The Oppositional Gaze

Bell Hooks, 1997
African American Female Gaze

- Punished as a child for looking
- The gaze can be dangerous
- White slave owners punished slaves for looking
- Black male gaze always subject to control
- Look considered “rape” of white womanhood
- Birth of a Nation, 1915 Politics of race/gender were originally inserted into cinematic narrative
Phallocentric Spectatorship

- Male to look, women to be looked at

- Mulvey, without acknowledging it, is talking about white men and women

- The African American female gaze is ignored in feminist film criticism (absence = violence)

- Identification can only be made through recognition and all recognition is an implicit confirmation of the status quo
“I could always get pleasure from movies as long as I didn’t look too deep”

Imitation of Life, Douglas Sirk (1959)

Read page 204 Hooks
Oppositional Gaze

So African American females can avoid being hurt by the absence of a black female presence in cinema.

Look past race and gender for aspects of content, form, language.

White womanhood, occupies the place of stardom.

In reading Mulvey, African American females are outside the power dynamic—the Pleasure in looking.
**Binary**

- **Active/male**  **Passive/female**

- **Black female spectators can choose not to identify with the film's imaginary**

- **Critical distance and assessment--no identification with either the victim or the perpetrator**

- **Annette Huhn in *Power of the Image* (pg 205)**
Where are they?

Feminist film criticism doesn’t even consider the possibility that women can construct an oppositional gaze via an understanding of the politics of race and racism.

Erasure of black womanhood.

Does Mulvey not see that she is talking about white women?

Not inclusive.
Watching movies from a feminist perspective, Mulvey arrives at the location of disaffection that is the starting point of many black women.
Julie Dash

Daughters of the Dust (1990)

“I make films because I was such a spectator”

Did not want to be seduced by narratives that reproduce her negation

This awareness creates a politicized stance—in her films and her spectatorship
Essentialism

Black women do not see differently, because they are black.

Actually they may see the same.

Critical black spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women resist the imposition of the dominant ways of knowing and looking.
Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process where we see our history as counter
Eve’s Bayou, Kasi Lemmons 1998

- One of the most financially successful indies that year
- 4 million spent and earned 13 million
- Kasi Lemmons--former actress also director for the current film “Talk to me”
Critic Andrew Sarris

“to hail Eve’s Bayou as the best African American film of all time would be to understate its universal accessibility to anyone on the planet.

Can ethnic art do that?

Is it unable to evoke pathos or poignancy?
What does Universal Mean?

- It refers to the dominant voice

- In this article Sarris confuses the universal with white audiences
Hegemony

- preponderant influence or authority over others: DOMINATION

- “HEGEMONY OF WHITENESS AS THE LOCUS OF UNIVERSAL WHITE HUMANISM?”

- The film is “too good to be stigmatized as a black film”
Alternative to Stereotypes?

- Urban, ghetto centered, youth culture dominated
- Representations of women as treacherous girlfriend, unwieldy bitch, commonplace ho
- Upper middle class Creole family
- Rural setting
- Substantial roles for actresses