

3 Spectatorship, Power, and Knowledge

The world of images that we interact with on a daily basis is caught up in the power relations of the societies in which we live. We invest images with the power to incite emotions within us, and images are also elements within the power relations between human subjects, and between individuals and institutions. Just as **images are both representations and producers of the ideologies of their time, they are also factors in relations of power.** In Chapter 2, we examined the process of reception, in which actual viewers make meaning of images. In this chapter, we will look at the **role of the spectator of the image, and the ways that the gaze—of images, subjects, and institutions—is a fundamental aspect of the practice of looking.** This means shifting the focus from issues of reception to concepts of address. This distinction between address and reception is one between thinking about the ideal viewer of an image, and the potential real viewer who looks. **Address refers to the way that an image constructs certain responses from an idealized viewer, whereas reception is about the ways in which actual viewers respond.**¹ Both ways of examining images are incomplete in themselves, but can be seen to work together to understand what happens in the process of looking.

Psychoanalysis and the image spectator

Of all contemporary theories that can help us understand how viewers make meaning, *psychoanalytic theory* has addressed most directly the pleasure we derive from images, and the relationship between our desires and our visual world. We can have intense relationships with images precisely because of the power they have



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both to give us pleasure and to allow us to articulate our desires through looking. Since the 1970s, film scholars have introduced a number of approaches to help us consider this process. One concept that has provided a particularly useful way to examine practices of looking is that of the *spectator*. Spectatorship theory emphasizes the role of the psyche—particularly the *unconscious*, desire, and fantasy—in the practice of looking. In this theory, the term “spectator” does not refer to a flesh-and-blood individual viewer or a member of a particular viewing audience, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Rather, when psychoanalytic theory talks of the spectator, it treats it as an “ideal subject.” In using this term, psychoanalytic theory abstracts from real audience members and the experience of a particular film to refer instead to a construction. Independent of individual identity, the spectator is socially constructed by the *cinematic apparatus* (the traditional social space of the cinema that includes a darkened theater, projector, film, sound) and by the *ideologies* that are a part of a given viewing situation. It can be said that particular films, targeted toward specific categories of viewers during particular periods (the genre of women’s films of the 1940s, for example) create and offer to their viewers an *ideal subject position*. For instance, there is an ideal spectator for the woman’s film regardless of how any particular viewer might make personal meaning of the film. Theories of spectatorship often give us the means to analyze the subject position constructed for and offered to viewers by a given film or set of media texts.

Althusser’s concept of *interpellation*, which we discussed in Chapter 2, helps to show us how viewers are made to recognize themselves and identify with the ideal subject offered by images. In addition, *semiotics*, which we discussed in Chapter 1, allows us to see the ways in which images can be understood as a language with codes and conventions that can be subject to textual analysis. Christian Metz and other French theorists who wrote about film in the 1970s generally described the process of spectatorship as follows: the viewer suspends disbelief in the fictional world of the film, identifies not only with specific characters in the film but more importantly with the film’s overall ideology through identification with the film’s narrative structure and visual point of view, and puts into play fantasy structures (such as an imagined ideal family) that derive from the viewer’s unconscious.

The concept of the unconscious is crucial to these theories. One of the **fundamental elements of psychoanalysis lies in its demonstration of the existence and mode of operation of unconscious mental processes.** According to

psychoanalytic theory, in order to function in our lives, we actively repress various desires, fears, memories, and fantasies. Hence, beneath our conscious, daily social interaction there exists a dynamic, active realm of forces of desire that is inaccessible to our rational and logical selves. The unconscious often motivates us in ways which we are unaware of, and, according to psychoanalysis, is active in our dreams.

Early theories of spectatorship were based on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, who is considered to be the founder of psychoanalysis and who worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Vienna, and Jacques Lacan, a well-known French psychoanalyst who revised many of Freud's ideas in the mid to late twentieth century. Practices of looking are particularly central to Lacan's thinking about how humans come to develop as subjects. Lacan used the term "subject" rather than individual or human being to describe his object of inquiry. The subject of Lacan's study was not so much the individual but rather an entity he thought of as being constructed through the mechanisms of the unconscious, language, and desire. He was most concerned with how human beings come to imagine themselves as unique individuals even as they are given identity within the social structures of Western capitalism. The term "subject," then, carries within it the implication that individuality is a construction that takes place through ideology, language, and representation.

Film theorists used the work of Lacan, which emphasizes **the role of desire in creating subjects, to explain the powerful lure of film images in our culture.** For example, the well-known film theorists Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz drew an analogy between the early process of a child's ego construction and the experience of film viewing, using Lacan's concept of the *mirror phase* of childhood development. According to Lacan, children go through a developmental stage at about 18 months that establishes fundamental aspects of their notion of selfhood and separateness from other human beings (primarily their mothers, on whom they are dependent for their needs). In the mirror phase, Lacan proposed, infants begin to establish their egos through the process of looking at a mirror body-image, which may be their own mirror image, their mother, or another figure. The infants recognize the mirror image to be both their selves and different. Although infants have no physical ability to grasp or control this mirror-image, it is thought that they fantasize having control and mastery over it. Looking and the ability to fantasize based on what they see is crucial to infants' sense of control and mastery (of the body in the image) in this scenario. The mirror phase, as described by Lacan, is an

important step in infants' recognition of themselves as autonomous beings with the potential ability to control their worlds.

This recognition of self and other comes at a stage of growth when the infant's intellectual growth outpaces its motor skills—the infant can imagine control over the body in the image, but cannot actually physically exert that control. The mirror phase thus provides infants with a sense of their existence as a separate body in relationship to another body, but it also provides a basis for *alienation*, since the process of image recognition involves a splitting between what they are physically capable of and what they see and imagine themselves to be (powerful, in control). There are two contradictory relationships here to the image—infants see that they and the image are the same, yet at the same time they see the image as an ideal (not the same). Hence, the mirror phase is also about recognition and misrecognition. While this concept may seem highly abstract if not far-fetched to some readers, who might want to argue that it has little to do with adult subjects watching films, it is important to see how it helps us to understand the very question of how we become subjects. It can provide a useful framework to understand the investment of tremendous power that viewers place in images, and the reasons why we can so easily read images as a kind of ideal.

Part of the fascination with cinema, according to Baudry, is that the darkened theater and the conditions of watching a mirror-like screen invite the viewer to regress to a childlike state. The viewer undergoes a temporary loss of ego as he or she identifies with the powerful position of apprehending the world on the screen, much as the infant apprehended the mirror image. The spectators' egos are built up through their illusory sense of owning the body on the film screen. It is important to emphasize that it is not the specific image of bodies on screen with which the viewer is thought to identify most significantly, but with the cinematic apparatus. The idea that the viewer is in a regressive mode is the aspect of psychoanalytic theory that has come under the most criticism, because it presents a definition of the spectator as existing in an infantile state, one that stands in contrast to the engaged viewer practices we discussed in Chapter 2.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, many feminist film theorists interested in the power of film images over viewers took up these theories and engaged in productive criticism of them in order to emphasize that the film viewer is not a singular, undifferentiated subject, but is already enculturated as either male or female. Hence, we cannot speak of a singular universal spectator because

viewing circumstances are influenced by the psychic structures that inform our formation as gendered subjects. This intervention in questions of desire and the image led to a focus on the gaze.

The gaze

Earlier we noted that Lacan considered practices of looking to be important processes in the formation of the subject. One of the terms he used to describe looking relations is the gaze (in French, *le regard*). In common parlance, to gaze is to look or stare, often with eagerness or desire. In much psychoanalytic film criticism, the gaze is not the act of looking itself, but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances. The concept of the gaze has been the focus of inquiry in both art history and film studies, with different emphases.

Throughout the history of art, and in the contemporary world of film and advertising, images of women often have been presented in ways that emphasize their status as sexual beings or maternal figures. In 1975 filmmaker and writer Laura Mulvey published a groundbreaking essay about images of women in classical Hollywood cinema. This essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," used psychoanalysis to propose that the conventions of popular narrative cinema are structured by a patriarchal unconscious, positioning women represented in films as objects of a "male gaze." In other words, Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema offered images geared toward male viewing pleasure, which she read within certain psychoanalytic paradigms including *scopophilia* and *voyeurism*. The concept of the gaze is fundamentally about the relationship of pleasure and images. In psychoanalysis, the term "scopophilia" refers to pleasure in looking, and *exhibitionism* in the pleasure of being looked at. Both of these terms acknowledge the ways in which reciprocal relationships of looking can be sources of pleasure. Voyeurism is the pleasure in looking while not being seen, and carries a more negative connotation of a powerful, if not sadistic, position. The idea of the camera as a mechanism for voyeurism has been often discussed, since, for instance, the position of viewers of cinema can be seen as voyeuristic—they sit in a darkened room, where they cannot be seen, in order to watch the film. In Mulvey's theory, the camera is used as a tool of voyeurism and sadism, disempowering those before its gaze. She and other theorists who pursued this line of thinking examined certain films of classic Hollywood cinema to demonstrate the power of the male gaze.

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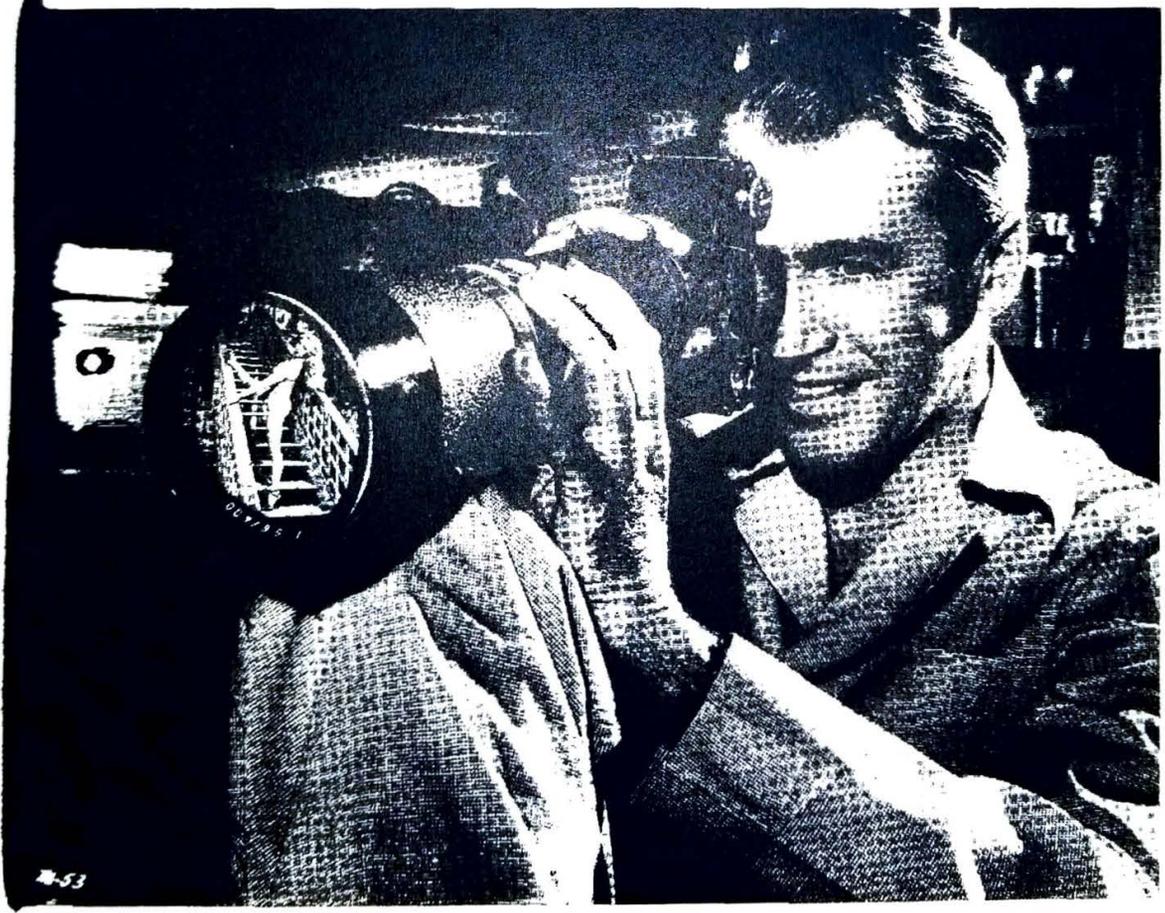
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Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is a popular example of a film that is explicitly about gendered looking. The film's main protagonist is Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart), a photographer who has broken his leg and is temporarily confined to a wheelchair in his New York City apartment. Jeffries spends much of his time seated at a window that affords him a perfect view into the windows of the various people who live in the building across the way, where he believes he has witnessed evidence of a murder. *Rear Window* has been read by film theorists (including Mulvey) as a metaphor of the act of film viewing itself, with Jeffries standing in for the cinematic audience. Confined to a fixed position like the film viewer, his gaze is similarly voyeuristic in that he freely looks but is not

Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, 1954



seen by the objects of his gaze. Like characters in a movie, his neighbors are apparently unaware that this audience of one exists, much less that he has seen them up close in the intimate setting of their homes. The windows frame their actions just as the camera frames narrative action in a film, both determining and restricting what Jeffries can know about their lives, and generating in him a desire to see and know more. The studio advertising still pictured on the previous page shows us one of the objects of his interest, a dancer, captured in his lens. In the film, we see through his point of view as he observes his neighbors and tracks the movements of his girlfriend Lisa (Grace Kelly) as she becomes his mobile surrogate, his "private eye." Lisa steals up the fire escape across the way to search for murder clues in the off-screen space beyond the window frame that is off-limits to Jeffries and us, the film viewers.

Rear Window is a quintessential example of the male gaze in relationship to female objects of visual pleasure. Yet, as the example of Lisa's investigation suggests, the male gaze is not as controlling and powerful as some theorists have suggested. Jeffries gains power by looking, but he is emasculated by his confined state, and must rely on the eyes and legs of a woman to gain access to knowledge. The cinematic viewer, like Jeffries, is confined to a fixed seat and the field of vision offered by this position and the restricted framing of the scene. The gendered relations of power of the cinematic gaze are clearly quite complex. Indeed, not only is Jeffries frustrated in his attempts to know more, he is also punished for looking. Once Jeffries gets caught looking, he becomes vulnerable and trapped; the murderer comes looking for him. Clearly, male looking is not without its limitations and its consequences.

There are other examples in popular culture of more extreme and literal portrayals of the camera's gaze as a kind of violence. The cult film *Peeping Tom* (1960) makes literal the idea of the camera as a weapon of a voyeuristic male gaze. Director Michael Powell depicts a protagonist who turns his camera into an elaborate device that can kill women while filming them before a mirror, so that they witness their own terror. *Peeping Tom* renders explicit the idea that the gaze can be implicated in sadism, and is an example, albeit an extreme one, of the ways that cameras have been seen as weapons of *phallic* power. Powell's film is an extreme dramatization of another sort of fantasy about the power of vision, a fantasy in which the camera is imagined to grant direct sexualized power over life and death.

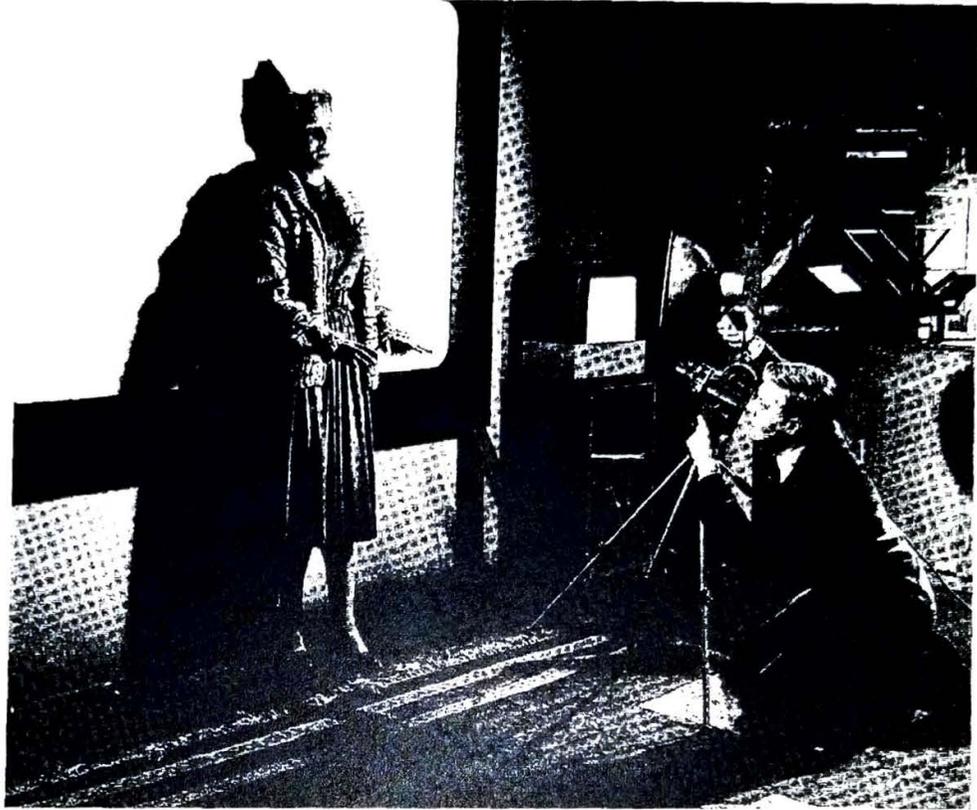
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Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom*, 1960

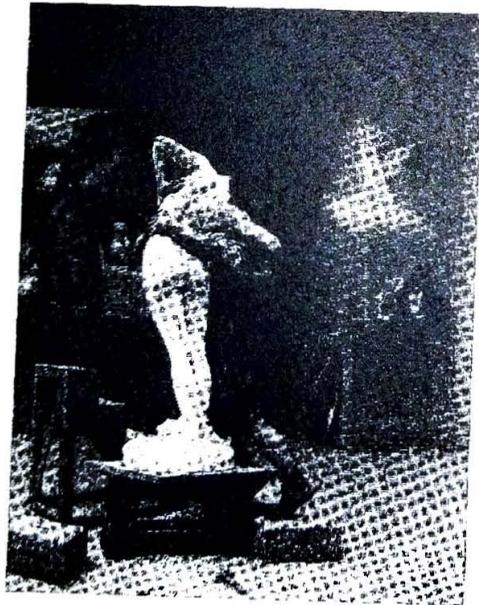
the audience sitting in a darkened theater, and the role of narrative and motion in viewer identification with the cinematic apparatus, concepts of the gaze in still images have concentrated more specifically on the different kinds of looks that an image can imply. In the history of art, the fact that paintings were geared toward male viewers had as much to do with the commerce of art as it did with the social roles and sexual stereotypes of men and women. Until quite recently, most collectors of art were men and the primary viewing audience of art was men. Since the owner of a painting was understood to be male, its spectator was also defined as such. In a typical depiction of a female nude, for instance, a woman is posed so that her body is on display for the viewer, who is implied to be male by the codes of the image. The female body is thus understood here in terms of form and allure, as an object before the viewer's gaze. There is a long tradition in art of defining the female nude as the project

and possession of the male artist. In these paintings, the men gaze upon the female figures as possessions. The women are the objects of the male gaze and their returning looks are accorded no power in the image.

The image convention of depicting women as objects of the gaze and men



Jean Desiré-Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866



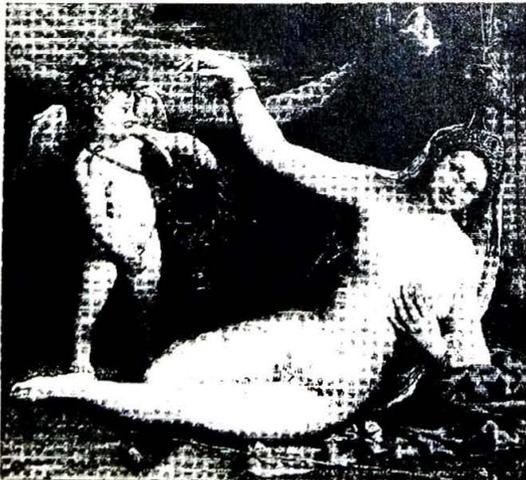
Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, late 1800s

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as lookers continues to exist today, although in an image context that is considerably more complex. This convention has many cultural and social implications. In the classic Western tradition of images, which was dominant throughout the history of painting, men were depicted in action and women as objects to be looked at. John Berger wrote that in this history of images, "men act, women appear."² Berger noted that the tradition of the nude in painting was almost exclusively about images of nude women who were presented for male viewers. Indeed, the women in these paintings were often turned away from the men depicted within the pictures toward the spectator. This way of viewing women thus defined them by their appearance, in essence their ability to be pleasing to look at, and this carries important weight in the context of contemporary image culture. The implication of a male gaze was often depicted quite literally in the history of painting with a woman whose body is turned toward the (presumably male) viewer, but whose head is turned to gaze into a mirror. This image convention has also been used extensively by advertisers.

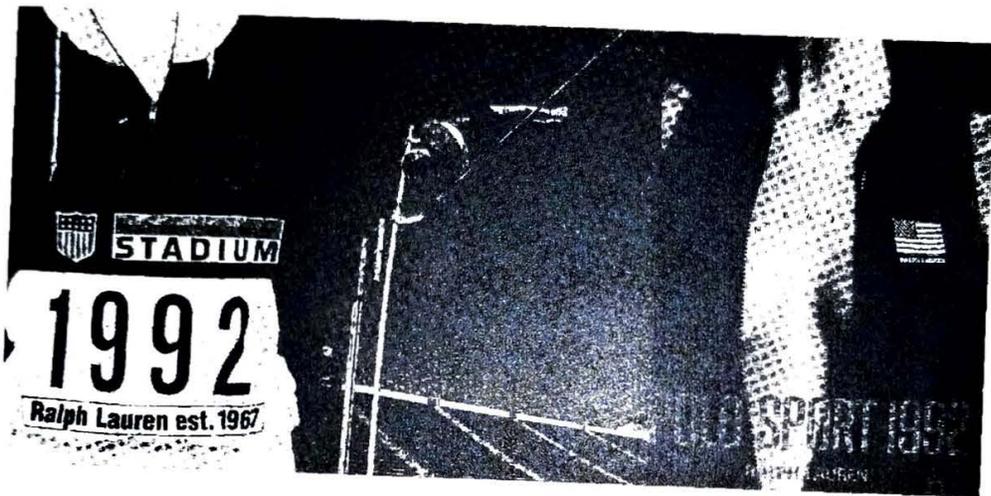
One of the primary elements of the concept of the gaze is a kind of split that viewers experience in looking at images. This is related to Lacan's notion of the alienation that results from the split between seeing the image as oneself and also as an ideal—as both the same and not the same as oneself. This can also be understood as the split that results from being simultaneously the surveyor and the surveyed, in looking at oneself through the implied gaze of others. The split self of the viewer is always connected to the idea that the gaze is omnipresent.

Lorenzo Lotto, *Venus and Cupid*, early 1500s
Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, c.1555



Changing concepts of the gaze

Today, we are surrounded on a daily basis by images of fashion models whose looks conform to a rigid set of normative codes about beauty. The cultural practices of cosmetics, plastic surgery, dieting, fitness programs, and image management go hand in hand with an image culture that incites women, and increasingly men, to see themselves and their appearance as inadequate in some way and in need of improvement. Berger's dictum, "men act and women appear," still applies to



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Images today. However, in Euro-American cultures, the traditional roles of men and women are in upheaval, and women are increasingly socially defined by their work in addition to their appearance. In addition, men are increasingly subject to many of the codes of appearance management that were once considered to be exclusively female. While men have been portrayed through twentieth-century advertising images as men in action, whose rigid muscular frames and active poses counter their role as objects of the gaze, today they are increasingly shown in an array of poses that were previously understood as specifically feminine.

Image conventions have changed, and so have the ways of understanding traditional images. The theoretical concept of the male gaze has been rethought, in particular because of the ways in which it could not account for the pleasures of female viewers (except by seeing them as masochistic or as viewing "as men") or for the male figure as the object of the gaze. Mulvey's essay launched more than a decade of writing about modes of spectatorship. Mulvey herself revised her thinking about visual pleasure in an essay of 1981. Meanwhile, feminist critics have continued to mine the theories of sexual difference put forth by Freud and Lacan.³

Mary Ann Doane used psychoanalysis to theorize female spectators of films made specifically for women viewers, such as the genre of the woman's film of the 1940s (also known as "weepies"). Some theorists responded that gendered viewing relations are not fixed; viewers readily deploy fantasy to occupy the "wrong" gender position in their spectatorial relationships to films. For example, women can identify with the male position of mastery or exercise voyeuristic tendencies, and men can be looked upon with pleasure and desire. In the studio still on the next page, from the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, actress Jane Russell is the object of both the camera's gaze and that of the adoring male athletes (of the US Olympic team). Yet, the men are also on display and subject to the gaze of viewers. One could posit an array of viewer pleasures and analyses across gender and sexuality in looking at this image. Many contemporary films aim precisely to defy the conventions of looking in film, and present women's gazes with agency. For example, the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise* defies traditional formulas of the gaze, and shows the complexity of the power relations of looking. The film begins with a scene, shown on the next page, in which the two women take a photograph of themselves. Here, the women control the camera, belying the dominant view that women are objects not subjects of the gaze.

Howard Hawks,
*Gentlemen Prefer
Blondes*, 1953



Ridley Scott, *Thelma &
Louise*, 1997

