood the panoramic shot as a politically motivated rejection of Hollywood continuity editing.⁴ Yet few describe the sensory experience of watching these protracted cinematic panoramas.⁵ My analysis of Mulvey and Wollen's film relies not on the mere fact of its divergence from classic cinematic form but rather on a close description of how the camera's panoramic movement shapes visual experience over time.

The pan puts viewers through a playful and challenging cognitive process. Its moving lens stretches and bends the visual field, at times distending the relationship between the shapes onscreen and the words we assign them. This visual experience is, I argue, the very ground on which Mulvey and Wollen hoped to build a new, non-patriarchal language. Before we create a new language, we first have to *see* the world anew. Rather than assign new words to the same old objects, we must use our eyes and minds to divide the matter before us into yet-to-be-named shapes. Mulvey and Wollen's visual disorientations aspire to the goal Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulated for cinema in his 1964 essay "Film and the New Psychology": "The idea we have of the world would be overturned if we could succeed in seeing the intervals between things (for example, the space between the trees on the boulevard) as objects and, inversely, if we saw the things themselves—the trees—as the ground."⁶

The optical apparatus of mirror, camera, and frame lend their support in this endeavor. But the effort, crucially, is our own. We regard the screen as a philosophical toy, one we can use to exercise our own perception. We sometimes allow the onscreen shapes and colors to cohere into a perspectival narrative space; at other times we

choose to regard them as kaleidoscopic patterns. A frame might initially appear as a window or mirror, but soon we learn to let our mind's eye flicker between these two options. The disorientation of the extended panoramic shot transforms the screen: it is no longer a window onto a stage on which characters move, dramas unfold, and events progress. Or it is no longer *only* that. The screen also becomes what Walter Benjamin, essaying cinema's radical potential, called *room-for-play*.⁷

Miriam Hansen has read Benjamin's idea of "play" as a mode of sense perception that might counteract the destructive effects of capitalist modernity by reformulating the relationship between humans and technology.⁸ I will use *play* in a similar but slightly different sense. The perceptual play of watching *Riddles of the Sphinx* suggests what it would feel like to be able to restructure the imaginary and thus establish a new relationship between words and things. It is only through playing with both language and vision that we might forge a new, nonpatriarchal relationship to language. *Riddles'* overt politics—its "manifest" content, perhaps—obtains support and significance from its sensory details. In *Riddles*, cinema is equal parts perceptual toy and critical tool. It holds the promise that humans might be able to use machines to reformulate the very process of signification.

RENDERING VOLUME

The scene is about to yield up its volume. But not without a subtle system of feints.

—Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things* (1970)

Neither the lens nor the mirror recognizes our world of discrete objects, of things with names. Rather, both regard the world as an unbroken field of variegated light. The cinema signifies because we assimilate its visual field to our own abstract systems—much the way we assimilate the visual sensations we encounter whenever our eyes are open. We recognize the shapes the screen offers up, and we call them by their names.

The cinema has also evolved its own language—an abstract, symbolic code. We see a shot of a man and a shot of a woman; if we subsequently understand the couple to be in the same space, gazing at one another, it is due to this system of cinematic language, a set of verbal and visual cues. Inspired by Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-1968 critics in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the

British journal *Screen* instigated a thoroughgoing critique of such cinematic codes. Mulvey and Wollen were among the many critics who advocated for a “counter-cinema,” a set of aesthetic strategies that would break with the seamlessness of classic cinematic language.⁹ *Riddles*, accordingly, rejects traditional editing in favor of its lengthy pans.

Were a film to present one continuous, stable shot, Daniel Dayan argued, viewers would wonder what, or who, had produced the image and to what end; they would think about their own roles as viewers and their relationship to the absent agents constructing the scene. Yet when a reverse shot shows a character’s face, the viewer retroactively understands the first shot as motivated by a character’s gaze. Thus, spectators learn to assign every shot a cause internal to the film’s narrative.¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Oudart used the word *suture* to describe how films thus produce the impression of contiguous space by soliciting the viewer’s unconscious cooperation. The classical Hollywood film follows the model of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, a painting that envelops the space in which we viewers stand, yet erases us in the process.¹¹

In the classical Hollywood cinema, editing moves far too quickly and efficiently to let us savor this paradox. It solicits, even exploits, our psychic labor in knitting the film together and sells us back that labor as entertainment. This is how, according to the critics of *Cahiers* and *Screen*, cinematic style produced a *subject*, a living being of illusory coherence shot through with capitalist ideology. According to David Rodowick, many critics in the post-1968 era asserted that “the only valid form of art was one that ruptured the fixity of meaning and decentered or deconstructed the subject.”¹² By disrupting the smooth machinations of Hollywood style, it follows that a film might disrupt the subject of capitalist patriarchy too.

It is immediately apparent that the panoramic shot breaks with classical Hollywood style: while classical editing constructs space with crisp efficiency, the panoramic shot unfurls space in time. In this it follows the experience of viewing the painted panorama, one of the founding sites of modern spectatorship. Like cinema, the painted panorama combines multiple two-dimensional, perspectival images to yield an extraordinary sense of volume, a virtual space that is as coherent as—or, rather, more coherent than—the one in which we live. The critics and historians who study these earliest manifestations of the panorama thus engage the same questions of vision, power, and control that were central to 1970s film theory. Stephan

Oettermann’s now-canonical *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (first published in 1980 as *Das Panorama*), for example, describes how the painted panorama worked on the spectator’s eye and body to produce a modern, disciplined subject.¹³ Like the Marxist critics of cinema, Oettermann concludes that the painted panorama enslaves vision by offering spectators a sense of visual mastery.

The 360-degree cinematic pan, like its nineteenth-century painted counterpart, makes us acutely aware of the gap at its center, the space from which the spectator sees. Critics of Mulvey and Wollen have suggested that the panoramic shot indulges viewers’ fantasies of a centered, coherent self who has a masterful control over his or her surroundings—whereas many 1970s film theorists praised the subject-shattering quality of experimental film style.¹⁴ These debates about vision and volume are essentially about the politics of being—or *not* being—a subject. What are the political stakes to feeling “whole” or “divided,” “centered” or “decentered,” “constructed” or “deconstructed”? If political modernism could deconstruct the subject, what would it install in its place—or would any stable, nameable self become subject to cooptation?

Already in 1994, Rodowick observed that the question of “the subject” had long since retreated in the face of “an ever-widening series of differences defined by complex approaches to gender, post-coloniality, racial and ethnic differences, and queer theory.”¹⁵ Yet this necessary development within film studies still engaged questions of the viewer’s identity and political agency, or lack thereof. *Riddles* arguably stands at the beginning of radical film theory’s acknowledgment of difference. “Visual Pleasure” and other early essays of Mulvey’s do not engage racial difference or the fact of queer spectatorship; nonetheless, they grapple with the fact that cinema simply could *not* homogenize its diverse audience, however much it might attempt to do so.¹⁶ Women denied access, under patriarchy, to a stable form of subjectivity were not able to simply adopt the position of the male viewer. Mulvey’s appeal to experimental filmmaking suggests that radically new forms of spectatorship might allow women to construct themselves as radically new and different subjects. *Riddles* itself leverages the power of cinema that theory had long critiqued: its power to mold the viewer in its image. Aesthetic forms, *Riddles* suggests, can also build new forms of life.

The thirteen pans that form *Riddles* do not constitute a new cinematic language, an alternative to the shot/reverse

shot system that Oudart called suture. Rather, they push back against the abstract, linguistic system of Hollywood editing by emphasizing the visual and sensual registers of cinematic experience. Camera movement—including the panoramic shot—has provided a consistent foil for critics who analyze the “language” of film editing. The camera can follow a potentially infinite number of paths in three-dimensional space, making it impossible to account for camera movement with fully generalizable rules or typologies. Despite our best efforts to subject cinema to a linguistic or structural analysis, camera movement requires us to describe our experience of looking in time. This is particularly important in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, where panoramic camera movement forces viewers to attend closely to the screen as a constantly shifting visual field.

Mulvey and Wollen’s belief that visual sensation could serve as the ground for new forms of signification is key to understanding *Riddles*. It is also the direct result of Mulvey’s readings in psychoanalytic theory. In the 1970s Lacanian psychoanalysis was a foundational intellectual framework for many film critics. Yet Mulvey’s reading of Lacan was distinctive. To understand Mulvey’s ideas about gender and language, it is crucial to revisit Lacan’s terms *symbolic*, *imaginary*, and *real*. The idea of the *imaginary* deeply influenced Mulvey and Wollen’s work on the relationship between word and image and their ideas about how aesthetic experience could transform both.

THE IMAGINARY

“New languages and new forms of representation don’t appear like magic just because you hope and want them to,” Mulvey stated in a 1979 interview. “Language has to be recognizable; it can’t be isolated, just what you hope.”¹⁷ Instead, Mulvey wanted *Riddles* to “start making out a space which would not necessarily produce a different language, but force one to think differently”—a necessary step if a new language was ever to emerge.¹⁸ When discussing *Riddles*, Wollen likewise insisted that “it is precisely the interface between image and word that concerns us,” specifically “the dialectic of fit and misfit” between word and image.¹⁹ At this interface, *Riddles* performs its initial research into new forms of language and develops a unique audiovisual means of encouraging nonpatriarchal discourse.

Mulvey claimed that *Riddles of the Sphinx* “is really ‘about’ the imaginary.”²⁰ For Lacan, the symbolic is ruled by presence and lack—that is, we can say what an object is

only by deciding what it *isn’t*. Lacan argues that this structure of presence and absence originates in boys’ castration fears: through a traumatic encounter with the female body, the male child discovers both the power and threat of absence, and he uses this knowledge to assert meaning in the field of language. Thus, Lacanian theory could account for only the *male* child’s integration into language. Women, according to Lacan, never truly gain entry into “the symbolic order since they never undergo castration anxiety.”²¹ Girls lack a *stake* in this regime of presence and absence since—as Mary Ann Doane puts it—they literally have nothing to lose.²²

Lacking access to the symbolic, women, according to Lacan, remain stuck in the realm of the imaginary. Stephen Heath associates the imaginary with the plenitude of the “mother-child dyad,” a phase, or relationship, in which the infant does not yet understand where his body ends and the mother’s begins—or where objects in general find their boundaries.²³ The female child typically fails to traverse the Oedipus complex, remaining intimate with the mother and failing to internalize the father’s “no.” Women, moreover, often become mothers themselves, reentering the mother-child dyad from the other side. The imaginary’s elastic nature makes it, in Daniel Dayan’s words, “the structure through which images are formed.”²⁴ It allows us to organize the visual world into fields of sensation that we later recognize as objects, and to which we append language. It is the adhesive with which we apply words to things. Yet in classic Lacanian theory, to be *stuck* in the imaginary is still to live in the world of plenitude and possibility, in which images emerge from sensation as provisional, always changeable forms, and language lacks the capacity truly to limit perception. In this state, language is correspondingly less effective. Because it lacks the capacity to limit, it also lacks the capacity to signify.

Yet *Riddles* shows how the imaginary gains traction in the world of politics and subjectivity. For Mulvey, “even concrete political activities are shot through with the workings of the imaginary,” particularly as women encounter the question of motherhood—“to live it, or to not live it.”²⁵ In the case of Louise, *Riddles*’s protagonist, the concrete activity of child rearing imbricates with her own memories of infancy, influencing her practical, world-altering decisions about labor, unionization, and the politics and practicalities of child care. Rational decision making and inner psychic life appear codeterminate: Louise enters the workplace and negotiates life as a

working mother. At the film's literal center—the seventh of its thirteen panoramic shots—the narrator asks, “What would a politics of the unconscious look like?”

The imaginary and the symbolic also serve a *formal* function for the film's visual register, particularly in its thirteen panoramas. In the following section, I will attend closely to these visual sensations, since it is specifically the *pan* that allows Mulvey and Wollen to insist on the imaginary's importance. The pan stresses the “interface between image and word” by distorting the way the film lens divides colors and shapes into objects. As fields of color stretch or float across the frame, they pass from abstract shape to nameable thing, and back again. *Riddles* thus provides a rich visual field that catches the imaginary and the symbolic in an altercation. The fact of panoramic camera movement plays with the links between objects and their signification, suggesting that the imaginary is not simply the unstable ground of a rigid symbolic but the primary site for language's reconstruction.

BENT SPACE

An image is a stop the mind makes between
uncertainties.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1936)

Nearly a decade before *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Jackie Raynal's experimental feature *Deux fois* (1968) also used the extensive pan to interrogate cinematic space in the course of a feminist narrative. One of the film's early shots sets the camera on an embankment in the middle of a four-lane road and executes a lengthy pan that makes several 360-degree loops. Our first journey around with the camera gives us ample time to absorb the scene: a group of pedestrians waits at a crosswalk; a car waits at a stoplight. But by the time the camera makes its second journey around, all these objects have changed position. The pedestrians have disappeared; they have apparently crossed the road behind us while the camera directed our attention away from their trajectory. Our sense of disorientation increases as the speed of the pan picks up slightly, and as we gradually lose track of the number of times the camera has spun around in its place.

In a later scene, the camera pans counterclockwise across a seated group of young adults, who stare back at it. Raynal's own face is one of the last we meet before the camera reverses its 180-degree journey, showing us the same series of young people in reverse. But something has

changed: when we arrive back at our starting point, we encounter Raynal's face again. Initially, her appearance is surprising, paradoxical: the young woman appears in this space twice, as if by magic, betraying the viewer's expectation that off-camera space will remain unchanged as it awaits the return of his or her gaze. Within a few seconds, we realize that Raynal simply crossed behind the camera while it was on the midst of its return journey, arriving at the other end of the pan in time to meet us there.

Raynal's experiments illustrate an obvious yet crucial difference between the painted panorama and the cinematic pan shot: the pan necessarily presents 360 degrees in time. Of course, many painted panoramas, particularly battle panoramas, adopt a form of continuous narrative and portray several historical events that do not occur simultaneously. And the viewer of the painted panorama is unable to see the entire work at once; she must encounter it bit by bit over time. Yet the viewer of the painted panorama can still proceed *as if* every part of the artwork is equally available to his or her eye at any given moment. This may be one reason that Oettermann characterizes panoramic spectatorship as a position of visual mastery or enslaved vision, a space both intelligible and inescapable.²⁶

The cinematic panoramic shot, on the other hand, displays a world constantly in flux, in which the spectator must cede a great deal of control and mastery over depicted space. Over the course of a 360-degree pan, the viewer sees every part of the landscape in the camera's range of vision, yet sees each part of it only at a particular moment. With the extensive pans of *Deux fois* and *Riddles*, we are often just as aware of what is out-of-field as what we see within the frame.

Riddles plays with the same sense of flux as *Deux fois*, showing objects and characters moving freely in and out of frame. In a sequence set in a playground, *Riddles* plays a similar game to the one referenced in *Deux fois*: Louise and her daughter appear on one side of a spiraling slide (fig. 11.1), then an instant later on the next (fig. 11.2) as the camera mimics the slide's spinning form. In the film's sixth panoramic shot, Louise, who has recently started work as a telephone operator, discusses with her coworkers the possibility of forming a union to fight for free, company-sponsored child care. The camera slowly pans, showing the entirety of the office's break room and its all-female workforce; women pass in and out of frame from one group to another, discussing politics and the everyday in the same breath. Another panoramic shot recalls and



FIGS. 11.1–11.2. Laura Mulvey (British, b. 1941), *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.



elaborates on *Deux fois*'s vertiginous traffic panorama: it positions the panning camera on top of a moving car. As the vehicle snakes through a series of winding highway ramps, it continues to spin. Miraculously, midway through the shot, our gaze encounters Louise and her friends as they travel in an adjacent vehicle. Throughout the entire shot these women's conversation has played on the soundtrack; until we see their vehicle and thus locate them firmly in diegetic space, it is easy to imagine Louise

and her friends riding below us, within the vehicle on which our rotating camera rides. The scene exploits the spatial logic of the classical Hollywood cinema, which often associates the locations of cameras with those of characters. But Mulvey and Wollen play with that spatial logic, stretching it in ways that make us highly aware of how the camera positions us as viewers.

Many of *Riddles*'s most intriguing shots are less obviously virtuosic. In the first few pans, we encounter Louise

in the cramped space of her home before she leaves her husband, Chris. In these domestic spaces, we are highly aware not only of our position at the center of the panoramic shot but also of how the movement of the pan slowly guides the camera lens over a series of domestic objects. These familiar *things*—pots and pans, dishes, door handles—all go through several different kinds of perspectival distortion. Camera perspective, of course, automatically renders objects differently depending on where they stand with respect to a central viewpoint: a cuboid object positioned near the camera’s central vanishing point might appear nearly square, but move the camera a few inches toward one side or the other, and the orthogonal lines that show its depth will lengthen dramatically. Objects subject to a camera’s pan go through even more dramatic transformations, as the camera lens (and, with it, its central vanishing point) moves not only on an X axis with regard to the frame, but also on a Z axis—closer to and farther from the objects before it—as it traces a horizontal arc in space. As objects move with respect to the vanishing point, they also, at the same rate, get closer or farther from the perspectival plane.

In *Riddles’s* panoramic shots, many objects are thus momentarily distorted by perspective, or merely by a shot’s framing. Yet because of the constant motion of the pan, these objects always survive their moments of inscrutability. At one point in the first pan a white door fills the entire frame, seeming to swell to a larger size than it was mere moments before. The gray shape at its right briefly loses its iconic relation to its referent: a door handle. This

solid color mass, moreover, breaks the continuity between the space we know to lie on the left and right of the white door. But as the pan continues, the door soon becomes a door again: the accident of framing recedes as quickly as it emerged.

Perspective alone rarely distorts objects in *Riddles* into completely abstract forms. But even when the audience can easily recognize the objects onscreen, their subtle changes in shape still alienate. The wide-angle camera lens slightly distorts the objects at the frame’s edges, creating a subtle fish-eye effect. With a stable frame, this distortion is scarcely noticeable, but camera movement brings it to our attention. In the initial panorama in Louise’s kitchen, we see a straight-on shot of three blue pots sitting on a counter, in a row parallel to the perspective plane (fig. 11.3). The pots are framed on the right side of the shot by the edge of the camera frame, which runs vertically and thus perfectly perpendicular to the counter’s level surface. As the camera pans to the right, the appearance of these pots barely changes—yet the appearance of the rectangular counter on which they sit is dramatically transformed.

The right angles of counter and frame that previously dominated the composition—a Cartesian grid framed by cinema’s rectangular frame—bends before our eyes when the counter’s right edge emerges (fig. 11.4). It is at an angle to the frame’s edge; its forms an orthogonal line that recedes in depth toward the kitchen wall. Immediately, our sense of what forms a “right angle” is transformed. Before, the frame’s vertical edge and the counter’s horizontal plane formed a graphic right angle onscreen. Now,



FIGS. 11.3–11.4. Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.

we are aware that a shape that forms right angle in the profilmic world appears as a stretched, warped acute angle when it appears in its graphic, onscreen form. The lens's capacity to render depth comes into conflict with the counter's rectangular shape.

The shape of the counter mutates further as the camera continues to move to the left: its right edge becomes longer, and the distance between it and the left side of the frame increases. Moreover, the actual angle at which the line of the counter stretches across the screen changes with the camera's orientation. We witness this effect in all rectangular objects that the camera closely passes: as its inches past a calendar on the wall, we notice that the frame's lower edge initially matches up with the calendar's horizontal edge (fig. 11.5), but soon the camera's stable movement radically destabilizes the relationship between these two strong horizontals (fig. 11.6). Shapes thus appear elastic. At every given moment each object obtains a different outline, yet without changing dramatically in size and without serving a different function in the *mise-en-scène*.²⁷

In the pan shot, camera perspective thus serves a different function than it does in the Hollywood film. Oudart and Jean-Louis Schefer argue that classical painting, produced according to the figurative codes of perspective, centers the perceiving subject.²⁸ Since perspective provides a predictable way to model the relative shapes and distances of objects, it presents itself as transparent, effectively hiding its mode of figuration. Moreover, perspectival rendering shows space from a singular viewpoint shared by both

the imagined painter and the intended spectator.²⁹ Dayan similarly argues for Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory as the best argument "that the perceptual system and ideology of representation are built into the cinematographic representation itself."³⁰ (Though, for Dayan, this argument about the perspectival image remains insufficient to describe cinema's ideological effects since it does not explain how film fiction works.)

While the viewer may be *literally* centered by the pan—in *Riddles*, we observe Louise's room from a fixed point—objects within profilmic space shift as we watch them. The vanishing point of the image changes quickly and dramatically, yet also predictably: the viewer is thus brought into a gamelike relationship with the screen's visual field, predicting how objects may or may not be transformed as the camera traces its path across them over time. Unlike the painted panorama, a cinematic pan does not render space through a discrete number of vanishing points. Instead, it has an infinite number: or, rather, there is one continuously changing vanishing point, locked to the camera's movement. Once Mulvey and Wollen, along with the cinematographer Dianne Tammes, set the focal length and determined the *mise-en-scène*, there could be no further strategizing about how the space to be represented was to divide. The camera may offer a *rationalized* vision, but it is not necessarily the *human* vision of perspectival painting.

Painters tend to make strategic decisions to avoid perspectival distortion. Artists working on the painted panorama thus chose to place vanishing points at strategic intervals throughout their works to avoid such



FIGS. 11.5–11.6. Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.

distortions. As E. H. Gombrich has famously observed, painters present to us a world that is filtered through, and thus formed by, human cognition. Gombrich used the term *visual schemata* to describe the mental images we have inherited from past representational traditions and which guide artists' image making. The artist thus "begins not with his visual impression but with his idea or concept: the German artist with his concept of a castle that he applies as well as he can to that individual castle."³¹

Cameras operate differently: rather than creating each object individually with a conceptual framework imposed by words (for example, this is a castle, this is a lion, and so on), lenses address the world not as a plethora of objects but as a continuous field of light. Cameras do not necessarily present us with imagery that breaks with our conceptual schemata for objects: on the contrary, most cinematographers go to great lengths to frame and pose objects to render them recognizable, in accordance with the verbal concepts we possess for them. At the same time, we know that camera perspective can warp objects into unconventional configurations that no human would have chosen. Postwar avant-garde cinema often works with this capability: Stan Brakhage's *The Text of Light* (1974) displays abstract imagery that derives from close-ups of a crystal ashtray. The pan, arguably, strengthens the alienating effects of the camera lens: a contemporary camera operators' handbook acknowledges that the "action of a pan" is "an unnatural experience for the human visual system" because a pan, unlike human vision, is not "selective; everything that it 'sees' throughout the duration of the pan or tilt gets equal treatment."³²

Thus cinema's powers of visual estrangement result from the medium's *temporal* nature. The "panoramic time" of the camera's circular sweep makes both time and space feel elastic. This perhaps explains the overwhelming visual sensation of watching *Riddles*'s panning shots: each shot feels impossibly long, as though it yields far more than 360 degrees' worth of visual information. This plenitude of visual information—the lens's constant regeneration of the objects before it—overwhelms the viewer's ability to assimilate fully the profilmic space. On first viewing, it largely remains extremely difficult to determine precisely when the camera has completed half its transit. And every object before the camera's lens manifests itself as an infinite number of shapes, some far removed from the iconic, verbal-conceptual imagery we associate with them.

If the automatic, mechanical nature of photographic perspective has the power to estrange image from concept, it may also allow viewers to explore the relationship between Lacan's imaginary and symbolic orders. By slowing and distorting the process by which we append words to things, *Riddles*'s pan shots allow the imaginary and symbolic regimes to overlap. Throughout the film, moments of abstraction—such as the white door's complete dominance of the frame—punctuate scenes of recognizable spaces. By slowing our assimilation of the nameable objects appearing onscreen, the film reveals the action of the imaginary and symbolic orders in our minds as we view—and a codetermination of word and image.

"CUT BY CIRCUMSTANCES TO FIT"

One famous shot from *Riddles* plays much more overtly with the idea of the *imaginary*. The twelfth panorama (of thirteen) takes place in the apartment of Maxine, Louise's friend who has helped her develop a feminist, Marxist consciousness. The apartment is a disorienting jumble of curtains and mirrors, and it plays with the spectator's inability to discern tangible objects from their reflected images when both are framed by cinematic projection (fig. 11.7). On the screen, "real" objects are just as flat as their reflections, and we can tell the two apart only if a mirrored surface is clearly framed. As Gilles Deleuze argued of the famous "hall of mirrors" scene in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), cinematic projection renders the "virtual" and "actual" Kane equally present to film viewers.³³ In *Riddles*'s penultimate panoramic shot, tight framing makes it at times difficult to deduce—especially on a first viewing—where each mirrored surface starts and ends. But the camera's panning action also hinders our ability in this regard; it has a leveling effect on the *mise-en-scène*. Both objects and their reflections appear to inhabit two coeval orders of reality.

The shot begins with Louise: we see her image clearly reflected in an oval mirror as she reads aloud from Maxine's diary. When Louise asks Maxine the meaning of a particular passage, Maxine answers that she does not know, just as the camera passes from the image of an "actual" red curtain to its mirrored reflection. On first viewing, this passage is nearly indiscernible, since the thin strip of the mirror's left frame is almost buried in the red curtain's deep vertical folds. Soon after, we receive a more solid indication that we have entered mirror space, when we see a classical bust doubled onscreen (fig. 11.8). Yet

skeptical viewers find no definitive proof that they are not looking at two “actual” busts.

Continuing its right-to-left course, the camera eventually encounters Maxine, who is still listening to Louise (fig. 11.9). On the left, Maxine is framed by the large mirror’s left edge—but disoriented viewers who had not realized they were looking at “mirror space” can easily see the frame as a doorframe, and the “virtual” mirrored space as an actual recessed alcove within Maxine’s room. Above Maxine’s head hangs a landscape painting of an empty blue lagoon. To the left of the mirror frame, we encounter an uncanny repetition of this image. The small rectangle that frames the second landscape may be another mirror, pointing at a precise angle. Yet its matte, square appearance suggests it may, too, be a framed reproduction of the image above Maxine’s head.

The entire scene, with its frames within frames and mirrors upon mirrors, recalls Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*: another riff on *Las Meninas*. The playful viewer has options about how to divide the cinematic image into “actual” space and “mirrored” space. Each part of the frame is only provisionally “mirrored” or “actual”; the viewer labels each with the understanding that further visual data may help her split or collapse these fields of her own creation. Beyond a certain point, it makes no difference whether we look at one of the scene’s frames as the border of a mirror or an easily traversed doorframe. The scene does not ask us to define its spaces and objects in terms of negation: the “real” objects as “not reflections,” the reflected objects as “not real.” Fields of vision coalesce or divide in response to our probings. Here we may be in the Lacanian imaginary Mulvey claimed was the film’s setting.

During the scene, Louise and Maxine engage with the text of Maxine’s diary in a playful, interpretive way, assigning extreme gravity to the content of their imaginations. Scott MacDonald enumerates how Louise’s reading revises the borders between metaphor, dream, and memory spontaneously and at will.³⁴ One element of Maxine’s diary sticks out: the sentence Maxine claims, at the beginning of the sequence, she does not yet understand—“they make a groove or a pattern into which or upon which other patterns fit or are placed unfitted and are cut by circumstances to fit.” The phrase initially sounds like nonsense but could in fact aptly describe a mirror: a surface that passively reflects other patterns without adjusting them to fit, merely capturing the incidence of light on it.



FIGS. 11.7–11.9. Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.



FIG. 11.10. Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.

It could, likewise, describe the film camera's indexical, automatic recording—the very inhuman object that in previous sequences illustrated the imbrications of verbal concept and nonverbal image.

This phrase, in fact, comes from another woman's attempt to reconcile her interests in cinema and psychoanalysis with her lived reality as a woman. It is a quotation from the poet H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, an account of the conversations the poet and passionate cinephile held with the aging analyst about a "cinematic" hallucination she saw—or perhaps, she claimed, projected herself—on the walls of a Corfu hotel. She describes these shapes as "hieroglyphics." "The writing, at least, is consistent. It is composed by the same person, it is drawn or written by the same hand. Whether that hand or person is myself, projecting the images as a sign, a warning. . . . Or whether they are projected from outside. . . . For my head is already warning me that this is an unusual dimension, an unusual way to *think*, that my brain or mind may not be equal to the occasion."³⁵ H.D.'s description of the event sounds remarkably like the psychic uncertainty of writers like Mulvey and Wollen in the face of classical Hollywood cinema: the images onscreen manipulate the viewer's unconscious while appearing to be produced by it. H.D. discussed this experience or "projection" with Freud, who called it "perhaps her most dangerous symptom." Under

intense psychoanalytic scrutiny, H.D. insisted on the meaning of this event, her power in the face of it.³⁶ *Riddles*, likewise, asserts the power and productivity of women's cinematic imagination in the face of more hidebound psychoanalytic readings that treat projection merely as symptom.

Toward the scene's end, the room's elements begin to stabilize: after passing Louise's mirror image—discernible in the reflection of a cup of pencils in front of her—we enter "actual" space (fig. 11.10). But as soon as the "actual" Louise and Maxine pass us, we see another reflection: that of the cinematographer Dianne Tammes, sweeping her camera past a tall, narrow mirror (fig. 11.11). Though one might expect her appearance to read as an ironic assertion of the scene's constructedness, the image strikingly lacks cynicism. Tammes moves the camera with incredible focus and authority but also with lightness. Her hips sway back and forth; she seems to dance, silently and slowly, to maintain the pan's steady rhythm. *Riddles's* sense of *play* comes to the fore: Tammes smiles while she helps create a world of illusions.

As it was for H.D., cinema is in *Riddles* a powerful tool made by and for women's imaginations. Tammes's camera allows her to create hallucinations, collapse and rebuild the boundaries between spaces—or between two-dimensional reflection and three-dimensional "reality." In



FIG. 11.11. Laura Mulvey, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977.

this panoramic shot, cinema, mirrors, and storytelling all appear as a means by which to access such hallucinatory powers. It suggests the eye might one day literally rearrange reality.

CONCLUSION

I'm interested in a kind of balance that has some similarity to the way Cézanne equalized the physical facts and the presented illusions in painting. On film the transformation is into light and time and the balance is between the illusions (spatial and otherwise) and the facts-of-light on a surface.

—Michael Snow (1967)

Riddles throws into question the shapes and boundaries of objects, without ever crossing over into pure abstraction: shapes and colors onscreen still maintain their identities as real, tangible things. The film destabilizes the visual codes of illusionist cinema without “destabilizing” the subject (or its “imaginary coherence”) in the way many 1970s film theorists advocated. My reading argues, perhaps perversely, that the film in fact secures and stabilizes the female viewer by giving her a sense of playful mastery over the images onscreen. I believe that *Riddles of the Sphinx* encourages us into a playful relationship with space and time, strengthening the identity and capability

of the person playing. It is precisely in *aesthetic play* that the viewer senses the potential for a “new language.”

Some scholars have criticized Mulvey and Wollen’s aesthetic for reflecting neo-Kantian ideals: for Laura Kipnis the film evinces a “conservative reinvestment in aesthetic autonomy,” and in their artistic worldview, “one might suspect that the transcendental subject can’t be far behind.”³⁷ This critique echoes a more literal complaint that the pan’s center stabilizes the viewing subject, reproducing the illusory mastery viewers also experience in Hollywood cinema. But both examples, ironically, provide insight into the way *Riddles* operates: it is precisely *through* being centered, *through* an encounter with modernist aesthetics, that the film’s viewers can experience its full political and aesthetic import as a feminist film. *Riddles* makes a centered, subjective cinematic viewpoint finally available to women; at the same time, it establishes this viewpoint as the ground on which we might build a nonpatriarchal language.

Michael Snow’s *La région centrale* (1971) offers a useful comparison: another panoramic film that offers viewers similar opportunities to play with, and hone, their senses. The film comprises dozens of 360-degree tilt and pan shots, all taken from the same location: Snow attached his camera to a robotic arm he had erected on a Canadian mountaintop. Over the film’s three hours, viewers become intimately familiar with every aspect of

the wilderness surrounding the camera, and they come to identify strongly with that camera, arguably much more strongly than they do in *Riddles*. The camera does not just pan along a horizontal plane but performs a series of backflips and tilts—and as we swoop and spin with it, we start to feel as if we are riding a roller coaster. At other times, Snow’s camera moves so quickly and wildly on its axis that the onscreen shapes and colors cease to represent an antecedent nature. They are no longer objects outside the window of our spinning vessel—we no longer feel the sensation of moving with the camera but rather find ourselves suddenly back in the theater, sitting in our seats. The colors and shapes have become abstract visual phenomena on a screen. But the best moments in *La région centrale*—the moments that illustrate what Snow has called the “balance” between illusionism and “the facts-of-light on a surface”—come when the camera spins at precisely the speed that allows us to choose between the two. We can, at moments, perform this gestalt switch ourselves and choose how we would like to regard the screen: as window or canvas.

Soon after *Riddles* was made, the critic Annette Michelson wrote a groundbreaking article about *La région centrale* analyzing this very aesthetic experience. Her essay suggests precisely what avant-garde aesthetics might achieve: the creation of a more coherent subjectivity. Michelson inverted contemporary film theorists’ critiques of camera perspective, quoting Jean-Louis Baudry’s assertion that “the world” of the mobile camera is “constituted not just by [the viewer’s] eye, but for it . . . the mobility of the camera seems to fulfill the most favorable conditions for the manifestation of the ‘transcendental subject.’”³⁸ Michelson finds in Snow’s film just this formal and psychic significance, as a mobile camera records panoramic views of a Canadian landscape. “It is of course,” she writes, “this disembodied mobility of the eye-subject which is hyperbolized in *La Région Centrale*.”³⁹

It is perhaps Snow’s *hyperbole* that makes his aesthetic revolutionary: instead of taking for granted our sense of sovereignty over our surroundings and visual apparatus, we obtain a highly self-conscious sense of our perceptual powers. Such playful exaggeration engenders what, in other writings, Michelson has called the viewer’s “ludic sovereignty” over his or her own perceptions of space and time.⁴⁰ Like the great Soviet avant-garde directors, Michelson believes that playful engagement with cinema could engender “no less than the transformation of the

human condition through a cinematic intensification of cognitive accuracy, analytic precision, and epistemological certitude.”⁴¹

Riddles makes its own arguments for the power of the ludic. After Louise’s tale concludes, we see series of strong, capable female acrobats, transformed by postproduction processing into abstract splashes of color. The images convey the power and playfulness female bodies can experience, while the video processing makes it difficult to view these women as mere sexual spectacle. Then the film’s final section shows an extreme close-up of a child’s mercury maze toy. We watch as a bubble of mercury floats through plastic corridors, urged one way and the next by a pair of offscreen hands (Mulvey’s).⁴² The film ends the moment the game is won, and the silver bubble slips into the hole at the maze’s center. We, likewise, have been placed in *our* center; likewise, we have found our way there only through play. The panoramic shots at the center of the film offer many of *Région*’s delights: objects become abstract shapes and then objects again; we guess at the relationships between the screen’s spaces. Moreover, the overt political content of *Riddles*, as of Mulvey and Wollen’s writings, suggests that intimate links between the transformation of our perceptual and analytic senses and the transformation of our psychic apparatus: that developing the language to speak sexual difference will be an *adventure*, a trip, a radical rewiring of our perceptual apparatus. The film aims at a playful, empowered engagement with the interaction between word and image, object and reflection—between the world as we know it and what it might become.

NOTES

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 47.
2. Stephen Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11; and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 479.
3. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18. In 1985 Mulvey described her general project as dialectical: “Visual Pleasure” played a specific role, “a negative challenge to dominant cinematic codes,” while her fascination with Lacan offered the means to explore the “logical limit” of sex and gender difference; Mulvey, “Changes,” *Discourse* 7 (Spring 1985): 11–15.
4. See, for example, Lucy Fischer, *Shot Counter-shot* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), chap. 2; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 162–63; and Scott MacDonald’s detailed description of the film in *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 79–92.
5. For many years the film was difficult to find and the extant prints very

- faded. With the BFI's recent restoration of the film and its 2014 DVD/BluRay rerelease, *Riddles* has become much easier to write about. One commendable recent essay is Rakhee Balram, "Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen," *Lux Online*, [https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura_mulvey_and_peter_wollen/essay\(1\).html](https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/laura_mulvey_and_peter_wollen/essay(1).html), accessed May 2014.
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Film and the New Psychology," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H. Dreyfus and P. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press), 48–59.
 7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19–54.
 8. Miriam Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3–45.
 9. Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*," *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn 1972): 6–17.
 10. Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28 (Autumn 1974): 22–31.
 11. This is Foucault's argument about the painting in his introduction to *The Order of Things* (1960) (New York: Pantheon, 1970). Oudart cites Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas* as inspiration for his theory of suture. Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18 (Winter 1977): 35–47.
 12. David Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xxii.
 13. Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone, 1997), 31.
 14. See Keith Kelly's "Riddles of the Sphinx: One or Two Things I Know about Her," *Millennium Film Journal* 2 (Spring/Summer 1979): 95–100.
 15. Rodowick, *Crisis of Political Modernism*, vii–viii.
 16. Mulvey writes on the role of the female spectator and the importance of women's films to her thinking in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)," *Framework* 15/17 (Summer 1981): 12–15.
 17. Jacqueline Suter, Sandy Flitterman, and Laura Mulvey, "Textual Riddles: Woman as Enigma or Site of Social Meanings?" *Discourse* 1 (Fall 1979): 94–95.
 18. *Ibid.*, 95.
 19. Peter Wollen, "Film in the Field of Language," *October* 17: "The New Talkies" (Summer 1981): 53–60.
 20. Suter, Flitterman, and Mulvey, "Textual Riddles," 122.
 21. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). See also Jean-Paul Hilttenbrand, "Real, The (Lacan)," *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Alain de Mijolla (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Macmillan Reference/Thompson Gale, 2005).
 22. Mary Anne Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17, "The New Talkies" (Summer 1981): 23–36.
 23. Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," *Screen* 17 (1976): 68–112.
 24. Dayan, "Tutor-Code," 24.
 25. Suter, Flitterman, and Mulvey, "Textual Riddles," 122.
 26. In fact, the repetitions of the shot/reverse shot sequence represent the painted panorama more closely than the cinematic pan: such sequences allow us to feel secure that the space in which a character stands will remain relatively unchanged every time we return to it.
 27. These effects, discernible on DVD, appear far more pronounced when the film is exhibited on a large screen.
 28. Dayan, "Tutor-Code," 22, draws the connection between Oudart's work on figurative codes in classical painting and on cinematic representation.
 29. "The spectator's imaginary can only coincide with the painting's built-in subjectivity"; *ibid.*, 27.
 30. *Ibid.*, 28.
 31. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Phaidon, 2001), 72.
 32. Christopher Bowen and Roy Thompson, *Grammar of the Shot*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, Mass.: Taylor and Francis and Focal Press, 2013), 172.
 33. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 79–95.
 34. MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film*.
 35. H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Directions, 2012), 46–47.
 36. H.D. called the experience the most important in her life—whereas, ever secular, Freud called it the poet's most dangerous symptom. H.D. in turn called Freud's interpretations the film's "narration." *Ibid.*
 37. Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" *Social Text* 21 (1989): 156.
 38. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Basic Ideological Effects of the Cinematographic Apparatus," quoted in Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* (1979): 121.
 39. Michelson, "About Snow," 121; emphasis in original.
 40. Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 60–81.
 41. *Ibid.*, 62.
 42. Personal conversation with Mulvey, spring 2013.